

Cambridge University Press
0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology
Nicholas Wolterstorff
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THOMAS REID AND THE STORY OF EPISTEMOLOGY

The two great philosophical figures at the culminating point of the Enlightenment are Thomas Reid in Scotland and Immanuel Kant in Germany. Reid was by far the more influential across Europe and the United States well into the nineteenth century. Since that time his fame and influence have been eclipsed by his German contemporary.

This important book by one of today's leading philosophers of knowledge and religion will do much to reestablish the significance of Reid for philosophy today. Nicholas Wolterstorff has produced the first systematic account of Reid's epistemology. Relating Reid's philosophy to present-day epistemological discussions, the author demonstrates how they are at once remarkably timely, relevant, and provocative.

No other book both uncovers the deep pattern of Reid's thought and relates it to contemporary philosophical debate. This book should be read by historians of philosophy as well as all philosophers concerned with epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University. His previous Cambridge University Press books are *Divine Discourse* (1995) and *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (1996).

Cambridge University Press
0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology
Nicholas Wolterstorff
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

MODERN EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

General Editor

Robert B. Pippin, *University of Chicago*

Advisory Board

Gary Gutting, *University of Notre Dame*

Rolf-Peter Horstmann, *Humboldt University, Berlin*

Mark Sacks, *University of Essex*

Some Recent Titles:

Frederick A. Olafson: *What Is a Human Being?*

Stanley Rosen: *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra*

Robert C. Scharff: *Comte after Positivism*

F. C. T. Moore: *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*

Charles Larmore: *The Morals of Modernity*

Robert B. Pippin: *Idealism as Modernism*

Daniel W. Conway: *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game*

John P. McCormick: *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*

Frederick A. Olafson: *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics*

Günter Zöller: *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy*

Warren Breckman: *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory*

William Blattner: *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism*

Charles Griswold: *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*

Gary Gutting: *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*

Allen Wood: *Kant's Ethical Thought*

Karl Ameriks: *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*

Cristina Lafont: *Heidegger, Language, and World-Discourse*

Cambridge University Press

0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THOMAS REID AND THE STORY OF EPISTEMOLOGY

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

Yale University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology
 Nicholas Wolterstorff
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Nicholas Wolterstorff 2001

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without
 the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2001

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Baskerville 11/12 1/2 pt. *System* QuarkXPress [BTS]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
 Wolterstorff, Nicholas.

Thomas Reid and the story of epistemology / Nicholas Wolterstorff.

p. cm. – (Modern European philosophy)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-521-79013-1

1. Reid, Thomas, 1710–1796. 2. Knowledge, Theory of. I. Title. II. Series.

B1537.W65 2000

121'.092 – dc21

00-028943

ISBN 0 521 79013 1 hardback

Contents

| | |
|----------------|---|
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>page ix</i> |
| Chapter I | Reid’s Questions 1 |
| Chapter II | The Way of Ideas: Structure and Motivation 23 |
| Chapter III | Reid’s Opening Attack: Nothing Is Explained 45 |
| Chapter IV | The Attack Continues: There’s Not the Resemblance 77 |
| Chapter V | Reid’s Analysis of Perception: The Standard Schema 96 |
| Chapter VI | An Exception (or Two) to Reid’s Standard Schema 132 |
| Chapter VII | The Epistemology of Testimony 163 |
| Chapter VIII | Reid’s Way with the Skeptic 185 |
| Chapter IX | Common Sense 215 |
| Chapter X | In Conclusion: Living Wisely in the Darkness 250 |
| <i>Index</i> | 263 |

Cambridge University Press
0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology
Nicholas Wolterstorff
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

There are signs today of a renaissance of interest in the philosophy of Thomas Reid; whether those signs are a portent remains to be seen. If so, it will indeed be a *renaissance*. Reid has almost disappeared from the canon used for teaching modern philosophy in the universities of the West. Yet from the last decade or two of the eighteenth century, on through most of the nineteenth, he was probably the most popular of all philosophers in Great Britain and North America and enjoyed considerable popularity on the continent of Europe as well. I myself judge him to have been one of the two great philosophers of the latter part of the eighteenth century, the other being of course Immanuel Kant.

Why has Reid almost disappeared from the canon? No doubt for a number of reasons; let me mention just three. For one thing, the reception of Reid's philosophy both trivialized and misunderstood him. It trivialized him by giving looming importance to his doctrine of Common Sense; it misunderstood him by failing to see the radicality of his rejection of the prior tradition of modern philosophy and treating him as if he justified us in forgetting about Hume and returning to Locke.

Second, scholarship in the history of philosophy lives and thrives on challenges to the interpretive skills of the scholar and on the controversies that ensue from different ways of meeting such challenges: Is there or is there not a vicious "Cartesian circle," and so forth. Reid provides relatively little by way of such challenges. Certainly he's been misunderstood. Nonetheless, he is one of the most lucid writers in the history of philosophy; and never does he suggest that he is revealing to us astonishing, hitherto undreamt of, realms of truth. In short, he's not a very rewarding subject for the historian of philosophy. A great many people, upon reading Reid, have become "Reidian" in one or another

Cambridge University Press

0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

aspect of their thinking; but they haven't dwelt on him. They've gone on to think for themselves along Reidian lines. That's been Reid's role in the history of philosophy.

I speculate that a third reason is the following. The history of modern philosophy was first written by Hegel and his followers. A Hegelian history of anything whatsoever structures the cultural material into triads of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. All those who have ever encountered modern philosophy have been inducted into the Hegelian structure for this material: continental rationalists, British empiricists, and synthesis in Kant and Hegel. Reid is not plausibly regarded as an empiricist; he does not believe, for example, that all concepts are "derived from experience." But neither is he a rationalist. As we will see, one of the deepest themes in his thought is opposition to what he regarded as the exaggerated claims made for reason by the modern philosophers – empiricists included!

