A DEFENCE OF SCOTTISH COMMON SENSE

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I provide a reading of Reid as an 'encyclopaedist', in Alasdair MacIntyre's sense, that is, as a scientist who conceives of himself as part of a broader scientific community, and who aims to make a contribution through work in a particular field. Reid's field is pneumatology. On this conception, Reid's recourse to 'common sense' is of a piece with the postulation, by any scientist, of a natural endowment for members of the same ostensible kind. Reid should therefore be understood as rejecting the classical tradition of epistemology and any conception of epistemology as first philosophy. His view resembles, rather, the modern position of 'natural epistemology', though admittedly, on account of his doctrine of active power, he is not committed to 'naturalism' in the contemporary sense.

Nicholas Wolterstorff holds that the notion of common sense (hereafter CS) is the deepest but also the most confusing element of Reid's philosophy. He maintains that Reid had no clear idea of what he meant by 'common sense', and in particular, that he put forward two different and apparently non-identical stipulations of it: (1) CS as consisting of self-evident principles that everyone believes; and (2) CS as consisting of basic presumptions that we must 'take for granted' in everyday life. Wolterstorff speculates that Reid probably intended (2), but that he was led to accept (1), on the false assumption that we could not take something for granted without believing it: but once these things are thought to be believed, then we must be concerned about their evidence, and, since this evidence is clearly not inferential in character, it must amount to 'self-evidence'.

I maintain, on the contrary, that Reid had a very clear notion of what CS was. It was not a private notion; he shared this notion with other members of the 'common sense school', principally James Oswald and James Beattie. Together with the great majority of scientific thinkers in Enlightenment Scotland, these philosophers regarded the existence of CS as something almost pedestrian and undeniable. The common sense school understood itself not as discovering or articulating anything particularly new, but rather as simply restating the obvious – lost sight of for only a brief while, they

thought, because of a momentary and eccentric eruption of scepticism, consequent upon some bad science served up by Descartes and Hume.\(^2\)
Furthermore, the notion of CS which they shared is captured well by neither of Wolterstorff’s two characterizations, since it was, we may say, a ‘scientific’ rather than a ‘philosophical’ notion.

I suspect that this shared conception of CS avoids, or can respond to, all of the objections typically raised against it. However, it must do so in a ‘deflationary’ way. The cost of adherence to this conception of CS – a justifiable adherence, perhaps – would be abandonment, as misguided and pointless, of large parts of what is regarded as ‘philosophy’ today.\(^3\) It is a consequence of the doctrine of CS that the scope of philosophy must be seriously restricted, if indeed there is anything at all left to philosophy after its development, or ramification, into particular fields of science. Indeed, we miss much of the force of Reid’s claims about CS because the heirs of Reid’s project today are to be found not in academic philosophy, but in the fields of anthropology, behavioural economics and human ecology.

To structure my discussion, I have collated the principal objections that may be brought against the notion of CS. I can identify six:

1. Talk of CS is too easy; it is a grand petitio principii, or perhaps we should say, a petitio principii primi. To assert that a claim should be believed because it belongs to CS has ‘all the advantages of theft over honest toil’, as Russell famously quipped.

2. To classify a principle as belonging to CS seems unreflective and uncritical in spirit, since when something is assigned to the ‘human constitution’, it apparently becomes removed from the realm of dispute and critical examination – as indeed happens to a principle of government when it is moved from a legislative to a constitutional basis. The commonsensical is therefore that which is uncritically accepted.

3. Talk of CS appears indeterminate, since there are no criteria for distinguishing it from what is simply acquired and deeply entrenched opinion.

\(^2\) ‘The old system [i.e., of Plato and Aristotle] admitted all the principles of common sense as first principles, without requiring any proof of them; and, therefore, though its reasoning was commonly vague, analogical, and dark, yet it was built upon a broad foundation, and had no tendency to scepticism’: Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (hereafter *Inq*), ed. D.R. Brookes (Edinburgh UP, 1997), VII iii, p. 210.

\(^3\) James Beattie is not being a religious polemicist when he remarks ‘I know not but it may be urged as an objection to this doctrine, that, if we grant common sense to be the ultimate judge in all disputes, a great part of ancient and modern philosophy becomes useless. I admit the objection with all my heart, in all its force, and with all its consequences’, *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (Edinburgh: Kincaid & Bell, 1770), I ii 9, p. 143. His reasons for disregarding so large a portion of philosophy are, however, scientific, not religious or anti-intellectual: as I shall show, they do not differ significantly from Quine’s. Beattie, in effect, wants to promote philosophy in the sense of ‘science’ and dismiss philosophy in any other sense.
4. An appeal to CS has no more weight than an appeal to an authority; and, in the end, it is an appeal to mob opinion.

5. Any appeal to CS, by the nature of the case, is redundant: either one’s interlocutor shares CS, or not; if so, a mere statement of the relevant point should be sufficient, apart from any identification of that point as belonging to CS; if not, then no force can accrue to the point under dispute by the mere assertion that it belongs to CS.

