

Re-evaluating Reid's Response to Skepticism

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§1 Introduction

We can understand Thomas Reid's epistemology as a response to skepticism. It is particularly unfortunate, then, that Reid's response to the skeptic is widely misunderstood. I argue that some of the most prominent interpretations neglect a crucial aspect of Reid's thought: namely, that our common sense beliefs meet whatever normative standards of rationality that the skeptic might fairly demand of them. After reviewing the nature of the skeptical problem, as Reid understood it, we will turn our attention towards Reid's proposed resolution.

In Reid's mind, the skepticism of Berkeley and Hume was conceived in Descartes (e.g. *Inquiry* 7.3, 210). The Cartesian system, fertile as it was, gave birth to two distinct forms of skepticism.¹ No-concept skepticism denies knowledge of, for instance, the external world by contesting our ability to form a conception of mind-independent objects. No-justification skepticism denies that we have epistemic justification for forming such beliefs, even if we could. Reid responds

Passages from Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* are taken from Reid (1997) and will be cited as "*Inquiry*" followed by the chapter and section number, then the page number. Passages from Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* are taken from Reid (2002) and will be cited as "*Essays*" followed by the essay and chapter number, then the page number.

¹ See Greco (1995), (2004) and Sosa and Van Cleve (2001), 184.

to the no-concept skeptic by rejecting the dreaded Way of Ideas: the position that only ideas are the immediate objects of thought. But there is widespread disagreement about the nature of Reid's response to the no-justification skeptic, which is what our discussion will focus on.

The source of no-justification skepticism reveals how Reid must respond to it. Descartes' original error, according to Reid, is accepting only one principle of common sense:

The [Cartesian] system admits only one of the principles of common sense as a first principle; and pretends, by strict argumentation, to deduce all the rest from it. That our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious, hath real existence, is admitted in this system as a first principle; but ever thing else must be made evident by the light of reason. Reason must rear the whole fabric of knowledge upon this single principle of consciousness. (*Inquiry* 7.3, 210)

In rough terms, the principles of common sense state that the basic beliefs produced by our various natural faculties and belief-forming mechanisms are true (*Essays* 6.5).² To admit a principle of common sense involves treating the immediate deliverances of that faculty as first principles. Though Reid uses "first principles" in a variety of ways, we will understand first principles as propositions that are immediately and non-inferentially justified.³ Descartes treated the content of his introspective beliefs as justified apart from any argument but refused to do the same for all our other faculties, including

² At least this is true of the first principles of contingent truths, which seem to be the crux of the matter.

³ Some argue that Reid's characterization of first principles is ambiguous between two distinct kinds (see, e.g., Van Cleve (1999), 8; Somerville (1987), 425; and especially Wolterstorff (2001), 218, (2004) 82). Poore (2013) shows that there is less confusion in Reid than these commentators think.

perception. The “natural issue” of Descartes’ refusal is skepticism. To respond to this skepticism, Reid argues that the deliverances of *all* our natural faculties should be admitted as first principles. This vindicates the principles of common sense from skeptical accusations.⁴ Reid’s task, then, is to show that we have justification for believing the content of all those basic beliefs produced by our natural faculties – at least until we have reason to doubt them.

Any interpretation of Reid on skepticism must explain how we come to have immediate justification for first principles (particularly first principles of perception) and how Reid argues for this position. What we are *not* looking for is an argument that justifies first principles.⁵ First principles are *non-inferentially* justified: “Their evidence is not demonstrative, but intuitive” (*Essays* 1.2, 41).⁶

The goal, then, is to see how Reid argues *that* first principles are justified.

Reid’s argument to this end has proven difficult to find. What we get are reminders about the centrality and importance of first principles: how we would

⁴ This is at least the first and most important step in vindicating the principles of common sense. It shows that we are being rational in taking these principles for granted, or at least acting as if they are true, in the way we form basic beliefs. It also puts us in a position to show that belief in the principles of common sense is itself justified. Reid thinks that competent adults will immediately believe such principles upon considering them. Given our earlier conclusion, this means that, in the absence of defeaters, we have immediate justification for believing in the principles of common sense. The crucial step, then, is showing that we have immediate justification for the deliverances of all our faculties.

⁵ Reid actually recommends against offering arguments for the truth of first principles for the arguments offered for them will be less certain than the principles themselves, tempting one to mistakenly reject them as inconclusive (*Essays* 1.2, 41).

⁶ It is more accurate to say that first principles are neither entirely nor primarily justified by discursive reasoning. As Poore (2013; forthcoming, §4) argues, it may be possible to formulate non-circular arguments in support of some principles of common sense by relying on *other* principles of common sense to formulate these arguments. This is impossible only for the seventh principle of contingent truths, which attests to the general reliability of our faculties (*Essays* 6.5, 480-2). But any inferential justification provided by such arguments is merely in addition to the non-inferential justification of first principles.

be epistemically and prudentially incapacitated without them (see, e.g., *Essays* 6.4, 455; *Essays* 1.2, 39; *Essays* 6.2, 433). The following claims are especially pervasive in Reid's writings and will prove to be of special importance: (i) belief in first principles is psychologically irresistible (e.g. *Inquiry* 6.20, 169) and (ii) belief in first principles results from the constitution of our nature (e.g. *Inquiry* 5.7, 71-2). The trouble is that it's not immediately clear how these facts are supposed to show that we have epistemic justification for believing in first principles. As James Somerville, quoting Reid's *Essays On the Active Powers of Man*, notes:

It is one thing to hold that "it is necessary for our preservation, that we should believe many things before we can reason;" that our belief "is regulated by certain principles, which are parts of our constitution." This is only what Hume holds. It is another that such instinctive principles are true. (1987, 425)

This interpretive difficulty has led to a variety of perspectives on Reid. Some see Reid as offering a purely reliabilist or proper functionalist response: roughly, beliefs in first principles are justified since they result from the proper function of reliable faculties.⁷ Others say Reid is only defending the *practical* justification of believing first principles.⁸ Still others interpret Reid less

⁷ See Alston (1985b), Bergmann (2008), De Bary (2002), Greco (2004), and Poore (2013, forthcoming) for reliabilist or proper functionalist interpretations. To be precise, these interpretations do not contend that Reid fully worked out a reliabilist or proper functionalist theory, but only that this is the sort of theory that results from his underlying assumptions (see Alston (1985b), 437).

