

## CHAPTER I

*Reid's Questions*

## ENTERING REID'S THOUGHT

Reid's thought is not easy to enter. He was the greatest stylist of all who have written philosophy in the English language. No one can match him for wit, irony, metaphor, humor, and elegance. Yet his thought is elusive. Why that is so, I do not entirely understand. Partly it's because central elements of the pattern of thought against which he tirelessly polemicized – the *Way of Ideas*, he called it – have been so deeply etched into our minds that we find it difficult even to grasp alternatives, let alone find them plausible. Partly it's because Reid's understanding of the philosophical enterprise makes it seem to many that he's not practicing philosophy but opting out. Yet these factors, though certainly relevant, seem to me only partly to explain the elusiveness.

Be that as it may, the question before us is how to enter. The one thing everyone knows about Reid is that his philosophy became known as *Common Sense Philosophy*. It acquired that name because the phenomenon Reid called “common sense” played a prominent role in his thought. But it's not what is deepest. And one lesson to be drawn from the fate of Reid's thought is that if one tries to enter through the doorway of his views on Common Sense, one will never get far. The profundity of his thought will be blocked from view by that peculiar mindlessness that talk about common sense induces in readers. It's common sense not to try fishing in a lake immediately after a hard rain. That's an example of what we customarily understand by common sense. If we approach Reid's thought with that understanding in mind, his genius will elude us.

Common Sense comes into prominence in Reid's discussion when he engages in methodological reflections on how philoso-

phizing should be conducted after certain of the ideological underpinnings of the *Way of Ideas* have been rejected. But Reid's methodological reflections presuppose the conclusions arrived at in his substantive reflections. It is with those substantive reflections that we must begin. A consideration of what Reid has to say about Common Sense will come at the end.

What were the fundamental questions that shaped Reid's substantive reflections? Before I say, let me mention a set of questions that many of us are tempted to take to be Reid's questions, though they were not.<sup>1</sup> Beliefs come with a variety of distinct truth-relevant merits and demerits. They are warranted, reliably formed, entitled, justified, rational, cases of knowledge, fit for inclusion within science, and so forth. Contemporary epistemology in the analytic tradition has been preoccupied, in recent years, with the attempt to offer analyses of such merits as these, and criteria for their application. A person trained in this tradition will naturally assume that Reid is engaged in the same enterprise. She will be inclined to try to extract from Reid a theory of warrant, a theory of entitlement, a theory of justification, or whatever. That inclination will be reinforced by the fact that John Locke, against whom Reid never tires of polemicizing, clearly did develop a theory of knowledge and a theory of entitlement. Given the polemic, one naturally supposes that Reid was doing the same and disagreeing with Locke's theories. But nowhere in Reid does one find a general theory of any doxastic merit (*doxa* = belief, in Greek). Naturally one can extract *assumptions* that Reid is making about such merits. He remarks, for example, that "it is the universal judgment of mankind that the evidence of sense is a kind of evidence which we may securely rest upon in the most momentous concerns of mankind" (EIP II, v [259a]). If one wishes, one can even oneself develop a "Reidian" theory concerning one and another doxastic merit.<sup>2</sup> But it was not Reid's project to develop

<sup>1</sup> I myself, at an earlier stage in my attempt to understand Reid, succumbed to this temptation. See my "Thomas Reid on Rationality" in Hart, van der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 43–69. And my "Hume and Reid," *The Monist* 70 (1987): 398–417.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga's theory of *warrant* is a good example of such a "Reidian" theory; see his *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). The reason Plantinga's theory is a "Reidian" theory, but not Reid's theory, is that Plantinga did not develop his theory, and could not have developed his theory, by simply exegizing and elaborating Reid.

any such theory. Contemporary analytic epistemology is closer to Locke than to Reid on this point; that makes Locke more accessible to those who work in this tradition than Reid is.

The reason one finds in Reid no general theory for any truth-relevant doxastic merit is not that Reid had no interest in such a project. He clearly indicates an interest in developing a general theory of “good evidence,” of “just ground[s] of belief” (EIP II, xx [328b]). But he found his interest stymied. Here’s what he says in the decisive passage:

The common occasions of life lead us to distinguish evidence into different kinds, to which we give names that are well understood; such as the evidence of sense, the evidence of memory, the evidence of consciousness, the evidence of testimony, the evidence of axioms, the evidence of reasoning. All men of common understanding agree, that each of these kinds of evidence may afford just grounds of belief, and they agree very generally in the circumstances that strengthen or weaken them.

Philosophers have endeavoured, by analyzing the different sorts of evidence, to find out some common nature wherein they all agree, and thereby to reduce them all to one. . . .