6. The very idea of CS confusedly blends together the descriptive and the normative, the compulsory and the justified. In doing so, it raises ‘the problem of the truth-value gap’, as Keith Lehrer has called it: even if our nature compels us to believe in various things, what reason do we have for regarding what we thus believe as true?

I. REID’S PROJECT

I shall say here a few general things about the character of Reid’s philosophical project, with the intention of evoking a kind of gestalt change, whereby we might perhaps come to see what Reid is up to in a new and slightly different light. I should say that I regard Reid’s project as fundamentally the same as Beattie’s and Oswald’s, although this may be obscured by the fact that the latter two appeal to CS principally to defend what they regard as attacks upon morality and religion. This explains the unpleasant, polemical character of their writing, absent in Reid. Reid’s immediate interests lie elsewhere; but the differences are merely superficial.

Reid is above all an ‘encyclopaedist’, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s sense. This is in fact typical of an educated Scotsman in his day. He regards scientific knowledge as a coherent body of truths about the world, continually being added to and improved upon; the arts are similarly constantly being improved. Reid regards himself as playing a role within this project, as a member of a community of scientific enquirers. Within this outlook and approach, Reid’s particular contribution is to the discipline of ‘pneumatology’, the study of spiritual or thinking creation, as opposed to material creation. The division is of course Cartesian in its immediate origin, but Reid would have regarded its ultimate provenance as ancient:

As, therefore, all our knowledge is confined to body and mind, or things belonging to them, there are two great branches of philosophy, one relating to body, the other to mind. The properties of body, and the laws that obtain in the material system, are the objects of natural philosophy, as that word is now used. The branch which treats

of the nature and operations of minds has, by some, been called Pneumatology. And to the one or the other of these branches, the principles of all sciences belong.\(^5\)

However, although Reid accepts Newtonian principles of induction for pneumatology (*Inq* I i, p. 12), he does not make the crude mistake of thinking that the characteristics of spiritual beings must be understood on the model of material beings (as La Mettrie may be understood as holding in *L'homme machine*, and as Hume maintains frequently, e.g., in his dissertation ‘Of the Passions’), because Reid regards only minds as having active power.

Two important consequences of Reid’s ‘encyclopaedism’ are that, first, he regards himself as free to use, in his enquiries, the results of other particular sciences, as in fact any scientist does; and, secondly, he views it as a constraint on his theorizing that what he says, in articulating a theory, must be consistent with other scientific results, and in particular, that it cannot undermine any received results, or imply the impossibility or misguidedness of these results:

... it was taken to be the outcome of the successful application of methods to facts that there is a continuous progress in supplying ever more adequate unifying conceptions which specify ever more fundamental laws. So it is characteristic of genuine science, as contrasted with the thought of the prescientific and the non-scientific, that it has a particular kind of history, one of relatively continuous progress (MacIntyre, p. 20).

All that I have said so far may be expressed by saying that Reid regards ‘pneumatology’ as something to be carried out from a suitably informed ‘third-person point of view’, not from a ‘first-person point of view’. Reid, like a practitioner of ‘natural epistemology’ of today, regards the enquiry into how human beings acquire knowledge, and thus how they practice science, as itself a branch of science – though on account of his views on active power, he is a natural epistemologist without the naturalism. We might also put the point in this way: Reid’s conversion away from Berkeleianism involved not merely a change in doctrine (‘There are material things now, in addition to ideas’), but also a change in method and goals. His break from Berkeley did not involve merely admitting the existence of a greater number or variety of objects, but also adopting new standards for correct results: the results of (what we would call) epistemology must cohere in the right sort of way with the results and reliability of other branches of science. It is correct, then, to construe Reid’s conversion away from Berkeleianism as a rejection of First Philosophy.

\(^5\) Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (henceforth *IP*), ed. Baruch A. Brody (MIT Press, 1969), Preface, pp. xxxiv–xxxv. Although he uses the term ‘pneumatology’ sparingly in his published writings, it is clear from the manuscripts in the Reid Archives that he viewed his work as a contribution to this discipline.
II. NATURAL SCIENCE AS IDENTIFYING THE NATURES OF THINGS

We know that Reid regarded scientific explanation as well captured by Newton’s nomological approach, according to which a phenomenon is explained by subsuming it under a law; and a law is explained by subsuming it under a higher law; and so on, until one reaches what is apparently a highest law in some domain. Reid many times insists that a law of this sort is to be accounted for simply by ‘resolving it into the will of the Maker’. That is to say: we do not know what the reason is for this law, but there is indeed a reason, in God’s mind.

