

The Cambridge Companion to
THOMAS REID

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Introduction

History can be a fickle judge. After enjoying enormous popularity in the United States, Great Britain, and France for almost one hundred years after his death, Thomas Reid (1710–96) disappeared from the philosophical canon. Reid's disappearance did not have the consequence that his thought failed to influence subsequent philosophers: One can discern, for example, distinctly Reidian themes and methodology at work in Moorean "ordinary language" philosophy. But it did mean that Reid made no appearance in the story that philosophers in the last century have told – and continue to tell – about the development of early modern philosophy. The basic shape of this story is familiar enough and goes something like this:¹

Early modern philosophy was animated by two central worries: First, given its dismal history of disagreement and present state of faction, how could philosophy progress in the way and to the degree that the natural sciences had? And, second, how could traditional objects of philosophical inquiry such as free will, the soul, and God be fit into the world as described by the new science? The urgency of both these issues occasioned a crisis in modern philosophy. In their own way, and with varying degrees of success, rationalists such as Descartes and empiricists such as Hume grappled with these issues. But only in the figure of Immanuel Kant do we encounter a sustained and ingenious attempt to blend the rationalist and empiricist ways of addressing these problems.

A theme that emerges from this book is that this story needs to be retold. The story needs to be retold not so much because it is fundamentally misguided, but because it is incomplete. There is, in addition to the Kantian response to the crisis in modern philosophy,

a Reidian response – a response of a different character, but of comparable sophistication and ingenuity.

I

One of the most striking features of Thomas Reid's thought is that the typically modern anxiety about what we might call the "progress" and "location" problems is absent. There is, in Reid's published work, no lamentation about the lack of progress in philosophy.² Nor is there complaint about how philosophy compares unfavorably with the new science. On the contrary, in the preface to the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Reid writes that whatever the current prejudices may be against philosophy,

About two hundred years ago, the opinions of men in natural philosophy were as various, and as contradictory, as they are now concerning the powers of the mind. GALILEO, TORRICELLI, KEPLER, BACON and NEWTON, had the same discouragement in their attempts to throw light upon the material system, as we have with regard to the intellectual. If they had been deterred by such prejudices, we should never have reaped the benefit of their discoveries, which do honour to human nature, and will make their names immortal. . . .

The remains of ancient philosophy upon this subject [viz., the powers and operations of the mind], are venerable ruins, carrying the marks of genius and industry, sufficient to inflame, but not to satisfy, our curiosity. In later ages, DES CARTES was the first to point out the road we ought to take in those dark regions. MALEBRANCHE, ARNAULD, LOCKE, BERKELEY, BUFFIER, HUTCHESON, BUTLER, HUME, PRICE, Lord KAMES, have laboured to make discoveries; nor have they laboured in vain. For, however different and contrary their conclusions are, however skeptical some of them, they have all given new light, and cleared the way to those come after them.

We ought never to despair of human genius, but rather to hope, that, in time, it may produce a system of the powers and operations of the human mind, no less certain than those of optics or astronomy. (EIP Preface: 13–14)

This passage is remarkable for both its balanced assessment of philosophy's state and its high estimation of the philosophical tradition.³ The tradition has given us insight concerning the powers and operations of the mind, by which Reid means both the intellectual and active powers of the mind such as "[t]he powers of memory, of

imagination, of taste,⁴ of reasoning, of moral perception, the will, the passions, the affections, and all the active powers of the soul" (IHM VII: 218). And there is, says Reid, hope for real progress on these matters – even when so much of recent thought has been "skeptical" in character.⁵ In light of this measured optimism, it is natural to raise the question: Why is this characteristically modern theme of philosophy in crisis absent from Reid's thought?

It is not because Reid was ignorant of the history of philosophy or the success of the new science. Reid had a firm grip on the history of philosophy, as is evident in his extensive and detailed discussion of what he calls the "theory of ideas."⁶ Moreover, Reid himself was a practicing scientist, and, among all the great eighteenth-century philosophers, Reid is arguably the most learned and expert concerning scientific issues.⁷ Nor is the anxiety absent because Reid is dismissive of the new science. On the contrary, Reid repeatedly lauds the accomplishments of Newton and Bacon. Nor, finally, is it absent because Reid insisted on a sharp division between the methods of science and philosophy. Like Hume, Reid explicitly claims that philosophy should (in certain domains, at least) also employ the broadly inductive methods of Baconian science.⁸ So, once again: Why this absence of anxiety in Reid's thought about the progress of philosophy?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that Reid took himself to have identified the root of why philosophy had failed to progress as it should. The Reidian diagnosis of what we've called the "progress problem" is conspicuously different from that of his contemporaries. Unlike Hume, Reid does not claim that the failure of philosophy to progress primarily consists in the fact that philosophers have failed to use the "experimental method" of the new science – although Reid emphasizes that it is partly due to this. Nor is his diagnosis the Kantian one, according to which philosophy's failure to progress is explained by the reach of theoretical reason having exceeded its grasp – although there are certainly echoes of Kant in what Reid says.⁹ What Reid claims is