⁸ Lundestad (2006), Baumann (1999), and Magnus (2004). Addressing these interpretations directly would take us too far afield. However, these interpretations seem to be primarily motivated by an inability to see how Reid is making a plausible defense of the epistemic justification of first principles. So the discussion that follows is itself a response.

charitably as providing no substantial response to no-justification skepticism at all.⁹

The position I will defend is that Reid uses the above facts to show that we are rationally permitted to believe in first principles, which, on my interpretation, amounts to justification. The term 'rational' is often associated specifically with the faculty of Reason, but this is not how I am using the term here. One is rationally permitted to believe something iff believing it doesn't violate the normative standards or duties that ought to regulate our cognition as intellectual agents. It is true that Reid's predecessors commonly *assumed* that all of our beliefs (excepting introspective ones) were permitted only if supported by reason, but Reid rejects this assumption. Basic perceptual beliefs, for instance, are not supported by reason but are perfectly rational because we violate no obligation in holding them. Reid sees our intellectual obligations as closely connected with the notions of intellectual criticism or blame. We are not in violation of our duties iff we are not blameworthy or cannot be criticized for believing as we do. Reid appeals to the naturalness and irresistibility of first principles (including first principles of perception) to show that we are not at fault for believing in them; thus, believing in first principles is rationally permissible, or justified.

This picture of Reid stands in sharp contrast to most others, which ignore or downplay the importance of rationality to Reid.¹⁰ Reliabilist or proper

⁹ Daniels (1974) and Popkin (1980) appear to interpret Reid as simply declaring his confidence that God ensures the reliability of our beliefs. See also Thomas Brown's quote in §3.

functionalist interpretations are perhaps the most popular. On these interpretations, justified beliefs are just those that result from a reliable belief forming process or that result from the proper functioning of reliable faculties. Given this understanding of justification, all that matters to Reid is that our beliefs in first principles do, in fact, result from properly functioning, reliable faculties. Whether they meet any additional intellectual standards is ultimately irrelevant.

Despite these differences, there is substantial common ground between reliabilist or proper functionalist interpretations and the deontological view. I agree that Reid is a proto-reliabilist or proper functionalist about *knowledge*. Reid learned from Descartes' failure that being rationally permitted to believe *p*, or having justification for believing *p*, doesn't guarantee that one is in a position to know *p*. We need our faculties to be reliably tuned to the world in order to gain knowledge. But it is an overreaction to thereby conclude that Reid stopped caring about meeting one's intellectual duties. Reid thought you need both for knowledge. Interpretations that ignore rationality miss half the story.

The following discussion fills in this missing half. I begin by explaining Reid's views on evidence, which are crucial to understanding the nature of justification. I then build a case that we ought to think of good evidence, and hence justification, in terms of rationality. I end by showing how Reid defends the justification of first principles, so understood, against the skeptic.

¹⁰Houston (2000), Rysiew (2002, 2005, 2011), and Wolterstoff (1983a; 1983b; 2001) are exceptions.

§2 Evidence and Reasonable Evidence

Reid thought that having justification for p was just to have good evidence for p . This is true even for non-inferentially justified first principles. This last part can be puzzling for those living with a paradigm on which evidence must come from arguments. How can propositions be based on good evidence *and* non-inferentially justified? The answer lies in Reid's unique conception of evidence. If we can understand how Reid thinks of evidence, then we'll be in a position to see how first principles can be supported by good evidence and how Reid can show this to be true.

There are major disagreements about the nature of evidence for Reid. The first decision point we face is whether Reid endorses a psychological conception of evidence or a normative one.¹¹ On the psychological conception, evidence is a certain kind of psychological cause or explanation of belief. On the normative conception, evidence is the sort of thing that we *should* have for our beliefs. If we admit that evidence has normative features, there are further questions about the nature of these feature which must be addressed.

On my interpretation, evidence in the broadest sense is a merely psychological notion; however, Reid speaks of a special kind of evidence called "good evidence" or "reasonable evidence" that has both psychological and

¹¹ Rysiew (2005) sets up the debate in this way.

normative dimensions.¹² Reasonable evidence—the sort needed for justification—not only psychologically grounds belief but also serves as a *just* ground for belief. Ultimately, Reid claims that all of our evidence is reasonable evidence, but it is at least conceivable that evidence be unreasonable. I'll start with Reid's general conception of evidence.

Reid thinks that there are many different kinds of evidence, each stemming from a different natural faculty. As to what unites them all as evidence, Reid states:

They seem to me to agree only in this, that they are all fitted by Nature to produce belief in the human mind. (*Essays* 2.20, 229)

Elsewhere, Reid says that, “The Judgment is carried along necessarily by evidence” (*Essays* 6.4, 452). The message seems to be that evidence is a psychological cause or explanation of a belief. This understanding is supported by Reid's proclamation, “We give the name of evidence to whatever is a ground of belief” (*Essays* 2.20, 228). We should not, however, conclude that any psychological ground of belief is evidence. Rysiew notes that a moment after this proclamation, Reid adds, “To believe without evidence is a weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid” (*Essays* 2.20, 228).¹³ On the modest assumption that all beliefs possess *some* psychological ground—a generalization that is violable only in extreme cases that Reid doesn't have in mind—Reid implies that some psychological grounds

¹² Rysiew (2002, 2005, 2011) also interprets Reid as endorsing a psychological-normative account of evidence. My interpretation follows his on a number of points.