This strategy of explanation is not unlike what Richard Swinburne has called ‘personal’ as opposed to ‘physical’ explanation. Swinburne insists that ‘personal’ explanations differ in kind from ‘scientific’ explanations, because the former appeal to intentions and beliefs, the latter to ‘liabilities and powers’, yet statements regarding intentions and beliefs cannot be analysed in terms of those regarding liabilities and powers. But here is a significant difference from Reid, who thinks that, ultimately, non-persons have only liabilities, or ‘passive powers’, not active powers; yet scientific explanation, in so far as it must appeal to laws, relies upon notions of agency that are properly applied only to persons. Thus whereas Swinburne takes ‘personal’ and ‘scientific’ explanations to be distinct but co-ordinate, Reid regards scientific explanations, if properly understood, as parasitic upon personal explanations. The appeal to God’s will here is not feckless or a superstitious genuflection to religion; rather it is the claim that some explanation belonging to a general type is true, even if it remains unknown which particular explanation of that type is true.

This, so far, is standard Newtonianism, which Reid shares with Hume, apart from the appeal to God. Reid appeals to God where Hume does not, not because Reid is a specifically ‘religious’ thinker, but rather because he regards the existence of God as a reasonable postulate given the evidence, not unlike Cleanthes in Hume’s Dialogues. Reid uses this appeal in a specific way. It seems clear that one kind of lawfulness he allows is the recurrence of exactly similar sets of powers or properties in things that are initially identified by phenomenal characteristics: that is, things have ‘natures’ which they share with other things of the same kind. We may therefore say that a ‘nature’ is akin to a highest law of explanation; and to say that a power or property belongs to the nature of a thing is simply to say that explanation,
for scientific purposes, must stop here, with the mere identification of something as belonging to a thing’s nature. That is, the postulation of a nature and the identification of a highest law in a domain are exactly on a par. We may thus construe Reid’s talk of ‘natures’ as a transposition into Aristotelian language of his Newtonianism.

Reid regards things’ having natures as typically falling into patterns which evince ‘intelligence or design’ and which therefore license speculation about what the ‘intention of nature’ was in introducing them. This means, of course, giving an account of a nature that exhibits design, by showing how its having such a nature works out for the good of the things that have that nature, or of systems to which things of that nature belong. (This view of a ‘nature’ underwrites Reid’s talk of the ‘constitution’ of things, since the term ‘constitution’ connotes both that of which something essentially consists, and also the harmonious structure and mutual adaptation of the fundamental parts of a thing.) That is, Reid makes use of ‘final causes’. He is aware of this, aware that he departs in this respect from the strictures of Bacon’s Novum Organum; yet he is insistent that good science requires it. And in this respect Reid took himself simply to be following what he reasonably regarded as good and well established scientific practice: form does follow function; and living things do behave in a goal-directed manner.

The nature of a thing may be viewed as its endowment: it constrains how that thing may be acted upon or changed, and, for things with active power, how such things are able and disposed to act. The basic properties of chemical substances, for instance, would be their nature or endowment; the use of such things in chemical reactions would be something superadded by nature or human invention. On this way of looking at things, it is trivial that human beings have a natural endowment: how could they be a distinct kind of thing, as they are, without their having a definite nature, the ‘human constitution’? In fact, the scientific (or ‘philosophical’) study of human beings, as indeed with any science, must begin with the assumption that there is a definite sort of thing, the properties of which (its ‘powers’ or ‘faculties’) must be discovered. But there must be some natural endowment relative to every natural activity of a thing. If, therefore, one of the things which human beings do is discover the truth – and the success of science (‘philosophy’) in accordance with the encyclopaedist project shows clearly that science is something we engage in and succeed at – then some part at least of that with which human beings are endowed by nature must move or direct them towards the discovery of the truth, and these are the first principles of the human mind.

It is in this light that we should understand the ferocity of the Scottish common sense school’s attack on Locke’s image of a tabula rasa. A human
being could not be originally indefinite, any more than anything else in nature. Beattie scolds Locke on this point:

It is a favourite maxim with Mr Locke, as it was with some ancient philosophers, that the human soul, previous to education, is like a piece of white paper, or tabula rasa; and this simile, harmless as it may appear, betrays our great modern into several important mistakes. It is indeed one of the most unlucky allusions that could have been chosen. The human soul, when it begins to think, is not extended, nor inert, nor of a white colour, nor incapable of energy, nor wholly unfurnished with ideas, (for if it think at all, it must have some ideas, according to Mr Locke's definition7 of the word) nor as susceptible of any one impression or character as of any other. In what respect then does the human soul resemble a piece of white paper? To this philosophical conundrum I confess I can give no serious answer.8

Beattie (pp. 140–2) has a neat argument that there must be shared principles constituting the nature of the human mind and inclining it towards truth. There is a determinate way in which the world is arranged (to admit this is simply to admit the 'distinction between truth and falsehood'); human beings succeed in coming to know how the world is; all reasoning, by the nature of the case, is from first principles; if these were not true, we could not succeed in coming to know how the world is; therefore the first principles of human reasoning are true.