I confess that, although I have, as I think, a distinct notion of the different kinds of evidence above mentioned, and perhaps of some others, which it is unnecessary here to enumerate, yet I am not able to find any common nature to which they may all be reduced. They seem to me to agree only in this, that they are all fitted by nature to produce belief in the human mind; some of them in the highest degree, which we call certainty, others in various degrees according to circumstances. (EIP II, xx [328a–b])<sup>3</sup>

Let it not be thought, Reid adds, that because he lacks a general theory of evidence, he is incapable of making good judgments about evidence. “A man who knows nothing of the theory of vision, may have a good eye; and a man who never speculated about evidence in the abstract, may have a good judgment” (EIP II, xx [328a]). Theory comes *after* practice, not before.

<sup>3</sup> That last clause, “they are all fitted by nature to produce belief in the human mind; some of them in the highest degree, which we call certainty, others in various degrees according to circumstances,” won’t do badly as an epigrammatic summary of Plantinga’s theory of warrant. Hence, its “Reidian” character. Consider also, in the following passage, Reid’s striking anticipation of Plantinga’s account of probability: “I think, in most cases, we measure the degrees of evidence by the effect they have upon a sound understanding, when comprehended clearly and without prejudice. Every degree of evidence perceived by the mind, produces a proportioned degree of assent or belief” (EIP VII, iii [482b]).

I submit that all of Reid's substantive (as opposed to methodological) thought in his early book, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, and in his late *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, revolves around a pair of extraordinarily deep, yet easily formulated, questions. They are these: What accounts for the fact that we get entities in mind in such a manner as to be able to form beliefs and other modes of thought about them, and to speak about them? In particular, what accounts for the fact that we get *nonmental* entities in mind in such a manner, and experienced events from the past? And secondly, what accounts for the fact that often we do not merely *entertain thoughts* about the entities we have in mind but *form beliefs* about them?

Formulating the questions, as I say, is easy; explicating their significance will take some work. Let's begin that work by distinguishing between two distinct ways of describing what a person believes. One way is to state, in a that clause, the proposition which she believes: She believes that the days are getting longer, she believes that the crocuses are about to bloom, and so forth. The other way of describing what a person believes is to pick out that entity about which she believes something and then to state what it is that she believes about that entity. For example: She believes, about the tree in the far corner of the garden, that it is rotten and has to go. Let's follow the now customary practice of calling these styles, respectively, the *de dicto* style and the *de re* style – or to keep before us the structure of the latter style, let us often call it the *de re/predicative* style.

The reason for distinguishing these two styles of belief description is that we need both styles if we are to describe fully the similarities and differences in the contents of our beliefs; the styles are not just rhetorical variants on each other. Here is an example of the point. Suppose I express a belief of mine by saying, "Felix sounded ill," referring to our cat Felix with the proper name "Felix." Using the *de dicto* style, we can describe the belief I expressed thus: I believed that Felix sounded ill. And using the *de re/predicative* style we can describe it this way: I believed, about Felix, that he sounded ill. That is to say: There is a cat, Felix, about which I believed that he sounded ill. Given the former style of description, truth attaches to my belief if and only if the proposition *that Felix sounded ill* is true. Given the latter style, truth attaches to my belief if and only if Felix satisfies my predicative thought *that he sounded ill*. Whether other things also satisfy that

same predicative thought makes no difference; Felix has to satisfy it.

By contrast, suppose I have a belief that I express thus: "The cat making all that noise under the window last night sounded ill." And suppose that that cat, unbeknownst to me, was our cat Felix. Then, using the *de re*/predicative style of description, we can correctly describe my belief in the same way that my preceding belief was described; namely, I believed, about Felix, that he sounded ill. But if we use the *de dicto* style, we could not correctly describe this belief in the same way. I did not express the belief that Felix sounded ill – in spite of the fact that Felix was in fact the cat making all that noise under the window. An additional difference is this: Using the *de re*/predicative style of description, what we said about the preceding case is that truth attaches to my belief if and only if Felix satisfies my predicative thought *that he sounded ill*. By contrast, what has to be said about the present case is that truth attaches to my belief if and only if the cat which was in fact making all that noise under the window, *be it Felix or some other cat*, sounded ill. What accounts for this difference is that, in the second case, the fact that my belief was about Felix was a matter of (extramental) happenstance, whereas in the former case, it was by no means a matter of happenstance.

For these reasons, then, we need both styles of description if we are to say all that we want to say about the similarities and differences among the contents of our beliefs. It's not that there are two kinds of beliefs, propositional and *de re*/predicative. It's rather that these two styles of description enable us to get at different dimensions of the content of beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

There is a vast philosophical literature on the matters that I have just now been discussing; very much more could be said on the topic than what I have just now said. For our purposes here, however, it will be satisfactory to brush past all the elaborations, refinements, and controversies to say that if we are to grasp the significance of Reid's questions, we must work with the *de re*/predicative style of description. Judgment, says Reid, "is an act of the mind, whereby one thing is affirmed or denied of another"

<sup>4</sup> In my *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 138 ff., I distinguished what I called the *noematic* content of beliefs from what I called the *designative* content. The connection between that distinction, and the one above, is this: the *de dicto* style of description gets at the *noematic* content, the *de re*/predicative style gets at the *designative* content.