¹³ Rysiew (2005, 111).

of belief do not or might not qualify as evidence. Prejudice, for instance, can ground belief in a purely psychological sense but is not evidence.

The fact that evidence is tied to our natural faculties gives us a clue as to which psychological grounds count as evidence. These faculties are designed to produce belief on the basis of some grounds but not others. Those grounds on which it is proper function to base belief are evidence.¹⁴ Thus Reid writes, “we measure degrees of evidence by the effect they have upon a sound understanding” (*Essays* 7.3, 482). This partially explains why Reid is so interested in showing that our common sense beliefs result from our natural faculties rather than prejudice. It also explains why Reid thinks that a prejudice might be mistaken for a first principle or a first principle for a prejudice (*Essays* 1.2, 41). We may be in error about whether believing a proposition results from the proper function of our faculties.

What counts as evidence for an individual will vary with her natural constitution. While one human may have greater powers of reasoning than another, humans all share similar natural constitutions. For instance, the power to judge self-evident principles common to all humans is called the faculty of common sense (*Essays* 6.2, 432-3). Reid talks about evidence in general (as opposed to evidence for a particular person) as that which grounds belief in the properly functioning, normal, competent, unbiased, attentive adult.

¹⁴ What counts as proper function for an individual will be determined by the design of one’s faculties. While Reid thinks of God as the designer of our faculties, the relevant notion of design is, in principle, separable from an agential designer.

Evidence is not to be limited, however, to that which, in fact, grounds a belief. Reid conveys that evidence can be undiscerned (*Essays* 6.5, 481), which implies that not all evidence actually grounds a belief. More generally, we may encounter something on which it is proper function to believe but fail to do so because of bias or inattention or many other reasons. What is crucial to evidence is that it is proper function to base belief on it.

We are zeroing in on a conception of evidence as that on which it is proper function to ground assent. This is not to say that, when functioning properly, evidence always leads to a belief. Say you have evidence for p and stronger evidence for $\sim p$. The properly functioning human will believe $\sim p$ despite having evidence for p . What seems to be essential to evidence is that it pushes or inclines us to believe when functioning properly. At one point Reid writes:

What this evidence is, is more easily felt than described. Those who never reflected upon its nature, feel its influence in governing their belief. (*Essays* 2.20, 228-9)

The phrase Reid uses later is that which “commands my belief” (*Essays* 2.20, 233). The crucial feature of evidence is not that it succeeds in bringing about assent but that it motivates it, where this implies only that one feels a compulsion to assent to p . So evidence is that which engenders a compulsion to believe in the properly functioning mind. In this way, all evidence might be called “natural evidence”, since it is by virtue of how we are naturally constituted that something counts as evidence.

Evidence, so understood, comes in degrees. When functioning properly, different evidence will compel different degrees of assent. Reid says of the different forms of evidence:

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. (*Essays* 2.20, 229)

Reid then links the degree to which we are naturally compelled to assent to p to the degree of evidence we have for p . Recall Reid's statement that, "we measure degrees of evidence by the effect they have upon a sound understanding" (*Essays* 7.3, 482). So the strength of our evidence is correlated with how strongly the properly functioning mind is naturally compelled to believe.

This conception of evidence unites all the different types of evidence stemming from our various natural faculties. But what evidence actually consists in will differ between kinds. The evidence of sense, for instance, consists in sensations since they serve as the natural signs that occasion the formation of perceptual beliefs. Evidence stemming from the faculty of reason, on the other hand, consists in propositions. This is confirmed in Reid's endorsement of foundationalism:

When we examine, in the way of analysis, the evidence of any proposition, either we find it self-evident, or it rests upon one or more propositions that support it. The same thing may be said of the propositions that support it; and of those that support them, as far back as we can go. But we cannot go back in this track to infinity. Where then must this analysis stop? It is evident that it must stop only when we come to propositions, which support all that are built upon them, but are themselves supported by none, that is, to self-evident propositions. (*Essays* 6.4, 455)

The evidence of reason for any proposition comes from being either (i) supported by other propositions or (ii) self-evident. In an argument, the premises are evidence for the conclusion because consideration of the premises compels assent in the conclusion in the properly functioning human mind. With a self-evident proposition, merely considering that proposition triggers a compulsion to believe it in the properly functioning human mind.¹⁵ In this way, self-evident propositions are *self-evidenced*—i.e. evidence for themselves. So the evidence of reason either consists in the propositions of a supporting argument or a self-evident proposition. Either way, the evidence of reason consists in propositions.¹⁶

So far, we have a purely psychological notion of evidence. To say that something compels assent in the properly functioning human mind is, in itself, a merely descriptive claim about the psychological operations of the mind. For this reason, Reid’s most general notion of evidence is purely psychological. Reid, however, draws a distinction between evidence and good, or reasonable, evidence. All reasonable evidence is evidence, but possibly not all evidence is reasonable evidence. Right after characterizing evidence as “whatever is a ground of belief,” Reid gives the defining characteristic of reasonable evidence.¹⁷

¹⁵ At least, if a competent and unbiased adult attentively considers the proposition, then she will be compelled to believe that proposition.