Beattie (p. 140) initiates this argument dialectically with the consideration 'If there be any creatures in human shape, who deny the distinction between truth and falsehood, or who are unconscious of that distinction, they are far beyond the reach of philosophy, and therefore have no concern in this inquiry'. 'Philosophy' here again means science: such persons as deny the distinction remove themselves from the project of science. Only a creature that was human in shape alone could adopt this position, or so Beattie thinks, consistently with his view that the pursuit of scientific truth in accordance with the encyclopaedist conception is simply an expression of human nature. Hence that human nature is such that it enables human beings to arrive at science must itself be a conclusion of science.9

I have claimed that a 'nature' may be seen as a 'highest law' that governs the uniform behaviour of things falling in a kind. As such, a nature functions as a kind of first cause in a series of causes: we trace the activity of a thing

7 Here Beattie is quoting Locke: 'The word idea serves best to stand for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks. – I have used it to express whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking' (Essay, Introduction, §8).
9 This is Beattie's analogue to what Quine would call the containment of epistemology within psychology: 'Epistemology in its new setting ... is contained in natural science, as a chapter of psychology': W.V.O. Quine, 'Epistemology Naturalized', in Ontological Relativity and Other Essays (Columbia UP, 1969), pp. 69–90, at p. 83. See also fn. 17 below.
back to elements of its nature, at which point, except for teleological elucidations of its function, we can say little more than that God has constituted that thing in that way. An element or part of the nature of a thing, and even the nature itself, is referred to by Reid as a ‘principle’ of a thing of that kind. So, for instance, if being attracted to other matter in accordance with Newton’s law of general gravitation is part of the nature of matter, then it is a ‘principle’ of matter that it must be so attracted. Here Reid is simply following traditional usage: the Latin principium is the equivalent of the Greek arche, which was in fact the original word used in the early development of science among the pre-Socratics for denoting a basic cause of a thing.

But this usage of ‘principle’ makes possible an ambiguity when Reid talks about human nature, and Reid regarded himself as justified in exploiting both senses of the term. Along with Beattie, he regards human nature as consisting of basic determinations of thought and action, which enable human beings to arrive successfully at scientific truth. These basic determinations may be arrived at from observing how human beings act, and by attending to the reasons they give in theorizing. We presume the existence of such causes, and hypothesize about what should be included within that class, as we do with respect to the endowment of any kind of thing whatsoever. Therefore these basic determinations may appropriately be called ‘principles’, in the sense of basic causes. Yet additionally, these determinations, given that they admit of explicit formulation, may be grasped and deliberately accepted by us – ‘deliberately’, not in the sense that we deduce them or reason to them, but rather in the sense that we can become convinced, for our own part, by reflecting on the requirements of science, and applying marks of something’s belonging to the human constitution, that they are part of the nature of a human being that enables us to arrive at truth successfully. Thus the principles may serve as ‘principles’ in the sense of axioms for the (immanent) activity of thought and the (transitive) activity of human action.

There are many passages in which Reid employs both senses of the word ‘principle’ – ‘principle’ as cause and ‘principle’ as reason – and moves freely back and forth between them. For instance, in his discussion of ‘First Principles of Contingent Truths’ in IP VI v, p. 632, Reid remarks

We may here take notice of a property of the principle under consideration, that seems to be common to it with many other first principles, and which can hardly be found in any principle that is built solely upon reasoning; and that is, that in most men it produces its effect without ever being attended to, or made an object of thought. No man ever thinks of this principle, unless when he considers the grounds of scepticism; yet it invariably governs his opinions.
The principle Reid is talking about is ‘that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious’. Yet he speaks of it as a cause: ‘it produces its effect without ever being attended to’, and as a reason, ‘No man ever thinks of this principle, unless when he considers the grounds of scepticism’. This way of speaking is intelligible on the broadly behaviouristic assumptions that to every action that displays intelligence there may be assigned a belief, which is a partial cause of that action; that every belief as regards action of a certain sort will in fact have effects discernible in action of that sort; that we may have beliefs of which we are unaware; and that reliance upon, or trust in, one’s ‘natural faculties’ displays intelligence.

In holding that ‘the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious’, Reid rejects the high tradition of epistemology beginning with Descartes, which aims to determine, all at once instead of piecemeal, the reliability and proper limits of operation of the ‘human understanding’. Reid (IP VI v, p. 631) recognizes this implication: ‘Des Cartes certainly made a false step in this matter’, he observes, and after summarizing the difficulty of the Cartesian circle, notes that ‘the reason why Des Cartes satisfied himself with so weak an argument for the truth of his faculties, most probably was, that he never seriously doubted of it’. Since Reid holds that the principle of trust in one’s natural faculties is a part of the human constitution, he must believe that everyone always in fact believes it, and that no serious investigation into how people actually reason can begin by calling this into question.

In the Introduction to his Treatise, Hume avows that ‘the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences’, and that ‘... all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature’. He wonders ‘what changes and improvements we might make in these sciences were we thoroughly acquainted with the extent and force of human understanding, and cou’d explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations we perform in our reasonings’. From the point of view of the CS school, this sort of speculation is deeply confused. The only dependence one sees among sciences is causal dependence, and the objects studied in the various sciences do not depend causally on human nature; furthermore, precisely because the human endowment is fixed and everywhere operative, we should expect no general changes or improvements in scientific theorizing generally, from a better specification of this endowment.