that the defects and blemishes in the received philosophy concerning the mind, which have most exposed it to the contempt and ridicule of sensible men, have chiefly been owing to this: That the votaries of this Philosophy, from a natural prejudice in her favour, have endeavored to extend her jurisdiction beyond its just limits, and to call to her bar the dictates of Common

Sense. But these decline this jurisdiction; they disdain the trial of reasoning, and disown its authority; they neither claim its aid, nor dread its attacks.

In this unequal contest betwixt Common Sense and Philosophy, the latter will always come off both with dishonour and loss. . . . Philosophy (if I may be permitted to change the metaphor) has no other root but the principles of Common Sense; it grows out of them, and draws its nourishment from them: severed from this root, its honours wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots. (IHM Introduction iv: 19)

So, in Reid's view, philosophy's lack of progress should mainly be attributed to its flouting the principles of common sense, by which Reid means (roughly) those propositions that properly functioning adult human beings at worlds like ours explicitly believe or take for granted in their ordinary activities and practices.¹⁰ But why has philosophy disregarded the principles of common sense? And what exactly has been the consequence?

Reid's answer to the first question is that modern philosophers have almost universally embraced what he calls "the Cartesian system" (IHM: VII: 208).¹¹ The Cartesian system, as Reid describes it, has two main elements, the first of which is a particular version of what we now call "epistemological foundationalism." For our purposes, we can understand epistemological foundationalism to be a three-part thesis. In the first place, the foundationalist claims that our beliefs have various kinds of epistemic merit such as being warranted, entitled, reliably formed, certain, a case of knowledge, and so forth.¹² In the second place, the foundationalist maintains that beliefs that display a given epistemic merit come in two kinds – those that are evidentially based on some other belief that has that merit and those that are not. Finally, the foundationalist specifies the conditions under which a belief has that merit – conditions under which a belief may be "immediately" warranted, entitled, reliably formed, and so forth (i.e., not evidentially based on some other belief that has the merit in question) or "mediately" justified, warranted, entitled, and so forth (i.e., evidentially based on some other belief that has the merit in question). The dominant trend in modern philosophy, according to Reid, has been to claim that the former sorts of belief are few in number:

There is, no doubt, a beauty in raising a large fabric of knowledge upon a few first principles. The stately fabric of mathematical knowledge, raised upon

the foundation of a few axioms and definitions, charms every beholder. DES CARTES, who was well acquainted with this beauty in the mathematical sciences, seems to have been ambitious to give the same beautiful simplicity to his system of philosophy; and therefore sought only one first principle as the foundation of all our knowledge, at least of contingent truths.

And so far has his authority prevailed, that those who came after him have almost universally followed him in this track. This, therefore, may be considered as the spirit of modern philosophy, to allow of no first principles of contingent truths but this one, that the thoughts and operations of our own minds, of which we are conscious, are self-evidently real and true; but that everything else that is contingent is to be proved by argument. (EIP VI.vii: 516)¹³

Reid's suggestion is that fundamental to the modern system is the thesis that the only beliefs that are immediately warranted, entitled, reliably formed, or a case of knowledge – Reid can, in various passages, be read as having different epistemic merits in mind¹⁴ – are ones that concern “the thoughts and operations of our own minds, of which we are conscious.” If an agent's belief concerning some contingent matter of fact other than the conscious thoughts and operations of her mind is warranted, entitled, reliably formed, or a case of knowledge, then it must be “proved by argument” from some belief concerning the conscious thoughts and operations of that agent's mind.

