

Reid and Kant

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Reid’s criticism of the “Ideal System” and the “Way of Ideas”

Reid’s main objective is the defence of what he calls “common sense”, a set of principles more secure than any philosophical theory: “The belief of a material world is older, and of more authority, than any principles of philosophy.” (IHM, 5.7, (Reid 1848: 127)).

Reid’s main object of criticism is the view that the only immediate objects of our perception and our thinking are ideas. In his view, these assumptions, though ancient, originate in modern times with Descartes and lead to skepticism, as Berkeley and Hume have shown. They

have not only led philosophers to split objects into two, where others can find but one, but likewise have led them to reduce the three operations now mentioned to one, making memory and conception, as well as perception, to be the perception of ideas. But nothing appears more evident to the vulgar, than that what is only remembered, or only conceived, is not perceived. (EIP 4.2, 314/369b)

Instead of merging imagination, perception and thinking generally into a homogeneous activity of ‘@-ception’ of ideas, we should – contra Hume (Treatise, 1.3.7) – accept the “vulgar division of the acts of the understanding, into conception, judgment and reasoning.” In this way, we may hope to find a middle way between the materialising of the mind by the Aristotelians and the spiritualising of matter by the Cartesians, avoiding their “error [...] that we can know nothing about body, or its qualities, but as far as we have sensations which resemble those qualities”:

The Peripatetic, taking it for granted that bodies and their qualities do really exist, and are such as we commonly take them to be, inferred from them the nature of his sensations, and reasoned in this manner: – Our sensations are the impressions which sensible objects make upon the mind, and may be compared to the impression of a seal upon wax: the impression is the image or form of the seal, without the matter of it; in like manner, every sensation is the image or form of some sensible quality of the object. This is the reasoning of Aristotle: and it has an evident tendency to materialise the mind and its sensations.

The Cartesian, on the contrary, thinks that the existence of body, or of any of its qualities, is not to be taken as a first principle; and that we ought to admit nothing concerning it, but what, by just reasoning, can be deduced from our sensations: and he knows that, by reflection, we can form clear and distinct notions of our sensations without borrowing our notions of them by analogy from the objects of sense. The Cartesians, therefore, beginning to give attention to their sensations, first discovered that the sensations corresponding to secondary qualities, cannot resemble any quality of body. Hence, Des Cartes and Locke inferred, that sound, taste, smell, colour, heat, and cold, which the vulgar took to be qualities of body, were not qualities of body, but mere sensations of the mind. Afterwards, the ingenious Berkeley, considering more attentively the nature of sensation in general, discovered and demonstrated, that no sensation whatever could possibly resemble any quality of an insentient being, such as body is supposed to be; and hence he inferred, very justly, that there is the same reason to hold extension, figure, and all the primary qualities, to be mere sensations, as there is to hold the secondary qualities to be mere sensations. Thus, by just reasoning upon the Cartesian principles, matter was stripped of

all its qualities; the new system, by a kind of metaphysical sublimation, converted all the qualities of matter into sensations, and spiritualised body, as the old had materialised spirit. (IHM 7 (Reid 1848: 205–206))

According to Reid, there is another problem with the indirect way we perceive and think according to the ‘Way of Ideas’: there is no explanation available of how we know the contents of our ideas themselves. This is because their content, according to Hume, derives from impressions (sensations, in Reid’s terminology) and these do not have content but are mere signs. Mere signs, however, need to be interpreted to have meaning: “Signa, sine interpretatione nihil valent” (Reid 1937, 35). Another interpreter agrees:

[Hume’s] impressions and ideas are not states which are about objects and, moreover, concatenation of them will not be a state which is about an object either....Hume had assumed that our thought of such things [horses and people] must be constructed out of impressions or ideas. But he failed to confront the problem of immanence or intentionality. [...] The fundamental problem for Hume’s empiricism is the problem of accommodating the intentionality of thought. [...] Hume cannot account even for our conception of impressions. (Lehrer 1998: 16–17)

To allow for direct apprehension in the case of non-material objects, is to give the game away:

The expedient which the good Bishop uses on this occasion is [...] that we have no ideas of spirits; and that we can think, and speak, and reason about them, and about their attributes, without having any ideas of them. If this is so, my Lord, what should hinder us from thinking and reasoning about bodies, and their qualities, without having ideas of them? (IHM 7 (Reid 1848: 207))

Reid’s own theory: a form of adverbialism?