Hume expresses in his first Enquiry his belief that ‘The only method of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions, is to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects. We must submit to this fatigue, in order to live at ease ever after’, §1 para 12.

III. WHAT IS THE ‘IDEAL SYSTEM’?

We can understand a philosopher’s position better by understanding better what view he takes it to work against. Of course Reid is the great critic of Hume, but perhaps Hume is too close to Reid to provide us with the best contrast with Reid. It is more useful to look first to Descartes, whom Reid regarded, famously, as initiating a misguided tradition that finds its culmination in Hume. For my present purposes, I wish simply to call attention to an oddity in Reid’s interpretation of Descartes, which tells us something significant about him.

We tend to read Descartes as a ‘foundationalist’, and indeed as the first modern philosopher to engage seriously in philosophical epistemology. As I have remarked, Reid’s understanding of CS is such that he must reject this kind of investigation as feckless. Thus if Reid is to give Descartes any weight at all, he must understand him to be engaged in some other kind of project. Thus it happens that through an application of the principle of charity in interpretation, Reid interprets, or rather misinterprets, Descartes as a natural scientist, engaged in roughly the same project as himself, and in particular as a psychologist, who aims to uncover the laws and principles governing the operation of the human mind. Descartes aimed to contribute to ‘our philosophy concerning the mind and its faculties’, that is, he aimed to ‘consider the phaenomena of human thoughts, opinions, and perceptions, and ... trace them to the general laws and the first principles of our constitution’; but because he found ‘nothing established in this part of philosophy’, his enquiry almost immediately went astray (Inq I iii, p. 16).

In order to explain how it is that Reid understands Descartes, I shall introduce the notion of ‘rehearsing an argument’. To rehearse an argument is not to think it through for oneself so much as to see whether it describes a possible path of reasoning for someone who is described as having abilities of a certain sort. To think about an argument in this way is therefore to adopt, in a limited respect at least, a third-person as opposed to a first-person point of view as regards that argument.

Suppose we understand reason simply to be one among many elements or parts of human nature. Reason has its own powers, abilities and characteristic operations, which we may stipulate with greater or lesser precision. Yet we hold that there are other elements of human nature,

12 We might say that Wolterstorff’s misunderstanding (p. 183) of CS derives from his taking Reid’s target to be a variety of foundationalism. But Reid rather regards Cartesian doubt as simply an exaggerated response to the disarray in the scientific study of the human mind.
which may similarly be specified. We take for granted, as was said, that human beings arrive at truths about the world, and we are concerned with a matter of causation and fact: how precisely do they arrive at truth? We do not presume in advance that one element in human nature alone is responsible for human beings arriving at truth. Suppose for instance that human beings typically succeed in coming to know \( p \). Suppose we wish to investigate whether belief in \( p \) can be attributed to that element of human nature which we have identified as ‘reason’ – whether reason alone can suffice to explain it. If there is some specification of the faculty of reason, and some valid argument relative to that specification, according to which it follows that \( p \), then we may rightly attribute belief in \( p \) to reason. (Presumably the axioms and rules of inference we allow to reason must be ones that are plausible upon reflection.) If such an argument is or appears impossible, then either we must expand the powers we ascribe to reason – by adding premises and principles of inference, say – or we are constrained to attribute the belief that \( p \) to some power of human nature other than reason, or to some power working in conjunction with reason.

This testing of arguments to see whether, on a certain model of reasoning, one may arrive at \( p \), may be called ‘rehearsing’ those arguments. For instance, Reid reasons in *Inquiry* that sensations of touch are so far different from tangible magnitude that no line of reasoning, on any plausible model of reason, suffices to take us from one to the other; therefore judgements regarding tangible magnitude must be explained in terms of some other power (sense-perception, Reid says). In general, we may understand Reid’s theory of perception to be simply the view that the sense faculties are elements of the human constitution which are responsible for our arriving at some classes of truths. His theory of perception is important not so much because it aims to show that reason plays a vital role even in supposedly brute sensation (somewhat as in Kant’s maxim ‘intuition is blind without understanding’), but rather because it is an important first admission that some faculty other than reason can be the direct means by which human beings attain to truth.

We may now characterize Reid’s misinterpretation of Descartes as follows: Reid thinks that Descartes’ *cogito* should be understood as Descartes’ rehearsal of arguments that begin from the following meagre materials: (i) the observation that one is thinking; (ii) the principle that ‘whatever is given to consciousness is true’. Descartes, however, applied his model poorly, and in particular he committed the fallacy of circular reasoning, which is not, on any account, a proper functioning of reason. As a consequence, he failed to see that his initial model was impoverished, and that it needed to be supplemented with a richer natural endowment: he needed to
supply it with more first principles. Thus, according to Reid, Descartes is twice guilty: guilty of circular reasoning, and guilty of bad science – bad pneumatology – since Descartes’ mistakes in reasoning hindered him from seeing how he had misconstrued the way in which the mind operates. It is this second censure that makes Reid’s interpretation of Descartes so odd.