For ease of reference, we can call foundationalism of this kind “classically modern foundationalism.”¹⁵ The Cartesian system, according to Reid, links foundationalism of this variety with a methodological thesis that Reid calls the “way of analogy,” which is a manner “in which men . . . form their notions and opinions concerning the mind, and . . . its powers and operations” (IHM VII: 203). According to Reid, the tendency of those who engage in the way of analogy is to think of the mind in crudely mechanistic terms. Descartes and his followers – by which Reid means nearly all modern philosophers –

have built upon the same foundation [viz., consciousness] and with the same materials. They acknowledge that nature hath given us very simple ideas: These are analogous to the matter of Des Cartes's physical system. They acknowledge likewise a natural power by which ideas are compounded, disjoined, associated, compared: This is analogous to the original quantity of motion in Des Cartes's physical system. From these principles they attempt to explain the phaenomena of the human understanding, just as in the

physical system the phenomena of nature were to be explained by matter and motion. (IHM VII: 212)

Although Reid does not single him out by name in this passage, Hume is perhaps the most egregious example of those who engage in the way of analogy. The Humean mind is the Newtonian universe writ small – a theater in which the “materials” are “particles” of impressions and ideas governed by the quasi-Newtonian laws of contiguity, resemblance, and causality.¹⁶

Reid was of the conviction that analogical reasoning of this sort led naturally to what he called “the way of ideas” or the thesis that

things which do not now exist in the mind itself, can only be perceived, remembered, or imagined, by means of ideas or images of them in the mind, which are the immediate objects of perception, remembrance, and imagination. This doctrine appears evidently to be borrowed from the old system [i.e., the Aristotelian system]; which taught, that the external things make impressions upon the mind, like impressions of the seal upon wax; that it is by means of these impressions that we perceive, remember, or imagine them; and that those impressions must resemble things from which they are taken. When we form our notions of the operations of the mind by analogy, this way of conceiving them seems to be very natural, and offers itself to our thoughts: for as every thing which is felt must make some impression upon the body, we are apt to think, that everything which is understood must make some impression upon the mind. (IHM VII: 216)¹⁷

The main reason that the espousal of the Cartesian system has made philosophy a “ridiculous figure in the eyes of sensible men” (EIP II.xv: 186), says Reid, is that it issues in epistemological skepticism concerning the external world. The path to skepticism from the first component of the system is fairly direct: “From the single principle of the existence of our own thoughts, very little, if any thing, can be deduced by just reasoning, especially if we suppose that all our other faculties may be fallacious” (EIP VI.vii: 518). To use one of Reid’s own examples, from the mere belief that a person is having, say, a pain sensation, he cannot justifiably infer the existence of a pin whose sharpness occasioned this sensation. The proposition *that there is a sharp pin that is causing this sensation* is no more probable than not with respect to his belief that he is having a pain sensation of a certain kind: “Common sense may lead him to think that this pain has a cause; but whether this cause is body or spirit, extended

or unextended, figured or not figured, he cannot possibly, from any principles he is supposed to have, form the least conjecture" (IHM V.vi: 65).¹⁸

One of the reasons that it is extraordinarily difficult to argue from beliefs about the content of our minds to the existence of external reality is that these beliefs are, according to advocates of the Cartesian system such as Hume, supposed to be about *images* in the mind that imagistically resemble external reality.¹⁹ According to the Humean way of ideas theorist, we secure a mental grip on external reality by forming beliefs about images in the mind and inferring, on the basis of a resemblance between those images and the external world, entities in the external world that resemble those images.²⁰ But, as Reid tirelessly urges, we typically form no beliefs about our sensory experiences, and there is no significant resemblance between a sensory experience such as a pain sensation in one's finger and the sharpness of the instrument that occasioned it.²¹ It makes no difference, moreover, if we think of that sensory experience as an awareness of an idea in the mind. There is no imagistic resemblance between an idea of pain in the mind that we are aware of when experiencing pain and the sharpness of the instrument that occasioned that idea, for the idea in question is not itself sharp, extended, and so forth. Accordingly, if what the way of ideas theorist says is true, there is no adequate inference from ideas in the mind to an external reality that resembles it. The "natural issue" of the way of ideas is also skepticism concerning the external world (IHM VII: 210). To which Reid adds that even if there were objects such as ideas, they would not explain how we get a mental grip on external reality:

We are at a loss to know how we perceive distant objects; how we remember things past; how we imagine things that have no existence. Ideas in the mind seem to account for all these operations: They are all by means of ideas reduced to one operation; to a kind of feeling, or immediate perception of things present, and in contact with the percipient; and feeling is an operation so familiar, that we think it needs no explication, but may serve to explain other operations.