Reid thus had the great misfortune not to fit what became the canonical schematization of the history of modern philosophy! So much the worse for the scheme, one wants to say. What happened was the opposite. Since the bed was too small for Procrustes, Procrustes' legs were cut off. I call this a "speculation" on my part. To make it more than speculation, with this point in mind one would have to study, among other things, the early Hegelian histories. I have not done that, nor am I aware that anyone else has done so.

It was about twenty years ago that I first read Reid, for reasons that I now cannot recall. I had the sense of discovering a philosophical soul mate: a metaphysical realist who was also, in his own way, an antifoundationalist. I suppose I also had the vague sense of having discovered a religious soul mate, less I think because Reid was a Christian philosopher, though he was, and more because of the fundamental role in his thought of ungrounded trust. I resonated with his antirationalism.

For these reasons, and many others, I found him fascinating but in equal measure baffling. What *was* he getting at? Why *did* he say *that*? I now know that some of my bafflement – by no means all – had its source in looking for Reid's answers to the questions of contemporary epistemology; I had to learn that some of those questions were not Reid's questions but only ours. What kept me going was that, as with all the great philosophers, one had the

Cambridge University Press

0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

sense of so much intelligence at work that one hesitated a long time before settling on the conclusion that the source of bafflement was not obtuseness on one's own part but confusion and mistake on the part of the philosopher.

The blend of fascination and bafflement lasted many years. The fascination remains; the bafflement has now considerably diminished. Hence, this book.

A word about the book's genre. This is an *interpretation* of Reid's epistemology. By no means is it a full treatment of his epistemology; that would have to be much longer. Instead it offers a line of interpretation, a way of reading. That's one thing I mean. I also mean to suggest that it's not an exegetical study. When discussing a given topic, I don't assemble all the relevant passages so as to find out what Reid actually said, with all its ambiguities, obscurities, inconsistencies, and so on. I will in fact attend to ambiguities, obscurities, and all of that; but my aim throughout is not so much to present what Reid said as to discover what he *was trying to say*. Not, be it noted, to discover what he was trying *to get at*, understanding that in the way in which it is understood by Gadamer; that is to say, I do not interpret Reid with the aim of trying to make what he says come out true. Sensible, intelligent, but not necessarily true. My goal is to discover the line of thought that he was trying to clarify and articulate.

I have one more thing in mind. This is not an engagement with the scholarly literature on Reid – of which there isn't very much in any case. I do not carry on debates with those with whom I disagree; and I do not very often mention the points at which my interpretation accords with that of others. That too would have required a longer book. More relevantly, it would repeatedly have diverted the reader's attention from the way of reading Reid's epistemology that I offer. Rightly or wrongly, I judge the need of the day to be a guide to reading Reid, so that his genius can come to light. What I *will* do, every now and then, is bring into the discussion some contemporary alternative to Reid's position; by having a contrast before her, the reader can better see what it is that Reid was trying to say and the significance thereof.

There is much in Reid's thought that is highly provocative. Now and then I have responded to the provocation and gone beyond

Cambridge University Press

0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

presenting Reid's views to discussing them. For the most part, though, I have restrained myself and simply presented my interpretation of what Reid was trying to say.

During the twenty years that I have been reading and reflecting on Reid I have talked about him with many people, mainly philosophers and historians, given lectures on him at many places, most extensively at St. Andrews University, and taught courses on him at Calvin College, the Free University of Amsterdam, Notre Dame University, and Yale University. I have learned much from many. To single out some from those without mentioning all is to do injustice to those not singled out. But my memory isn't up to mentioning all. It might seem best then to be just and mention no one. But that would be taken as ingratitude. So let me mention those who, for one or another reason, sensible or quirky, happen right now to be in the forefront of my mind as ones from whom I have either learned about Reid, or been aided in thinking about what he said: William P. Alston, Alexander Broady, Andrew Chignell, Keith de Rose, Andrew Dole, Richard Foley, John Haldane, Lee Hardy, Gordon Graham, Joseph Huston, Alvin Plantinga, Del Ratzsch, Huston Smit, James van Cleve, Edwin van Driel, René van Woudenberg, Allen W. Wood, Crispin Wright, Steve Wykstra.

I have used two editions of Reid's works. First, the standard edition by William Hamilton of Reid's complete published works, along with certain of his letters; I have employed the fifth edition, published in Edinburgh in 1858 by Maclachlan and Stewart. Secondly, the critical edition of the *Inquiry* prepared recently by Derek R. Brookes and published in Edinburgh in 1997 by Edinburgh University Press. This is the first volume in what will be The Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid.

I will employ the following system of references: References to Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764) will be cited by the abbreviation IHM, followed by chapter and section number, followed by page and column in the Hamilton edition, and page in the Brookes edition, thus: IHM V, ii [121a; B 58]. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) will be cited by the abbreviation EIP, followed by essay and chapter, followed by page and column in the Hamilton edition, thus: EIP IV, iii [375b]. *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (1788) will be cited by the abbrevi-

Cambridge University Press
0521790131 - Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology
Nicholas Wolterstorff
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

violation EAP, followed by essay and chapter, followed by page and column in the Hamilton edition. References to passages in Reid's letters will be identified by recipient and date, and by page and column in the Hamilton edition.

I should add that I myself fail to see any significant change in Reid's views from his early *Inquiry into the Human Mind* to his late *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* and *Essays on the Active Powers*; elaboration, yes, significant change, no. Thus it's not the views of early Reid nor the views of late Reid but just the views of Reid that I will be articulating. It's for that reason that, in the references I offer, I will move freely back and forth between the early *Inquiry* and the late essays.