Descartes ‘resolved not to believe his own existence’, yet it is clear, from how he acted and what he said, that he never succeeded in doubting this. So there is a question of fact: what caused him, after his resolve, to believe his own existence? If we rehearse his arguments, we see that those arguments could not have been the cause, as Descartes misguidedly thought. Now we might presume that some other argument, more rigorous but not yet discovered, was in fact the cause; but Malebranche, Locke and others have shown that this kind of explanation is fruitless: ‘... however lame and imperfect the system may be, they have opened the way to future discoveries, and are justly entitled to a great share in the merit of them’ (Inq I iv, p. 18). They have shown that kind of explanation to be fruitless, not as a logician shows a result to be impossible, but in the way in which it may become clear that scientists working on a particular theory have played out all of the resources of that theory: through their efforts, that line of enquiry or research now appears pointless.

Reid interprets Hume similarly, and with better reason, since Hume of course regarded himself as a pioneer in the scientific study of the mind. This interpretation is evident in one of Reid’s most basic criticisms of Hume. Hume notoriously wished to argue that our inability to derive some idea from impressions could serve to indicate that there was no such idea: ‘When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion’ (First Enquiry, §1 para. 9). But Reid regarded this as bad science: we have such ideas, as we can see, not simply from introspection but also from ‘the structure of all languages’ (which is the force or role of this appeal), and from the fact that our assertions involving that idea are predictable and have structure.13 A good pneumatologist ought to conclude, therefore, from rehearsing Hume’s arguments, that Hume’s model of the natural endowment of the human mind is false.

13 The criterion is ultimately behavioural in a broad sense: ‘If power were a thing of which we have no idea, as some philosophers have taken much pains to prove – that is, if power were a word without any meaning – we could neither affirm nor deny anything concerning it with understanding. We should have equal reason to say that it is a substance, as that it is a quality; that it does not admit of degrees as that it does’: Reid, Essays on the Active Powers (AP), I i.

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What I have called a 'model', Reid calls a 'system'. It is essential to the understanding of Reid to see that by a 'system' he means not a philosophical or epistemological account, which is supposed to be convincing because of its conceptual plausibility, but rather a proposed theory of the operation of the human mind, of the sort that should be devised within pneumatology. The term is introduced early on in Inquiry (I ii), where Reid distinguishes between an analysis and a system of the human mind:

It must therefore require great caution, and great application of mind, for a man that is grown up in all the prejudices of education, fashion, and philosophy, to unravel his notions and opinions, till he find out the simple and original principles of his constitution, of which no account can be given but the will of our Maker. This may be truly called an analysis of the human faculties; and, till this is performed, it is in vain we expect any just system of the mind – that is, an enumeration of the original powers and laws of our constitution, and an explication from them of the various phænomena of human nature.

Analysis must always precede and govern the construction of a system: analysis is the tracing back of all of the phenomena of the mind, dispassionately and accurately, until one arrives at 'simple and original' principles sufficient to explain them. A system is a model of the human mind, used to predict the nature and limits of the mind's activity. Reid's criticism of Hume, in brief, is that Hume constructs a system without having first carried out an adequate analysis. Hume therefore relies on his model to dismiss evidence, rather than finding in recalcitrant data the need to revise his model.

The 'ideal system' is simply a model of the human mind (or, rather, a family of such models), which postulates a certain sort of theoretical entity playing a certain role – ideas – in order to account for the mind and its operations. A system of the human mind will be conducive to scepticism if it predicts or implies results about human thought or action so different from what is evidently the case that, to the extent that one accepts that system, one feels put upon by one's original observations. The 'ideal system' is of this sort, hence Reid calls it also the 'sceptical system'. It is a consequence of Reid's understanding of Hume, then, that he interprets Hume's scepticism in a very different way from Hume himself. Hume regarded his scepticism as a philosophical attitude, and compared himself to philosophers...

14 '... I find I have been only in an enchanted castle, imposed upon by spectres and apparitions. I blush inwardly to think how I have been deluded', Reid remarks, characterizing what he takes to be a natural reaction to Hume's views, at Inq I vi, p. 22.
15 'These facts, which are undeniable, do, indeed, give reason to apprehend, that Des Cartes' system of the human understanding, which I shall beg leave to call the ideal system, and which, with some improvements made by later writers, is now generally received, hath some original defect; that this scepticism is inlaid in it, and reared along with it' (Inq I vii, p. 23).

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in the Academic and Pyrrhonian movements. Reid understands it in a deflationary way, as fundamentally a condition in which we have been led to reject the proper starting points of scientific investigation, on account of bad science. It is not a scientific theory, but an overturning of science, or rather, what amounts to the same thing, a separation of oneself from the project of science. In this respect Reid's criticism of Hume is like Aristotle's of Parmenides. The thesis 'Nothing is in motion' is not a claim within physics, but a position implying the abolition of physics. It is 'philosophical' in a feckless and irresponsible sense.