But this feeling, or immediate perception, is as difficult to be comprehended, as the things which we pretend to explain by it. Two things may be in contact without any feeling or perception; there must therefore be in the percipient a power to feel or to perceive. How this power is produced, and how it operates, is quite beyond the reach of our knowledge. . . .

This power of perceiving ideas is as inexplicable as any of the powers explained by it: And the contiguity of the object contributes nothing at all to make it better understood; because there appears no connection between contiguity and perception, but what is grounded on prejudices, drawn from some imagined similitude between mind and body. . . . (EIP II.xiv: 185)

In a move that both prefigures and has inspired major trends in contemporary epistemology and the philosophy of mind, Reid proposes jettisoning the Cartesian system. This means, first of all, repudiating a version of classically modern foundationalism in favor of a version of foundationalism that is (to use John Greco's terminology) "moderate and wide."²² Reid's favored version of foundationalism is moderate because it tells us that a belief can be in excellent epistemic standing – say, be a case of knowledge or certain – without being indubitable or incorrigible.²³ And it is "wide" because it says that many of our beliefs about external objects, other minds, events in the past, moral truths, and the like are both (i) not inferred from other propositions and (ii) in excellent epistemic condition. Indeed, according to one reading of Reid's treatment of the "first principles of contingent truths," Reid's view is that it is a first principle of common sense that the particular deliverances of the faculties of perception, memory, consciousness, the moral sense, and so forth are immediately warranted, entitled, reliably formed, and so on.²⁴

To fully divest ourselves of the Cartesian system, however, we must take a further step: We must also reject the way of analogy and its offspring, the way of ideas. Since ideas do not offer us any explanation of *how* we get a mental grip on reality, it would be better, claims Reid, to stick with our pre-reflective conviction that we apprehend entities of various kinds, but not by way of pictures in the head that imagistically resemble them.²⁵

II

Hegel once quipped about the Kantian critical method that refusing to engage in philosophical reflection about substantive metaphysical issues until one had first examined the nature and limits of the understanding was akin to "refusing to enter the water until you have learnt to swim."²⁶ Hegel was no Reidian, but his comment in this case is decidedly Reidian in spirit. If philosophy had stumbled

because it embraced the Cartesian system, the way forward, according to Reid, was not to begin with a critique of reason, but to begin in the thick of human experience by paying "due attention" to the use and structure of ordinary language, the principles taken for granted in the "course of human actions in conduct," and "the operations of our own minds" (EIP I.v: 56–7).

Of these three planks in his philosophical methodology, Reid himself grants special priority to the last: The "chief and proper source" of knowledge of the mind, says Reid, is accurate reflection upon the operations of our own minds, or introspection (*ibid.*). Ascribing this sort of authority to introspection is not, of course, likely to appeal to the post-Wittgensteinian philosopher or the contemporary psychologist. But Reid saw no particular reason to be suspicious of introspection. And it should be emphasized that he clearly recognized its limits. In the first place, introspective knowledge needs to be supplemented and guided by our best scientific knowledge of the nature of mind. That adherents to the way of ideas failed to pay close enough attention to the operations of mind, and thereby confounded distinct cognitive acts such as sensation and perception, is one of Reid's main objections to their views. But Reid also stressed that adherents to the way of ideas embraced scientifically suspect physiological hypotheses regarding the mechanisms involved in human perception.²⁷ And it should not be overlooked that Reid's work in the theory of vision and geometry plays a major part in his rejection of the way of ideas.²⁸ As Lorne Falkenstein has argued, Reid's work in the theory of vision and, in particular, his use of the Berkeleian distinction between visible and real figure are fundamental to his rejection of Berkeley's claim that the objects of vision and touch exist only in the mind as radically different types of sensation.²⁹

Secondly, Reid himself stresses that the introspective method is of limited use. Attending to the operations of our minds is extraordinarily difficult as "[t]he number and quick succession of the operations of the mind make it difficult to give due attention to them" (EIP I.vi: 60). Moreover, we are, among other things, habitually disposed to attend to the objects of the operations of mind and not the operations of mind themselves.³⁰ So, although accurately reflecting on the operations of mind is central to Reid's common sense philosophy, it is not itself a practice easily engaged in by the ordinary person. On the contrary, it requires the exercise of virtues such as

attention, patience, and discernment that Reid suggests may be in short supply among the vulgar.³¹