¹⁶ It is natural to wonder why Reid thought that *propositions* were evidence rather than the mental states one has when conceiving of those propositions. I don’t know why Reid came to the former conclusion, just that he did.

¹⁷ In the next line he calls this the “meaning” of good evidence.

All good evidence is commonly called reasonable evidence, and very justly, because it ought to govern our belief as reasonable creatures. (*Essays* 2.20, 230)

All evidence compels belief in the properly functioning mind, but only reasonable evidence does so *justly*. Reasonable evidence, then, is both a psychological and normative notion. It is also the only sort of evidence that is of epistemic value, for only good evidence provides justification.

Reid acknowledges the possibility that the evidence of our faculties, or natural evidence, is not reasonable evidence. He writes:

I shall take it for granted, that evidence of sense, when the proper circumstances concur, is good evidence, and a just ground of belief. (*Essays* 2.20, 229)

Here Reid assumes that the natural evidence provided by our sensory faculties is reasonable evidence. If there were no conceptual distinction between natural evidence and reasonable evidence, then Reid would have no need to make this assumption. In fact, Reid's dispute with the skeptic can be reframed as a dispute over whether natural evidence is reasonable evidence. The skeptic agrees, of course, that we are naturally constituted to form beliefs in things like the external world. Hume, for example, was quite candid about his inability to throw off a belief in first principles – a fact that Reid is careful to note (see especially *Inquiry* 1.5). The skeptic simply contests is that we have *just* grounds for these beliefs. It is to this charge, then, that Reid must respond.

§3 Reid and Rationality

The nature of Reid's defense will depend a lot on how we are to understand the notion of a "just ground of belief." Clearly, beliefs with just grounds (or their contents) have some positive epistemic status—namely, *justification*—that other beliefs do not. But what does Reid take the nature of this positive epistemic status to be?

Many claim that Reid is only interested in defending the positive epistemic status characterized by contemporary externalist theories like reliabilism or proper functionalism. On some of these views, natural evidence justly compels assent iff one's natural belief-forming processes are sufficiently reliable. Thus, Reid need only insist that our faculties are, in fact, reliable to respond to the skeptic. In particular, these views contend that reasonable evidence has nothing to do with rationally entitling one to believe. Alston writes,

The basic question concerns whether beliefs that are formed in a certain way can be relied on to give us the truth, rather than whether beliefs that satisfy certain conditions thereby satisfy certain *normative* standard of rationality or whatever. (1985b, 437)

The natural result of such interpretations is that evidence becomes peripheral.

As John Greco explains:

Once we are reliabilists about evidence, inference or reasoning is not so special any more. In fact, once we are reliabilists about evidence, *evidence* is not so special any more. What matters is however we form our beliefs, they are formed in ways that are reliable. ... We can see that this is exactly what happens in Reid's epistemology. (2002, 562)

This sort of perspective on Reid has become fairly entrenched.

Despite their popularity, these interpretations face serious problems. Most troubling is that they completely miss a crucial element of Reid's response to skepticism. I will argue that, for Reid, a just ground for belief is something that rationally entitles one to believe—that is, we are not violating any intellectual obligation in believing on that ground. On this understanding, having justification for first principles is simply a matter of being rationally permitted to believe them. After defending this interpretation, I show how Reid defends the permissibility of believing first principles in §4.

The first thing to note is that Reid pretty overtly characterizes reasonable evidence in terms of intellectual obligations.

All good evidence is commonly called reasonable evidence, and very justly, because it ought to govern our belief as reasonable creatures. (*Essays* 2.20, 230)

This passage apparently implies that we have a duty to form our beliefs in accordance with reasonable evidence. That we have such a duty was standard fare for modern epistemologists. Even Hume famously held that “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence” (Hume (1999), 170). Reid, it appears, is no different. It is in this same section of the *Essays*, moreover, that Reid repeatedly talks about reasonable evidence as a “just ground” for belief (*Essays* 2.20, 228-9). This suggests that we should think of “just grounds” as having deontological significance—as being the sort of thing that makes belief rationally permissible.

Allow me to bolster the case. Reid casts his epistemological theory as a response to the no-justification skeptic. So if we can determine which positive epistemic status the skeptic is denying, then we have strong evidence about which positive epistemic status Reid is defending; for we should, if possible, interpret Reid as defending first principles against the very charge leveled by the skeptic. The positive epistemic status under contention is probably what Reid is thinking of as justification.

Wolterstorff (2001) asks himself which status Reid's skeptic contests. His answer:

Reid's skeptic has his eye on *entitlement*—on what one is permitted to believe—on what one may believe and on what one must not believe." (188)

Indeed, Reid articulates the skeptic's challenge in precisely this way:

[The skeptic says] There is nothing so shameful in a philosopher as to be deceived and deluded; and therefore you ought to resolve firmly to withhold assent, and throw off this belief of external objects. ...

Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. (*Inquiry* 6.20, 169)

The Cartesian skeptic insists that there are intellectual obligations governing our beliefs. In particular, we shouldn't hold any belief that isn't based on sound reasoning. The only exceptions are for introspective beliefs. This position leads to skepticism because many of our beliefs—perceptual beliefs, for instance—simply aren't supported by reason. Thus, a straightforward response to the skeptic will involve a denial that we are obligated to base all of our non-introspective beliefs on reason.