But perhaps Reid's sharpest complaint against Hume is not, pace Kemp Smith, that Hume's philosophy leads to a general suspension of judgement, and thus to either 'idealism' or 'universal scepticism', but rather that Hume's conclusions are so much at odds with what people otherwise, and responsibly, accept, that they are likely to discredit the proper study of human nature. Reid's indignation is of the sort that is characteristic of a professional and working scientist. It is not unlike that which might be adopted by an astronomer towards a proposed theory, putatively an astronomical theory, which implied that we are all deceived and mistaken in believing that the stars appear to rotate around the Pole Star: if this theory were widely accepted, or even if people simply came to believe that astronomers seriously entertained theories of this sort, it would bring derision upon astronomy.

The mind of man is the noblest work of God which reason discovers to us, and, therefore, on account of its dignity, deserves our study. It must, indeed, be acknowledged, that, although it is of all objects the nearest to us, and seems the most within our reach, it is very difficult to attend to its operations so as to form a distinct notion of them; and on that account there is no branch of knowledge in which the ingenious and speculative have fallen into so great errors, and even absurdities. These errors and absurdities have given rise to a general prejudice against all inquiries of this nature.16

Even though the 'ideal system' thus threatened to call pneumatology into disrepute, Reid genuinely admired Hume's contribution, as we have seen, because he regarded it as closing off a fruitless area of investigation and making the alternative seem unavoidable. Not all of the common sense school had so sanguine an outlook. Perhaps again because he was more concerned with accounting for human ethical action and religious belief, Beattie, in contrast, disdained Hume's contribution. Referring to the 'useless and mischievous' controversies stirred up by followers of the way of ideas,

16 IP Preface, pp. xxxv–xxxvi. Of course anyone who shared this view might quite reasonably oppose Hume's appointment to a chair in pneumatology.
Beattie writes ‘But it is said, that they improve their understanding, and render it more capable of discovering truth, and detecting error. – Be it so: – but though bars and locks render our houses secure, and though acuteness of hearing and feeling be a valuable endowment, it will not follow, that thieves are a public blessing; or that a man is entitled to my gratitude, who quickens my touch and hearing, by putting out my eyes’ (Truth II 9, p. 146).

I have called Reid a ‘scientist’, and of course he called himself a ‘philosopher’. Yet he uses the term ‘philosophy’ to mean not merely ‘science’, but also in another sense; and to get clear on this is to get clear on how Reid regarded his project as different from what we would today regard as ‘philosophy’ in its usual sense. Einstein remarked that all of science is nothing but the careful elaboration of common sense. Reid’s view is similarly that ‘philosophy’ in the sense of ‘science’ is appropriately based upon, and therefore indebted to, common sense: ‘Philosophy ... 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.’

There should be, and in the past there has been, he remarks, a ‘cordial friendship’ between CS and philosophy.

I have shown that Reid’s assessment of the ‘ideal system’ is that it postulates too sparse a model of the human mind, and that proponents of this system, rather than sensibly amplifying that model to accommodate the facts, prefer to deny the evidence that comes in conflict with it – and this is why Reid calls it a ‘sceptical system’. But it is important to appreciate how perverse this ‘philosophy’ seemed to Reid. Because of the dependence of science on common sense, a philosopher of the human mind who persists in not according the proper role to common sense persists in ignoring what his very activity as an investigator presupposes. His misguided theories, which fail to acknowledge the role of a natural endowment, need therefore to be explained not only as bad science, but also as the manifestation of some kind of pride or hubris.

That is, on Reid’s view, the ‘votaries of the ideal system’ display hubris not simply because they do not patiently observe nature and impute no laws to it beyond what the phenomena require, but also because they prefer their own imaginings and thoughts, as Reid saw it, to nature’s laws:

Conjectures and theories are the creatures of men, and will always be found very much unlike the creatures of God. If we would know the works of God, we must consult themselves with attention and humility, without daring to add any thing of ours to what they declare (Inq I i, p. 12).

17 Inq I iv, p. 19. This is Reid’s analogue to what Quine would call the converse containment of science within ‘epistemology’: ‘Epistemology Naturalized’, p. 83. See also fn. 9 above.
In that respect, to be sure, they show the same sort of hubris as does any bad scientist, in whatever field he works. But additionally they show hubris in so far as they exhibit a misguided tendency, one which particularly afflicts educated persons, of identifying themselves with only a part of what they really are, their faculty of reason.

Reasoning, as Reid sees it, is an activity that develops over time, only with careful cultivation, and only with the thoroughgoing assistance of parts of our nature other than reason. This is a view that runs throughout Reid’s discussions in Essays on the Active Powers. For example, in his discussion of instinct (AP IIIa ii) he insists, rightly, that we need instincts to keep us safe before the development of reason, and to help us carry out complicated or quick movements, aimed at our own good, after the development of reason. It is a fallacy of ‘philosophers’ in the bad sense to regard their power of reasoning as self-sufficient, free-standing and autonomous, when in fact it is everywhere indebted to natural endowments, for which we can claim no responsibility, but with respect to which we are in debt. Philosophical hubris, so considered, is a kind of natural impiety, a negligence of the debt we owe to nature in being able to reason now at all. ‘Philosophy’, then, in so far as it is distinct from science, involves a curious reflexive mistake: someone who engages in that sort of investigation misconstrues what he is actually like, yet that misconstruction itself provides perhaps the best evidence of his error.