It is not surprising, then, that both when criticizing the positions of others and when developing his own positive views, Reid leans heavily on the ways in which ordinary folk use language and the principles of common sense that they take for granted in their ordinary activities and practices. In this respect at least, Reid's philosophical method is one that foreshadows both American pragmatism and the "linguistic turn" in Anglo-American analytic philosophy. It is also, interestingly enough, that aspect of Reid's thought that has attracted the most criticism. To single out what is perhaps the most famous of such criticisms, Kant's invective in the introduction to the *Prolegomena* accused Reidian common sense of being an "appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed . . . when no rational justification for one's position can be advanced . . . when insight and science fail."³²

Kant's criticism has been echoed by philosophers of rather different persuasions.³³ This is more than a little ironic, for Reid himself would not have denied that there is a sense in which appealing to common sense – to what it "is ridiculous to doubt" – *is* humiliating for the philosopher:

When I remember distinctly a past event, or see an object before my eyes, this commands my belief no less than an axiom. But when, as a Philosopher, I reflect upon this belief, and want to trace it to its origin, I am not able to resolve it into necessary and self-evident axioms, or conclusions that are necessarily consequent upon them. I seem to want that evidence which I can best comprehend, and which gives perfect satisfaction to an inquisitive mind; yet it is ridiculous to doubt, and I find it is not in my power. An attempt to throw off this belief, is like an attempt to fly, equally ridiculous and impracticable.

To a Philosopher, who has been accustomed to think that the treasure of his knowledge is the acquisition of that reasoning power of which he boasts, it is no doubt humiliating to find, that his reason can lay no claim to the greater part of it. (EIP II.xx: 233)

Reid's response to humiliation of this sort is that it is salutary for the philosopher: The philosopher's humiliation should beget philosophical humility. And philosophical humility or modesty does

indeed pervade Reid's views on common sense and ordinary language; Reid is no less aware of the limitations of appeals to ordinary language and common sense than he is of the limits of appeals to introspection. We can, Reid emphasizes, be mistaken about what we take to be principles of common sense and, thus, should be "cautious, that we do not adopt opinions as first principles, which are not entitled to that character" (EIP I.ii: 46). And while philosophy must start from, and be guided by, ordinary language, Reid states that "all languages have their imperfections . . . and can never be adequate to all the varieties of human thought" since "we can expect, in the structure of languages" only "those distinctions which all mankind in the common business of life have occasion to make" (EIP I.v: 56). Indeed, as Reid indicates in his discussion of the way in which we talk about the movement of the earth, ordinary language can lead us astray.³⁴ Finally, it should be noted that Reid himself is willing to deviate from ordinary language and what appears to be common sense, when the latter clashes with our best science. Perhaps the best example of this in Reid's own thought lies in his treatment of causality. Reid understood the best science of his day – that is, Newtonian science – to establish that matter was inert. Accordingly, Reid was willing to allow that, even though ordinary language and the beliefs of ordinary folk indicate otherwise, material objects are not causally efficacious: "In compliance with custom, or, perhaps, to gratify the avidity of knowing the causes of things," Reid writes, "we call the laws of nature causes and active powers. So we speak of the powers of gravitation, of magnetism, of electricity" (EAP IV.iii: 607a).³⁵ But "[t]he name of a *cause* . . . is properly given to that being only, which, by its active power, produces some change in itself, or in some other being" (EAP IV.ii: 603a). As the latter passage indicates, by an "active power," Reid means the power of intelligent agents to bring about some change in itself or some other entity. All causation, according to Reid, is *agent* causation. All causation in nature, then, is ultimately the result of the exercise of God's agent power or the power of agents subordinate to God.³⁶

In summary, then, the Reidian diagnosis of and solution to the progress problem is both revolutionary and modest. It is revolutionary insofar as it identifies a package of commitments – the Cartesian system – that philosophers had heretofore accepted uncritically, and proposes, on account of the unattractive consequences of those

commitments, rejecting them. But it is modest insofar as both the diagnosis and the solution do not stray far from the principles of common sense. Philosophizing has to start *somewhere*, and Reid saw no reason that we should leave our commonsensical modes of discourse and convictions at the door when entering into the philosophical workplace. Admittedly, it is sometimes easy to identify modesty of this sort with lack of sophistication. But such an identification would be a mistake in Reid's case. Reid's positive philosophical methodology is complex: It should be viewed as the interplay between the deliverances of introspection, science, observations concerning the structure and use of ordinary language, and the principles of common sense. Reid certainly does ascribe a particular type of authority to common sense and ordinary language; until shown otherwise, they are presumed to be reliable guides to reality. But trade-offs between these different features sometimes need to be made, and the philosopher must exercise good judgment in making them.