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(EIP VI, i [413b]). No doubt Reid would not have repudiated the *de dicto* style if the issue had been put to him; but it's not the style he works with.

To move on, let me again work with an example. Among my *de re*/predicative beliefs is my belief, about the car I presently own, that it is red. My having that, or any other *de re*/predicative belief, presupposes my having the general ability to believe something about something. So fundamental in our human constitution is this ability, so pervasive in our lives, its exercise, that we rarely take note of it. But there it is: the ability to believe something *about* something. And that, in turn, is just a special case of *thinking* something about something. For a while, let me speak of thinking something about something, coming back later to *believing* something about something.

If my possession of that highly general ability, to think something about something, is to be actualized by my thinking, about the car I presently own, that it is red, I must, for one thing, get that car in mind – gain a mental grip on it. In Reid's words, "It is true of judgment, as well as of knowledge, that it can only be conversant about objects of the mind, or about things which the mind can contemplate. Judgment, as well as knowledge, supposes the conception of the object about which we judge; and to judge of objects that never were nor can be objects of the mind, is evidently impossible" (EIP VI, iii [427b–428a]).<sup>5</sup> What I am calling "having in mind" is what some philosophers have called "mental reference." I shall avoid that terminology – mainly because to speak of "reference" to something is to invite the quest for some entity that the person *uses* to refer to the referent. But when one has something in mind, there isn't – or needn't be – anything that one uses to refer to the thing one has in mind. One can just have it in mind by virtue of its being present to the mind and one's being aware of that.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. EIP I, vii [243a], p. 66: "without apprehension of the objects concerning which we judge, there can be no judgment. . . ."

<sup>6</sup> Now and then Reid takes note of the fact that making a judgment requires not just having in mind the thing about which one is making the judgment but also requires having in mind *the judgment itself*: "even the weakest belief cannot be without conception. He that believes, must have some conception of what he believes" (EIP IV, i [360b]; cf. EIP IV, iii [315a]). Immediately after taking note of this connection between judgment and conception, Reid goes on to take note of the connection which is of more concern to him – namely, the one mentioned in the text above.

Second, if that general ability of mine, to think something about something, is to be actualized by my thinking, about the car I presently own, that it is red, I must think about it the predicative thought *that it is red*. This itself is the exercise of an ability, a capacity, on my part. Before I ever thought, about my car, that it is red I had the *capacity* to think the predicative thought, about it, that it is red; now I actualize the capacity. To have this capacity is to possess the *concept of being red*. That capacity was, as it were, stored in my mind awaiting actualization; in thinking the predicative thought I did, I brought the capacity out of storage for actual use. How we acquire those capacities that constitute possession of a concept has, of course, been a topic of much philosophical discussion; Reid will have a few things to say.

The way I just described possessing the concept of *being red*, though not inaccurate, is misleading. I described it as the capacity to think, about my car, that it is red. That capacity, though implied by possessing the concept, is not identical with it. The capacity that constitutes possessing the concept is the capacity to think, *about anything at all*, that it is red. All concept-possession is general in that way. Hence it is that, for anything I have in mind, I can think about it any of the predicative thoughts (concepts) I'm capable of thinking. Of course many of those thoughts couldn't be true of it.

I described my thinking that it is red, about the car I presently own, as the actualization of a capacity I had already acquired – namely, the capacity to think about anything at all that it is red. There are many capacities of this sort which I have not acquired; natural scientists, for example, possess a huge repertoire of capacities for predicative thoughts (i.e., concepts) which I have not acquired. The concept of being red is one I have already acquired. It should not be assumed, however, that every case of thinking some predicative thought about something consists of actualizing some capacity one already possesses; sometimes experience brings it about that one thinks some predicative thought without that thought being the actualization of a preexisting capacity. When this happens, does thinking the predicate thought always then in turn evoke the capacity to think the thought henceforth. Does it evoke the concept? Good question!

It may be noted that whereas I described thinking a predicative thought about something as (typically) an actualization of the

stored capacity to do so, I did not similarly describe having some thing in mind as an actualization of a stored capacity to have it in mind. That's because very often it's not that. If I'm capable of remembering the thing, that will be the case; I then have the capacity to *bring it to mind*; likewise if I possess the conceptual material for getting it in mind by means of a singular concept. But if I perceive something for the first time without previously having had any thought of its existence, my thereby getting it in mind is not the actualization of a stored capacity to *bring it to mind*. Obviously I have to possess the perceptual capacities that make it possible for me to see it; but that's like the general capacity to *acquire* concepts, it's not like those capacities which *are* concepts. These belong to the furniture of the mind.