According to Reid, “[t]he objects of perception are the various qualities of bodies” (EIP 2.17, 200/313b; see EIP 2.19, 218/322b). This, however, is mostly a negative thesis:

Through the power of suggestion our sense of touch puts us in unmediated contact with features of the mind-independent world. This means that we do not need recourse to intellectual powers other than perception in order to be aware of mind-independent qualities. In other words, we need neither rely upon reasoning to form our concept of extension, contrary to Descartes, nor upon custom and habit to form such concepts, contrary to Berkeley. This also means that we do not need to perceive or be aware of intermediating objects like ideas in order to perceive mind-independent qualities, contrary to (Reid’s interpretation of) Hume. (Nichols 2007: 109)

On Reid’s account, then, human beings are so constructed that, in general, whenever a material impression is made on a sense organ by an external object, directly or via a medium, a mental sensation is immediately caused⁴ which thereupon produces the conception and conviction appropriate to the perception of the object. Beyond this, perception is not further analysable. (de Bary 2002: 51)

Reid does, however, say some positive things about sensations:

The form of expression, *I feel pain*, might seem to imply that the feeling is something distinct from the pain felt; yet, in reality, there is no distinction. As *thinking a thought* is an expression which could signify no more than *thinking*, so *feeling a pain* signifies no more than *being pained*. What we have said of pain is applicable to every other mere sensation. [...] [T]he sensation by itself [...] appears to be something which can have no existence but in a sentient mind, no distinction from the act of the mind by which it is felt. (IHM 6.20, 168/183a)

In sensation, there is no object distinct from that act of the mind by which it is felt. (EIP 2.16, 194/310a)

The product of the process takes over the rôle of the object of the act:

Die Empfindung verhält sich zum Empfinden der Empfindung nicht so wie der Gedanke zum Denken *eines Inhalts*, sondern so wie ein Gedanke zum Denken *des Gedankens*. Genau wie das Denken des Gedankens, dass ich bin, nichts anderes ist als der Zustand des Denkens, dass ich bin, so ist das Empfinden einer Schmerzempfindung nichts anderes als der Zustand des Schmerzempfindens, d.h. die Schmerzempfindung selbst. (Haag & Wild 2010: 445)

Sensations do not have an act/object or act/content structure (cf. Nichols 2007: 84) and we do not know them or about them inferentially: they are natural signs and suggest intentional perceptions of primary qualities. At least in vision, the suggestion of perceptual beliefs is “immediate” (IHM 6.8, 101/146b). This suggestion is a relation, and hence the representational properties of sensations are extrinsic.

But how do extrinsically representational sensations bestow thoughts with their intentional objects? Reid seems to think that sensations are objects of thoughts and draws the distinction between primary and secondary qualities in terms of whether the sensation is ‘transparent’ with respect to the qualities of the object of which it is a sign:

...our senses give us a direct and a distinct notion of the primary qualities, and inform us what they are in themselves. But of the secondary qualities, our senses give us only a relative and obscure notion. They inform us only, that they are qualities that affect us in a certain manner – that is, produce in us a certain sensation; but as to what they are in themselves, our senses leave us in the dark. (EIP, 2.17, (Reid 1848: 313))

When a primary quality is perceived, the sensation immediately leads our thought to the quality signified by it, and is itself forgot. (EIP, 2.17, (Reid 1848: 315))

How our thoughts or thinkings achieve this feat, however, is not explained.