III

Reid, then, offered a general strategy for addressing the progress problem – a strategy out of step with both the rationalist and empiricist thought of his day. Advocating a strategy of this sort, however, was only a first step toward adequately addressing the progress problem. A fully adequate response to the problem required exhibiting how one's favored philosophical methodology could shed light on the issue of how traditional objects of philosophical inquiry could be accommodated within the world as described by the best science. Reid's conviction – and here it is instructive to note a parallel with Kant – was that, among the various entities most in need of accommodation in the world as described by Newtonian science, human free choice had special priority: Without our having free will in a robustly libertarian sense, moral responsibility and, thus, traditional morality would be illusions.³⁷ For both Reid and Kant, other traditional issues such as personal identity through time were of secondary importance to this. Ascribing to agents strict identity through time was an important issue for Reid mainly insofar as it was necessary to underwrite our ordinary practices of holding agents morally responsible for their actions and character traits.³⁸

Although Reid and Kant were agreed on this much, they adopted different strategies of locating free choice in the Newtonian universe, for they understood the nature of this universe rather differently. Kant advertised his project in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as one that (among other things) attempted to account for the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge of necessary truths. And among the synthetic a priori propositions for which we have to account, says Kant, are Newton's laws of motion.³⁹ Although it is not entirely uncontroversial in what sense Kant held these laws to be "necessary and universal," the drift of Kant's thought appears to be that they are "transcendentally necessary" or metaphysically necessary at worlds in which human beings have experience. Understood thus, Kant was a necessitarian about these laws of nature inasmuch as he held it to be transcendentally necessary that, for example, for any action, there is always an opposite or equal reaction.⁴⁰ To this thesis Kant joined a broadly Leibnizian version of determinism: All the actions of the self in time are entirely determined by such natural laws. Of course Kant was perfectly aware that determinism is incompatible with libertarian freedom, and so he proposed dividing the world and the self in two: Insofar as we are inhabitants of the phenomenal realm, or the world of appearances, our actions are entirely determined. Insofar as we are inhabitants of the noumenal realm, or the world of things-in-themselves, we are free in the libertarian sense (and must be so for practical purposes).⁴¹

Viewed thus, Kant's strategy of addressing the location problem is one of avoidance: Rather than attempt to fit human free will into the Newtonian universe, his proposal is to place it in a different realm altogether – a nontemporal, nonspatial "noumenal" realm. Reid shared Kant's resolve to defend the claim that we have free will in a robustly libertarian sense, but did not share Kant's concern that free will of this sort has no place in the Newtonian universe. Fundamental to our existence, says Reid, is that "[w]e have, by our constitution a natural conviction or belief that we act freely – a conviction so early, so universal, and so necessary in most of our rational operations, that it must be the result of our constitution, and the work of Him that made us" (EAP IV.vi: 616b). Reid continues:

This natural conviction of our acting freely, which is acknowledged by many who hold the doctrine of necessity, ought to throw the whole burden of proof

upon that side; for, by this, the side of liberty has what lawyers call a *jus quaesitum*, or a right of ancient possession, which ought to stand good till it be overturned. If it cannot be proved that we always act from necessity, there is no need of arguments on the other side, to convince us that we are free agents. (EAP IV.vi: 620a-b)

But then what about those features of the experimental method or the Newtonian universe that might threaten to overturn this native conviction concerning our freedom?

In Section VII of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume argued that we have no conception of active power or the power of free choice because (i) we can see no dependence relation – let alone a necessary dependence relation – between the exercise of this power and its effects, and (ii) we have no idea how the exercise of this power could bring about behavior of certain kinds in the agent who exercised the power. Reid was unimpressed by this complaint:

To this [i.e., Hume's argument] I answer that if a man believed that in heat there was a will to melt ice, he would undoubtedly believe that there is in heat a real efficient⁴² power to produce that effect, though he were ignorant how or by what latent process the effect is produced. So we, knowing that certain effects depend on our will, impute to ourselves the power of producing them, though there may be some latent process between the volition and the production which we do not know. So a child may know that a bell is rung by pulling a certain peg, though he does not yet know how that operation is connected with the ringing of the bell, and when he can move that peg he has a perfect conviction that he has power to ring the bell.