With these explanations in hand, let us once again have before us Reid's two fundamental questions. The first is this: What brings it about that we have things in mind? Apart from some polemical comments about the theories of his predecessors, Reid doesn't have much to say about that highly general ability of ours to think something about something; he pretty much just takes for granted that we have this ability to form *de re*/predicative thoughts. The question that grabs his attention is, once again: What brings it about that we have things in mind – have a thing in mind in such a manner as to be able to form some predicative thought about *that thing* rather than about some other thing? What brings it about that I have the car I presently own in mind in such a way that, from among all the things there are, I can attach *to it* my predicative thought that it is red?

Reid also has things to say on the topic of what brings it about that we possess concepts – what brings it about that I, for example, possess the concept of being red, and thus am capable of thinking, of something, that it is red. He assumes, though, that possessing some concept consists of possessing the capacity to think some particular property as possessed by something – having the concept of being red consists of having the capacity to think redness as possessed by something. And this presupposes having a mental grip on redness. Accordingly, he treats the question, what accounts for our possession of concepts, as a special case of the general question on his docket: What accounts for our having entities in mind? What accounts for my having the property of redness in mind?



That was the first of Reid's two fundamental questions. The other is this: What in general accounts for the fact that often we don't just *think* predicative thoughts about things that we have in mind but *believe* those things about those things? Few questions in philosophy go deeper than these two.

#### WHAT REID MEANS BY "CONCEPTION"

Though most if not all of Reid's present-day commentators have discerned that vast stretches of his thought are devoted to giving an account of belief formation, relatively few have discerned the centrality in his thought of the prior question of how it comes about that we have things in mind. There are a number of reasons for this oblivion on the part of Reid's readers. It's important for my exposition that I single out what seems to me the most important of them.

I have been using the locution, "having something in mind." Though Reid sometimes uses that locution, and closely similar locutions, for the phenomenon in question, his official terminology is "having a conception of something." I submit that therein lies one of the principal obstacles to our grasping Reid's thought. For we take it for granted that Reid's locution, "having a conception of," is synonymous with our locution, "possessing a concept of"; and we automatically understand this latter in the sense in which I used it some paragraphs back. I said that to think, about my car, that it is red, I must possess the concept of being red. Between us and Reid looms Kant, who powerfully shaped our understanding of what we call *conception*. We automatically connect conception with concepts. But much of what Reid says makes no sense if that is how we understand his locution, "having a conception of." And since his thoughts about conception are more fundamental than anything else in his thought, misunderstanding at this point blocks from view the whole pattern of his thinking.

In his account of perception, Reid over and over says that in perception the perceived object evokes in the percipient a conception of the object and an immediate belief about it that it presently exists as something external. Here is just one passage from among hundreds that might be cited: "by an original principle of our constitution, a certain sensation of touch both

suggests to the mind the conception of hardness, and creates the belief of it" (IHM V, ii [121a; B 58]). In his account of memory he likewise speaks of memory as incorporating a conception of the event remembered and the immediate belief about it that it did once exist. And in his account of consciousness he speaks of consciousness as incorporating a conception of the mental act or state of which one is conscious and the immediate belief about it that it presently exists as something subjective. Over and over, the pairing: conception of some entity and the immediate belief about it that it does or did exist.

On our quasi-Kantian construal of such language this yields either a puzzling interpretation or too narrow an interpretation. Suppose one takes Reid to be saying that in perception the perceived object evokes *a general concept* of itself. That's puzzling. Which concept of itself does the perceived object evoke – for example, which concept of itself does my perception of a table evoke? Reid never tells us. Does he mean, perhaps, *any* concept? If so, how does the claim that an object evokes some concept or other of itself contribute to our understanding of what goes on in perception?

Alternatively, suppose one takes Reid to be saying that in perception the perceived object evokes *a singular concept* of itself. Reid does in fact think that usually this is what happens. The perceived object evokes a belief, about itself, that it presently exists as something external. In order to have such a belief we must have the perceived entity in mind. And usually we have the perceived entity in mind by means of some singular concept which that entity satisfies – for example, the concept of *the hardness of the object which I am touching*. But though getting things in mind by means of some singular concept is one way of getting them in mind, for Reid's purposes it's indispensable that we recognize that this is not the only way.

The thing to do is set aside our Kantian lens and give full weight to Reid's own official explanation of what he has in mind by "conception." It goes like this:

Conceiving, imagining, apprehending, understanding, having a notion of a thing, are common words, used to express that operation of the understanding, which the logicians call *simple apprehension*. . . . Logicians define simple apprehension to be the bare conception of a thing, without any judgment or belief about it. (EIP IV, i [360a])