Kantian sensation

As part of his ‘Copernican turn’, Kant takes (at least certain features of) our experience as given, and tries to explain how its objects must be for the experience to be that way. The transcendental aesthetics is thus “about what space and time must be like, and how we must handle them, if our experience is to have the spatial and temporal properties that it has” (Brook 2013: 7). It opens with terminological stipulations:

Auf welche Art und durch welche Mittel sich auch immer eine Erkenntnis auf Gegenstände beziehen mag, so ist doch diejenige, wodurch sie sich auf dieselben unmittelbar bezieht, und worauf alles Denken als Mittel abzweckt, die Anschauung. Diese findet aber nur statt, sofern uns der Gegenstand gegeben wird; dieses aber ist wiederum, uns Menschen wenigstens, nur dadurch möglich, daß er das Gemüt auf gewisse Weise affiziere. Die Fähigkeit (Rezeptivität), Vorstellungen durch die Art, wie wir von Gegenständen affiziert werden, zu bekommen, heißt Sinnlichkeit. Vermittelst der Sinnlichkeit also werden uns Gegenstände gegeben, und sie allein liefert uns Anschauungen; durch den Verstand aber werden sie gedacht, und von ihm entspringen Begriffe. Alles Denken aber muß sich, es sei geradezu (directe) oder im Umschweife (indirecte), mittelst gewisser Merkmale zuletzt auf Anschauungen, mithin bei uns auf Sinnlichkeit beziehen, weil uns auf andere Weise kein Gegenstand gegeben werden kann. Die Wirkung eines Gegenstandes auf die Vorstellungsfähigkeit, sofern wir von demselben affiziert werden, ist Empfindung. Diejenige Anschauung, welche sich auf den Gegenstand durch Empfindung bezieht, heißt empirisch. Der unbestimmte Gegenstand einer empirischen Anschauung heißt Erscheinung. In der Erscheinung nenne ich das, was der Empfindung korrespondiert, die Materie derselben; dasjenige aber, welches macht, daß das Mannigfaltige der Erscheinung in gewissen Verhältnissen geordnet werden kann, nenne ich die Form der Erscheinung. Da das, worinnen sich die Empfindungen allein ordnen und in gewisse Form gestellet werden können, nicht selbst wiederum Empfindung sein kann, so ist uns zwar die Materie aller Erscheinung nur a posteriori gegeben, die Form derselben aber muß zu ihnen insgesamt im Gemüte a priori bereit liegen und daher abgesondert von aller Empfindung können betrachtet werden. (KrV A19,20/B33,34)

In the analytic, this “unbestimmter Gegenstand” is characterised as “any object whatsoever”:

Wahrnehmung ist das empirische Bewußtsein, d. i. ein solches, in welchem zugleich Empfindung ist. Erscheinungen als Gegenstände der Wahrnehmung sind nicht reine (bloß formale) Anschauungen wie Raum und Zeit, (denn die können an sich gar nicht wahrgenommen werden). Sie enthalten also über die Anschauung noch die Materien zu irgendeinem Objekte überhaupt, (wodurch etwas Existierendes im Raume oder der Zeit vorgestellt wird), d. i. das Reale der Empfindung, als bloß subjektive Vorstellung, von der man sich nur bewußt werden kann, daß das Subjekt affiziert sei, und die man auf ein Objekt überhaupt bezieht, in sich. (KrV B208)

Even if we grant Kant that whenever we perceive, some “indeterminate” or “arbitrary” object also is the object of our perception, it certainly is not the *only* object. How do we get to the specific object of our perception then? Kant’s answer is: only in experience (Erfahrung). In experience, however, the object is *constituted*, not perceived (as we use the word):

Erfahrung ist ein empirisches Erkenntnis, d. i. ein Erkenntnis, das durch Wahrnehmungen ein Objekt bestimmt. Sie ist also eine Synthesis der Wahrnehmungen, die selbst nicht in der Wahrnehmung enthalten ist, sondern die synthetische Einheit des Mannigfaltigen derselben in einem Bewußtsein enthält, welche das Wesentliche einer Erkenntnis der Objekte der Sinne, d. i. der Erfahrung, (nicht | bloß der Anschauung oder Empfindung der Sinne), ausmacht. (KrV B219)

In the other direction, top-down, we get “intuitions”, but these too are retrospectively constructed:

Acts of synthesis are performed on that to which we are passive in experience, namely intuitions (Anschauungen). Intuitions are quite different from sense-data as classically understood; we can become conscious of intuitions only after acts of synthesis and only by inference from these acts, not directly. Thus they are something more like theoretical entities (better, events) postulated to explain something in what we do recognize. What they explain is the non-conceptual element in representations, an element over which we have no control. (Brook 2013: 15)

For Kant, not just the world, but our experience of it is something “given”, i.e. presumably not itself in need of an explanation of its possibility:

Soll Anschauung möglich sein, ein Vorstellen mit den Merkmalen Aktualität, Unmittelbarkeit und Singularität, so ist irreduzibel Gegebenes erfordert. Nun ist für uns die sinnlich-empirische Gegebenheit der Empfindungen das unmittelbar Gegebene. Also kann man sagen, dass die Sinnlichkeit mit den Empfindungen das liefert, was Anschauung ermöglicht. Und zugleich wird klar, inwiefern sie Gegenstände gibt: An den Empfindungen haben wir die Gegebenheit, die wie zur Anschauung, so zur Gegenständlichkeit gehört. Der Verstand vermag mit dem Empfindungsgegebenen als einem Gegenstandsmaterial objektiv gültige Gegenstandssynthesen aufzubauen. Die Unmittelbarkeit der Empfindung ermöglicht die Anschauung. Die Gegebenheit der Empfindung ermöglicht den Gegenstandsbezug. Die Sinnlichkeit trägt mit der Unmittelbarkeit und mit der Gegebenheit der Empfindungen zur Erkenntnistätigkeit bei. (Baumanns 1997: 167)

Experience and the Copernical turn

In his preface to the second edition, Kant highlights this “theoretical” notion of experience as the main upshot of his “Copernican turn”:

Wenn die Anschauung sich nach der Beschaffenheit der Gegenstände richten müßte, so sehe ich nicht ein, wie man a priori von ihr etwas wissen könne; richtet sich aber der Gegenstand (als Objekt der Sinne) nach der Beschaffenheit unseres Anschauungsvermögens, so kann ich mir diese Möglichkeit ganz wohl vorstellen. Weil ich aber bei diesen Anschauungen, wenn sie Erkenntnisse werden sollen, nicht stehen bleiben kann, sondern sie als Vorstellungen auf irgend etwas als Gegenstand beziehen und diesen durch jene bestimmen muß, so kann ich entweder annehmen, die Begriffe, wodurch ich diese Bestimmung zustande bringe, richten sich auch nach

dem Gegenstande, und denn bin ich wiederum in derselben Verlegenheit wegen der Art, wie ich a priori hievon etwas wissen könne; oder ich nehme an, die Gegenstände oder, welches einerlei ist, die Erfahrung, in welcher sie allein (als gegebene Gegenstände) erkannt werden, richte sich nach diesen Begriffen, so sehe ich sofort eine leichtere Auskunft, weil Erfahrung selbst eine Erkenntnisart ist, die Verstand erfordert, dessen Regel ich in mir, noch ehe mir Gegenstände gegeben werden, mithin a priori voraussetzen muß, welche in Begriffen a priori ausgedrückt wird, nach denen sich also alle Gegenstände der Erfahrung notwendig richten und mit ihnen übereinstimmen müssen. (KrV Bxvi,xvii)

The inference from

(1) We know only about things if they appear to us.

to

(2) We know only about things as they appear to us.

or even to

(3) We know only about things-as-they-appear-to-us.

is not in general valid.

These are, e.g., clearly distinguished by Pritchard (1906: 223), though he thinks that we can argue from the first to the latter:

The former [position] allows that reality is presented to us in perception, but insists that its nature becomes distorted in the process. The latter denies that reality is presented to us at all and substitutes for it another object, *viz.* ‘appearances’. Further these positions are not always distinguished. Kant, for instance, states his view sometimes in the form ‘we only know things as they appear to us’, sometimes in the form ‘we only know phenomena’, and he fails to notice that the two statements are different.

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