Supposing we were unable to give any account how we first got the conception of power, this would be no good reason for denying that we have it. One might as well prove that he had no eyes in his head for this reason[:] that neither he nor any other person could tell how they came there. (OP: 8, 5)

Reid's reply is that every person is convinced that certain events depend on the exercise of his active power, and it matters not a bit whether we can give an account of how the exercise of this power brings about these events. It should be noted that Reid does not leave the matter at this, but goes on to give an account of how we get a mental grip on active power. We do so not by way of being acquainted with some impression or idea, as Hume appeared to suggest we must

if we had such a conception, but by what Reid calls a “relative conception.” “Our conception of power is relative to its exertions or effects. . . . [P]ower . . . [is] something which has a certain relation to the effect” (EAP I.i: 514a).⁴³ To put Reid’s point in the way we might nowadays couch it, we can get a mental grip on a particular power by way of the apprehensive use of the singular concept or definite description *the entity whose exercise brought about such and such effects*. Of course in so grasping a power, one must possess the notion of *some thing’s bringing about another thing*. In Reid’s view, however, there is nothing particularly problematic about acquiring such a concept; acquisition of this concept needn’t come about by comparing ideas or hunting for an impression that corresponds to the concept. Rather, as the first passage quoted from the *Active Powers* above indicates, we acquire this concept by way of our “constitution.” Given certain kinds of experiential inputs – namely, the “consciousness of our own activity” (EAP I.v: 523b) – we form, by a law of our constitution, the concept of something’s causally bringing about something else.⁴⁴

But to say this is not perforce to give an account of how we get a mental grip on the *necessary* connection that is supposed to obtain between cause and effect. Nor is it to address the claim that determinism is constitutive of the Newtonian universe and, thus, prohibits our thinking of human agents in space/time as being free in a robustly libertarian sense. The heart of Reid’s response to these worries is expressed in the following passage, in which he claims that the laws of nature are contingent:

A law is a thing conceived in the mind of a rational being, not a thing that has real existence;⁴⁵ and, therefore, like a motive, it can neither act nor be acted upon. . . .

The *physical laws of nature* are the rules according to which the Deity commonly acts in his natural government of the world; and whatever is done according to them, is not done by man, but by God, either immediately, or by instruments under his direction. These laws of nature neither restrain the power of the Author of nature, nor bring him under any obligation to do anything beyond their sphere. He has sometimes acted contrary to them, in the case of miracles, and, perhaps, often acts without regard to them, in the ordinary course of his providence. Neither miraculous events, which are contrary to the physical laws of nature, nor such ordinary acts of the Divine

administration ... are ... impossible, nor are they *effects without a cause*. God is the cause of them, and to him only are they to be imputed. (EAP IV.ix: 628a-b)⁴⁶

Reid is what we might call a “theistic non-necessitarian” about the laws of nature. Laws of nature are simply rules according to which God commonly acts. Theistic non-necessitarianism of this variety is crucial to Reid’s strategy of addressing the location problem.

While it is not entirely clear what Hume is saying when he claims that there is a “necessary” connection between cause and effect, one plausible suggestion is this: Hume believed that nothing would count as an apprehension of a “must” between a particular cause and effect unless it carries with it implications of uniformity for the general case. In apprehending a necessary causal connection between two event tokens A and B, we also see that events could never transpire otherwise.⁴⁷ If this is Hume’s thought, then Reid’s answer is that grasping the dependence relation that obtains between cause and effect requires no such apprehension. One can grasp that a particular willing of type A brings about an event token of type B without being committed to the claim that all willings of type A bring about event tokens of type B.

Reid’s non-necessitarianism is equally fundamental to his rejection of what he calls the “system of necessity,” which can be viewed as the upshot of the combination of a pair of principles commonly embraced by its advocates. The first assumption is that human willings are events. The second is the necessitarian claim that

(N) Any event E is related to some other event E* in this way: Necessarily (as a law of nature) given E*, then E.

From these two principles it follows that our willings aren’t in any sense up to us; given the laws of nature, none of us could have willed otherwise than we did.⁴⁸

Reid not only believes we have no reason to accept (N) – (N) is not, for instance, a consequence of Newton’s system – but that theistic non-necessitarianism gives us reason to reject it. If the laws of nature simply describe how God commonly acts in the world, there is no reason to believe that God cannot act differently from the way that God commonly does. And what holds for divine actions – namely, that