IV. THE OBVIOUSNESS OF COMMON SENSE

At this point it should be clear, at least, why the common sense school was satisfied that it had responded adequately to Hume. It regarded Hume’s work as an unfortunate digression in the progress of the scientific study of human nature, which was liable to cause people, temporarily, to lose sight of some obvious truths about human nature and enquiry. This view of Hume has perhaps since been vindicated, in the sense that Hume’s work is not today typically regarded as the foundation of or even ancestor to received theories of human thought and behaviour. Despite what is regarded as a naturalistic temperament in Hume, we do not place his Treatise in the tradition of experimental psychology, ethology, behavioural ecology or sociobiology, but rather in the tradition which runs through Kant to the Aufbau and beyond.

But what of the objections to common sense formulated earlier? How might they be answered, if we understand common sense and the appeal to common sense in the manner explained here? In fact they can be disposed of fairly easily.
1. The appeal to common sense is clearly not a *petitio principii*, at least, not in its intention or spirit, since, properly understood, it is not to be regarded as the multiplying of assumptions for the purposes of an argument, but rather as the postulation of causes to account adequately for the observed effects. Someone working in a formal discipline is generally not free to assume whatever he needs to arrive at some desired conclusion; but scientists are indeed free to assume or postulate those causes required to account for some phenomenon.

2. Neither, then, is the appeal to common sense unreflective or uncritical, for two reasons: first, we are free to re-evaluate what we include in common sense, as much as we can re-evaluate any theory; secondly, even so long as we count something as belonging in common sense, there remains ample room, at least on Reid's conception of science, to investigate its teleological or functional role.

3. Since the distinction between common sense and that which is not common sense is simply the distinction between that which we have by endowment and that which is the result of experience or training, then any means of drawing the latter distinction contributes towards our drawing the former. And in fact there are useful means of distinguishing what belongs to the human endowment: for instance, cross-cultural studies (including linguistic studies and appeals to the 'structure of all languages'); analogies drawn with animal behaviour generally; and observations of infants.

4. An appeal to common sense need not be 'little more than an appeal to mob authority', since to recognize that there is such a thing serves at least as a reminder, perhaps in the face of scepticism, that reasoning has to start from somewhere. And once we acknowledge this, we are justified in looking for something which has a reasonable claim to having the appropriate status — and here any appeal to the mere fact of common sense would have no force, since we would need to give reasons for including something within it.

5. Furthermore, an appeal to common sense need not be redundant, if we suppose, as in the case of other natural abilities, that we can be more or less sure and steady in our holding to it, and that it is good for an individual to allow his insight to be corrected, or guided, by the judgement of others. It is a reasonable assumption of the common sense school that we act more efficiently and securely to the extent that we have some explicit grasp of the principles on which we act. So an interlocutor may share in my adherence to a principle of common sense only implicitly, but in making my appeal I gain his firmer adherence, and a more secure sharing, when he comes to recognize and assent to the principle explicitly as well.

6. To this final objection (*viz* that common sense blurs together the descriptive and the normative), a defender of the common sense school
might respond that the descriptive and the normative are rightly and appropriately brought together in the case of the human mind, since the mind has 'active powers'. Thus it would be part of the experience of a mind to be aware of and consent to those principles by which it brings about changes in the world. (It is a mistake, of course, to presume that non-rational or inanimate beings act as they do by being aware of principles governing their behaviour. But we could not make this mistake, unless there were some correct application of it.) And as regards the problem of the 'truth-value gap', it would presumably suffice for a philosopher of common sense simply to retort, at this point, that there is no legitimate alternative: that we cannot reasonably doubt that the principles by which we must inevitably act are also justified principles. It is a matter of common sense that common sense is reliable. And here is an instance in which a circularity would not be vicious, but rather a pleasing confirmation, and something to be expected. Reid strains this point, of course: he muses that 'evidence, which is the voucher for all truth, vouches for itself as well' (IP VI v, p. 632). This is not convincing, but if his view is correct, this kind of account should not be convincing.

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18 See Reid's discussion in AP I v, 'Whether beings that have no will nor understanding may have active power', and I vi, 'Of the efficient causes of the phaenomena of nature'.

19 Many thanks, for numerous helpful discussions, to fellow members of the 2000 NEH Reid Seminar at Brown University, under the able leadership of James Van Cleve. Thanks also to Maria Rosa Antognazza for her gracious hospitality during my visit to the Reid Archives in the University of Aberdeen, and to the Higgins School of the Humanities at Clark University for a grant to travel to the Archives.

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