We can confirm this position by looking at Hume, who is Reid's paradigm skeptic. What's important is not what Hume actually said so much as what Reid *took* Hume to be saying, for it is Reid's interpretation of the skeptic's challenge that would shape his response. In Reid's view, Hume insisted that one can reasonably infer very little from the immediate contents of one's mind. For instance, no argument for the external world can be crafted on the basis of our impressions. Hume readily acknowledges, of course, that humans *do* believe in the existence the external world, but these beliefs are based on "custom or habit," not reason (Hume (1997), 121). Clearly Hume sees it as a fault that our beliefs are based on custom rather than reason. What exactly does this fault consist in? Hume's conclusion seems to be that such beliefs stand in violation of our intellectual obligations. While the vulgar may be content to rely on custom, the wise man should cast off beliefs as unfounded.

In contrast, Hume is *not* contesting the reliability of our belief-forming mechanisms. It may be that custom is a perfectly reliable guide and that all our beliefs about the external world are true. Hume would still insist that there is something deficient about beliefs formed by custom rather than sound reasoning: namely, they are irrational. The mere claim that our beliefs are, in fact, produced by reliable faculties would do nothing to ward off Hume's attack. So if we interpret Reid as only being interested in the reliability of our faculties, then we are stuck with a Reidian response to Hume *that doesn't actually contest anything Hume said!*

Indeed, some commentators have accused Reid of missing Hume's point in precisely this way. Thomas Brown reportedly quipped:

Reid bawled out, We must believe an outer world; but added in a whisper, We can give no reason for our belief. Hume cries out, We can give no reason for such a belief; and whispers, I own we cannot get rid of it. (Mackintosh (1837), 346)¹⁸

In the same spirit, Popkin contends that Reid's response to the skeptic, "tried to rest on a weak middle ground, not answering the sceptics, but insisting on the importance of what people have to believe."¹⁹ Charity demands that these interpretations be a last resort. It can hardly be denied that Reid took himself to be disagreeing with Hume. But on these interpretations, Reid is doing nothing of the sort. Unless we think that Reid just missed this fact, it's not clear how to explain this discrepancy.

Proponents of a purely reliabilist or proper functionalist interpretation might insist that Reid simply rejected Hume's way of framing the debate. What matters is not the rationality of our beliefs but that they have some other positive epistemic status belonging to beliefs produced by reliable natural faculties. This is unsatisfying as a response to skepticism. On this view, Reid wouldn't really be disagreeing with Hume so much as making a friendly addition to Hume's conclusions. Reid's critique of Hume is not that he was in error about the rationality of our beliefs but that he neglected to notice that they possess some other positive epistemic status.

¹⁸ Quote taken from Grave (1960), 109.

¹⁹ Popkin (1980), 71.

To drive the point home, let's assume that Reid did effectively ignore Hume's charge by changing the nature of the debate. What *would* Reid say about the rationality of believing in first principles? It's not as if the existence of some other positive epistemic status does away with the original problem. If Reid thought that Hume's charge could be met, then we would expect to have Reid's response. Since on these interpretations there is no such defense, Reid presumably concedes to Hume that such beliefs are in violation of our obligations as intellectual agents. If this is true, then Reid should relinquish his title as a defender of common sense, for he has given Hume everything he wanted. Belief in the external world is irrational and should be dismissed. Reid is, in effect, a Humean mitigated skeptic. This implication is untenable. If our interpretation leads us here, then we've fallen in a coal-pit (*Inquiry* 1.8, 23). The misstep that led us here is the claim that Reid ignores the skeptic's charge of irrationality. Instead, we should interpret Reid as arguing that belief in first principles is not irrational despite lacking the support of reason.

The interpretation I suggest is borne out when we take a close look at Reid's response to the skeptic. Reid does not simply appeal to the reliability of our natural faculties: he is evidently concerned with the rationality of accepting first principles. For instance, the blamelessness of those who admit first principles and the blameworthiness of the skeptic are common themes (see, e.g., *Inquiry* 6.20, 168-9, and *Inquiry* 2.7, 37, respectively). In the next section, I

examine Reid's main defense of the rationality of believing first principles. Before we look at that, I need to clarify what I am *not* saying.

Once again, I am also not saying that Reid *only* cared about rationally believing first principles. It was also vital to Reid that reliable faculties produce such beliefs. Reid's predecessors saw rationality and truth as a joint package. They thought we could guarantee that our beliefs were true by adhering perfectly to our epistemic duties. Reid knew, as we do, that this is a pipe dream. Being perfectly rational doesn't guarantee truth. Thus Reid boldly proclaims, "If we are deceived in [believing in first principles], we are deceived by Him that made us, and there is no remedy" (*Inquiry* 5.7, 72). But far from rejecting either side of this package, Reid tries to *reunite* rationality and truth through the reliability of our natural faculties. That is, if we have reliable faculties, then believing in accordance with our intellectual duties guarantees the objective probability of our beliefs.²⁰ Both these elements—rationality and reliability—are necessary for knowledge. My point, then, is not that reliabilist or proper functionalist interpretations are wholly mistaken but that they have been missing half of the story.

§4 The Argument for Trust

²⁰ If our faculties were perfectly reliable, then being fully rational would guarantee truth. Unfortunately, our faculties are imperfect (*Essays* 2.22, 244, 251).

In this section we'll see how Reid defends the rationality or justification of believing first principles. We begin with Reid's observation that first principles are supported by natural evidence. Reid then argues that natural evidence is reasonable evidence—i.e. that natural evidence rationally entitles one to believe. It follows that first principles are justified in the absence of defeaters. Since there are no defeaters, Reid concludes that we have justification for believing in first principles. The most crucial step will be arguing that natural evidence rationally entitles one to believe. This will be the key to seeing *how* first principles comes to be justified.

We can start with Reid's contention that all of us, even would-be skeptics, are irresistibly compelled to believe first principles. For example,

My belief is carried along by perception, as irresistibly as my body by the Earth. And the greatest sceptic will find himself to be in the same condition. He may struggle hard to disbelieve the informations of his senses, as a man does to swim against the torrent; but ah! it is in vain. ... when his strength is spent in the fruitless attempt, he will be carried down the torrent with the common herd of believers. (*Inquiry* 6.20, 169)

Elsewhere he quips, "a man may as soon, by reasoning, pull the moon out of orbit, as destroy the belief of the objects of sense" (*Essays* 2.20, 230). Reid also frequently emphasizes that this compulsion to believe first principles comes not from prejudice or bias but from of our natural constitutions (e.g. *Inquiry* 5.7, 71-2; *Essays* 2.20, 229; *Essays* 6.4, 452).

Nature has subjected us to [natural beliefs] whether we will or not. They are neither got, nor can they be lost by any use or abuse of our faculties. (*Essays* 6.1, 412)

It follows that first principles are supported by natural evidence, since the compulsion to believe such propositions results from the proper functioning of one's natural faculties. Let's call the beliefs formed on the basis of natural evidence "natural beliefs".²¹ Reid calls them "judgments of Nature" (*Essays* 6.1, 412).

From this point, Reid is in a position to run what has come to be called "the argument for trust".²² The first step is perhaps the most important. Reid thinks that naturally believing p makes it rationally permissible to continue believing p until one encounters reason to doubt. But how can a belief be rational simply by virtue of the fact that one is irresistibly and naturally compelled to believe it? In evaluating Reid's answer, we must keep two things in mind. First, it is rational to believe p iff you can believe p without violating any intellectual obligations. So to show that natural beliefs are rational, Reid does not need to point to any cogent, non-circular line of reasoning supporting them. As Joseph Houston explains:

The claim is no longer that of most epistemology, that our beliefs are vindicated or justified by an exhibited rational case showing them to be at least probably true; rather it is that when standardly formed by the belief-generating mechanisms of our constitution, they are permitted, and we are entitled to them. (2000, 14)

²¹ We can naturally believe p even if we have no *innate* disposition to believe p . If we follow our innate dispositions to believe, then along the way we will pick up new dispositions to believe. Beliefs resulting from these naturally acquired dispositions also count as natural beliefs, though we often hold them with less certainty than beliefs formed by innate principles. See Wolterstorff (1983a; 1983b).

²² The name comes from DeRose (1989), 326-31. See discussions of this argument in Alston (1985b), 446; Greco (2004), 152-4; Rysiew (2002), 445-6; Vernier (1976), 114; Wolterstorff (1987), 411ff, (2001), 197-212.

Second, Reid sees violations of our intellectual obligations as inextricably tied up with the notions of fault, blame, or criticism. If you are blameworthy for believing p , then your belief is irrational, and vice versa. So all Reid must do is show that we are not blameworthy for holding natural beliefs.

Reid does this very thing by appealing to the irresistibility and naturalness of natural beliefs. First, the fact that we cannot resist them provides immunity from criticism.²³ In a letter to Lord Kames, Reid writes:

An invincible Error of the Understanding, of Memory, of Judgment or of Reasoning is not imputable for this very Reason that it is invincible. (Reid (2002b), 66)

Reid seems to be relying on an “ought implies can” principle.²⁴ If believing in first principles is impermissible, then one ought not do so. Since believing cannot be resisted, then it cannot be the case that one ought to refrain. This means that we are rationally entitled to maintain such beliefs.

This cannot be the whole story, however. Reid admits that the beliefs resulting from our natural faculties come in degrees and explicitly acknowledges that natural beliefs can be less than certain (*Essays* 2.20, 229). It’s likely that some of the less certain of these beliefs are resistible, in which case they would not be exonerated by the above line of reasoning. But Reid wants to say that these less-than-certain natural beliefs are also rational to maintain in the absence of defeaters. They too are based on reasonable evidence—albeit a lesser degree of

²³ See Houston (2000), 10-14, and Wolterstorff (2001), 194-7.

²⁴ Wolterstorff (1983a).

evidence than that enjoyed by our most evident beliefs. A defense of these first principles is still required.

Reid's second line of reasoning applies to all of our natural beliefs, be they irresistible or not. Reid builds on the fact that our natural beliefs result from our natural constitution and can't be attributed to us.

This belief, Sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine. (*Inquiry* 6.20, 169)

Reid's point seems to be that if these judgments aren't our doing, then we cannot be at fault for having them—no more than we can be at fault for having an experience. The comparison with experience is particularly apt since Reid thinks of at least some natural beliefs as components of experience. Perceptions, for instance, partly consist in natural beliefs about the external world. Perhaps you could be blamed for having an experience if that experience ultimately resulted from your vicious behavior. Consider a guard at Auschwitz who comes to see the imprisoned people as unworthy of human dignity after repeatedly treating them as undignified. But such critiques do not apply to natural beliefs, which result from our natural constitutions. If believing was *our* doing, then things might be different; but it is more proper to say that naturally believing is done *to* us than *by* us.

Reid compares our situation to being swept downstream by the current (*Inquiry* 6.20, 169). The one who trusts her natural beliefs is not swimming downstream; she is simply being carried along. This is an important distinction

for Reid. If we were swimming—i.e. if the belief came from us—then we would need to have considerations to rationalize moving in this direction. But if you find yourself being “carried down the torrent” then such considerations cannot be demanded of you. The only thing you can be criticized for is not resisting when there is reason to do so.

In effect, having natural evidence for a belief makes believing the default stance, and you only need arguments to rationalize deviations from the default. In most cases, taking no stance at all is the default. It’s where we begin. And until there is compelling reason to do otherwise, maintaining the default position is perfectly rational. Prior to writing this sentence, I was perfectly rational in never taking any doxastic stance towards the proposition that Fyodor Dostoyevsky published *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1880 (which I now believe). I didn’t need any arguments to justify not taking a stance. Only deviations from the default require arguments to be rational. Natural evidence shifts the default position to belief. Belief is thereby permitted until there is reason to doubt.

Obviously, none of these considerations apply to the one who would exchange her natural belief for disbelief or withhold assent. These skeptics are actively opposing their beliefs—they “swim against the torrent” (*Inquiry* 6.2, 169). Nor are they following the irresistible compulsion of Nature. For this reason, skeptics must have arguments to rationalize their behavior. The burden is on the skeptic to show that there is reason to doubt, not on the person of common sense to show that there is reason to trust.

All this adds up to the position that natural beliefs are fully rational in the absence of reasons to disbelieve or withhold assent. We can express Reid's conclusion in the following principle:²⁵

DC_R If S naturally believes p , then, in the absence of defeaters, S is rationally permitted to believe p .

This principle suggests that natural evidence—that on which natural beliefs are based—is reasonable evidence since it rationally entitles one to believe. This leads us to the following:

DC_E If S naturally believes p , then S has good evidence for p .

If natural beliefs are supported by good evidence, then they are justified in the absence of defeaters. Thus, Reid endorses the following form of doxastic conservatism:²⁶

DC_J If S naturally believes p , then, in the absence of defeaters, S has some justification for believing p .

We can add that the level of justification will be correlated with the degree to which one is naturally compelled to believe since “we measure degrees of evidence by the effect they have upon a sound understanding” (*Essays* 7.3, 482).

Once Reid has shown that first principles have justification in the absence of defeaters, all that remains is showing that there are no defeaters. Obviously, Reid is happy to admit that the justification for particular natural beliefs might be

²⁵ Lycan (1996), McGrath (2007), 17, and Wolterstorff (1983a), 163, (1983b), attribute some such principle to Reid.

²⁶ DeRose (1989), 327, and Wolterstorff (1983a), 163, (1983b), among others, interpret Reid as endorsing this sort of principle, though this does not mean they agree with me about the nature of justification for Reid. Gage (2014), 116-8, may also attribute this sort of principle to Reid.

defeated. What Reid is concerned to deny is that there are *general* skeptical defeaters that threaten the justification of all beliefs arising from faculties other than consciousness and reason. Let me reiterate that you don't need to prove the absence of defeaters prior to receiving justification for natural beliefs: only the absence of defeaters is required, not that you *prove* their absence. But Reid is currently defending the second-order position that we have justification for our natural beliefs. Defending this proposition requires that skeptical worries be addressed.

Reid examines the considerations offered in favor of skepticism and finds them lacking. There are actually two kinds of skepticism: complete skepticism and semi-skepticism. Together with common sense, these positions logically exhaust the approaches one might take towards natural beliefs:

Common Sense. Do not resist any of our natural beliefs until one has a reason to doubt their truth.

Complete Skepticism. Resist all of our natural beliefs until one has a reason to support their truth.

Semi-Skepticism. Do not resist some natural beliefs until one has reason to doubt their truth; resist all other natural beliefs until one has reason to support their truth.

Reid argues that there are no compelling reasons to adopt either form of skepticism; thus, adopting either is irrational.

Let's begin with complete skepticism. The complete skeptic resolves, categorically, to withhold assent from the deliverances of our faculties until it is proven that those faculties are not fallacious (*Essays* 6.5, 480). Reid is insistent

that there can't be a complete skeptic who successfully resists one's natural beliefs for any significant time. But Reid is interested in showing that one *shouldn't* be a complete skeptic, even if no one can be.

For the most part, Reid is content to let the absurdity and ridiculousness of complete skepticism speak for itself. He relays, for instance, the following yarn about the complete skeptic Pyrrho.

Pyrrho the Elean, the father of this philosophy, seems to have carried it to greater perfection than any of his successors; for if we may believe Antigonus the Carystian, quoted by Diogenes Laertius, his life corresponded to his doctrine. And therefore, if a cart run against him, or a dog attacked him, or if he came upon a precipice, he would not stir a foot to avoid the danger, giving no credit to his senses. But his attendants, who, happily for him, were not so great sceptics, took care to keep him out of harm's way; so that he lived till he was ninety years of age. (*Inquiry* 1.5, 20)

At a later point he says of the complete skeptics, "To such a sceptic I have nothing to say" (*Inquiry* 5.7, 71). A position with such consequences is so obviously irrational that Reid doesn't spend a lot of time explaining *why* it is irrational. Still, Reid does give us something of a story.

Reid's critique is that if complete skepticism is adopted, then we will have no justification for believing anything, including complete skepticism or the considerations that supposedly lead us to it. The complete skeptic says that if the content of a natural belief is to be justified, then one must have independent reason to believe that this content is likely to be true. For example, if one naturally believes *p*, then that belief will be justified only if one has justification for believing in the reliability of the faculty that produced this natural belief (call

this proposition q). But we cannot stop there. Recall Reid's challenge to Descartes, who claimed to prove the reliability of his faculties by reasoning to God: "if our faculties be fallacious; why may they not deceive us in this reasoning as well as in others?" (*Essays* 6.5, 481) Thus, before q can serve as a "proper voucher" for our belief in p (*ibid*), we need a proper voucher for the faculties at work in producing our belief in q . Clearly this same process will continue indefinitely; justification being always anticipated, never conferred.

What's particularly important is that this includes whatever beliefs were supposed to support complete skepticism. Hence, Reid remarks,

To pretend to prove by reasoning that there is no force in reason, does indeed look like a philosophical delirium. It is like a man's pretending to see clearly, that he himself and all other men are blind. (*Essays* 7.4, 563)

He must either be a fool, or want to make a fool of me, that would reason me out of my reason and senses.

I confess I know not what a sceptic can answer to this, nor by what good argument he can plead even for a hearing; for either his reasoning is sophistry, and so deserves contempt; or there is no truth in the human faculties, and then why should we reason? (*Inquiry* 1.8, 24)

Reid's point seems to be this. For complete skepticism to be rational, one must have reasons to adopt it. But if complete skepticism is correct, then one can't have reasons for *anything* and, thus, no reasons to accept complete skepticism. In short, complete skepticism is self-defeating. In offering reasons for complete skepticism, you simultaneously defeat those reasons. The result is that a complete skeptic resists her natural beliefs for no good reason. The complete skeptic is therefore irrational.

This doesn't mean, of course, that a thoroughgoing complete skeptic can be argued out of their complete skepticism. So long as the complete skeptic sustains his irrational demands, Reid acknowledges that "it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this strong hold, and he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism" (*Essays* 6.5, 480). But Reid's task is to provide good reasons for the irrationality of complete skepticism, not reasons *that the complete skeptic would accept*. The inability to convince the complete skeptic that his position is irrational is a symptom of the complete skeptic's irrationality, not a deficiency in Reid's arguments.

What of the semi-skeptic? The semi-skeptic picks and chooses which natural beliefs to accept and which to resist prior to confirming their reliability. Reid is specifically addressing those semi-skeptics that discriminate against natural beliefs based on the faculty from which they originate. Hume, for instance, privileged natural beliefs of reason and introspection over those of perception. The semi-skeptic is vulnerable to different criticisms than the complete skeptic. Like the complete skeptic, the semi-skeptic ultimately fails to have good reasons to adopt semi-skepticism, but the semi-skeptic at least has the potential of providing such reasons since they accept some natural beliefs prior to securing a proper voucher. Reid's criticism is just that there are no good reasons for systematically resisting a particular type of natural belief while trusting others. So the semi-skeptic is ultimately being arbitrary and, therefore, irrational.

Reid's argument is that any considerations that justify acceptance of a particular kind of natural belief are equally applicable to all; any considerations that justify resistance of a particular kind of natural belief are equally applicable to all. For example, the semi-skeptic might try to justify semi-skepticism by appealing to the fallibility of perception. Here Reid replies,

There is no more reason to account our senses fallacious, than our reason, our memory, or any other faculty of judging that Nature hath given us. They are all limited and imperfect. ... [Jumping back a few lines] But as this imperfection is common to them all, it gives no just ground for accounting any of them fallacious. (*Essays* 2.22, 251-2)

Or consider the suggestion that our perceptual faculties might be inherently deceptive. Reid cleverly retorts,

Why, Sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception; they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he put one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another? (*Inquiry* 6.20, 169)

A discrepancy in treatment cannot be justified by these considerations since they apply equally to all types of natural beliefs. Reid's claim is that this will be true for any relevant considerations one might offer.²⁷

Furthermore, anything that counts in favor of one kind of natural belief could be claimed for the other kinds as well. Why, for instance, does Hume accept the deliverances of introspection? Reid speculates:

[O]f the semi-sceptics, I should beg to know, why they believe the existence of their impressions and ideas. The true reason I take to be, because they cannot help it; and the same reason will lead them to believe many other things. (*Inquiry* 5.7, 71)

²⁷ There will be particular situations where one has reason to doubt a first principle—say, when you are knowingly shown an illusion. Reid's claim is just that there are not good reasons for systematically doubting the output of certain faculties like perception.

We are irresistibly compelled to believe in the existence of external objects, just as we are irresistibly compelled to believe in the existence of certain impressions or ideas. If the irresistibility of a belief makes rational its acceptance, then this applies equally to both kinds.

In the end, Reid thinks that the semi-skeptic must be demanding more of some first principles than others. The semi-skeptic accepts the deliverances of introspection on the basis of natural evidence but refuses to accept the deliverances of perception on the same basis. The semi-skeptic is arbitrarily favoring certain kinds of natural beliefs and is therefore irrational.

The irrationality of both complete and semi-skepticism yields an additional argument in favor of common sense. If we assume that *some* position must be rational—as all-sides in the debate seem willing to grant—then Reid has shown the permissibility of trusting our natural beliefs by showing the impermissibility of doing otherwise. When we encounter natural beliefs, what are we supposed to do? We can't categorically mistrust them or arbitrarily favor some over others. Our only remaining option is to trust them all until there is reason to doubt. Interestingly enough, this not only shows that trusting our natural beliefs is permissible; it shows it to be *obligatory*. As our only permissible option, it is what we *must* do.

At this point, Reid has argued for DC_J and shown that there are no general defeaters. He is therefore entitled to conclude that we have justification for

believing first principles. We can summarize our overall findings using the following passage from William Alston:

I am subject to reproach for believing that *p*, provided that I am to blame for being in that doxastic condition, in the sense that there are things I could and should have done, such that if I had done them I would not now be believing that *p*. If that is the case I am [irrational] in that belief. ((1985a), 66)

Is there anything we could or should have done to avoid some natural belief?

Not at all. There's nothing we *did* to bring about this belief since our natural beliefs result from our natural constitution. There's nothing we *could have done* to avoid believing since our natural beliefs are irresistible. There's nothing we *should have done* to avoid believing since there are no general defeaters for natural beliefs. Thus, holding on to natural beliefs is perfectly rational even if we don't have any non-circular arguments for trusting them. It follows that natural evidence is reasonable evidence. Since first principles are supported by natural evidence, we thereby have justification for believing them.

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