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Reid on Our Mental Constitution

Claire Etchegaray

In the introduction to the *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764), Reid defined “the anatomy of the mind” as the analysis that “finds out the simple and original principles of man’s constitution, of which no account can be given but the will of our Maker” (Reid, 1997: 13–15). According to him, observation and introspective reflection on experience of mental operations offered the only way in which anatomists of the mind could identify general facts of perceptual belief.¹ He labelled them as “principles of common sense”:

If there are certain principles, as I think there are, *which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe*, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd. (Reid, 1997: 33; emphasis added)

In the conclusion to the *Inquiry*, he introduced additional beliefs rooted in the natural constitution “called *the common sense of mankind*” (Reid, 1997: 215), which he later developed in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* (1785). Thus, Reid attributed the existence of self-evident beliefs to the virtue of our constitution. His treatment of the constitution in the anatomy of the mind, however, might be puzzling. Is the constitution of the mind hidden or observable? For Reid, it represents the nature by which mental operations are performed, and which can only be examined through these operations. In other words, it is known only in part—through its phenomena. This limitation introduces the question of why not restrict inquiries to the natural operations of the mind without mentioning this unknown constitution.² Reid’s encounter with this

¹ See Wood 1994, 2004, 2015; Broadie 2002.

² Hume seems to be more cautious in the introduction of the *Treatise*, by saying that “the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies [...] any hypothesis, that

problem was unexceptional with the terminology “by the original constitution” broadly used in the age of Enlightenment.

The phrase “original constitution” was closely connected to a form of nescience inspired by Newton’s comments on the cause of gravitation in the “General Scholium” of the *Principia mathematica* and in Query 31 of the *Opticks*, which influenced different meanings in medicine and the science of mind.³ In experimental philosophy, anatomists of the mind repurposed the meaning of the term “constitution”. John Locke, for example, argued we have no knowledge of the real constitution of things and experience provides only knowledge of nominal essences.⁴ In the Aberdonian tradition, George Turnbull held that an “inquiry into the facts and real constitutions” was possible by applying Baconian natural history and Newton’s *regulae philosophandi*. He also believed that such an inquiry revealed the natural order created by God.⁵ David Fordyce argued in the preliminaries of the *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1754) that “moral philosophy enquires, not how man might have been, but how he is constituted”. Consequently, he claimed that “to determine the office, duty or destination of man [. . .] we must inspect his constitution” (Fordyce, 1990: 8).

Reid, who was a student of Turnbull, did not reveal any concerns about the objection that the “constitution” referred to some occult cause. Of qualities that were immediately perceived in matter but whose nature we ignore, such as secondary qualities, disorders we feel in our bodies and powers of bodies whether mechanical, chemical, medical, animal, or vegetable, he claimed that “[t]o call a thing occult, if we attend to the meaning of the word, is rather modestly to confess ignorance, than to cloke it” (Reid, 2002a: 216). Like in the science of nature, an anatomist of the mind can refer to a thing of which its constitution is

pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical” (Hume, 2000: 5).

³ In medicine the “constitution” represented the contrivance of a healthy body or the nature of a part of the living body. The Latin ‘constitutio’ translates the Greek notion of *kataskeue*, as in the title of Galen’s work *De optima corporis nostri constitutione*. This medical sense is also the one to which Chambers exclusively refers in his *Cyclopaedia*, apart from the political sense (Chambers, 1728: 312). On the debates aroused by the appeal to an original power (a power that the thing has “by its constitution”) in physics, see Duchesneau, 1982 and Wright, 1990.

⁴ According to Locke, nominal essences “are made by the mind and not by nature” (Locke, 1975: 453). Yet “they are not made [. . .] arbitrarily” because the mind, in making its complex ideas of substances, “only follows nature”. That is, the mind only joins particular ideas that are “supposed to have an union in nature” (455).

⁵ See his graduation thesis, *De scientiae naturalis cum philosophia morali conjunctione* (1723), and *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* (1740: 2).

unknown without imagining a refuge of ignorance.⁶ He cannot know its nature independently from its qualities but he can conceive this unknown nature. In particular, he identifies regular relations between things without being able to observe *how* their natures are connected. He only *de facto* observes that this is the case. These relations are general facts. Nonetheless, natural philosophy provides explanations, because these facts are necessary and are produced by a genuine power (a causal one), which cannot be exerted by inanimate or material agents.⁷ As in other Aberdonians' views, Reid's defence of experimental philosophy was grounded on theism with God as the first cause of all creation.⁸ From the belief that things were "the creatures of God", Reid argued, "they have a real essence, or constitution of nature, from which all their qualities flow; but this essence our faculties do not comprehend" (Reid, 2002a: 303).

The suspicion that this notion of the constitution disguises a refuge of ignorance reappears more seriously in Reid's philosophy of mind. Indeed, his analysis of mental faculties takes for granted the truth of the operation that it examines. The description of our mental operations implies that they enable us to know, according to him. For instance, perception should be studied as the ability to perceive reality itself. In this aim his reference to our constitution seems to account for his anti-scepticism along two diverging perspectives.

1. We might say that by virtue of the constitution of the mind, there are some principles of belief that are *self-evident*.⁹ If so, it does not matter whether God created our mental constitution, which could just as well have been produced by chance, determinism, or evolution. The point is that this constitution of the mind enables us to judge self-evident things.
2. Alternatively, because God created the mental constitution, the mind follows God's laws, which are never deceitful, as a common sense power to judge self-evident things.

⁶ Reid thinks that Descartes' excessive distrust of an "obscure *something*, which is supposed to be the subject or *substratum* of the [material] qualities" leads him to wrongly identify material substance as the essential attribute of extension (Reid, 2002a: 120–4).

⁷ James Harris had shown that the inquiry into the mind is more quickly stopped than the inquiry into material nature. Copenhaver stresses that the laws of nature have the same status in each realm: in both cases they are "contingently necessary" (Copenhaver, 2006: 455). See Bradford Bow's Introduction to this volume.

⁸ The medical use may be a paradigm of the intertwining theistic and philosophical connotations. For Reid, the contrivance of the body is a sign of our origin. Significantly, he refers to Galen to illustrate the first principle of necessary truths, that design and intelligence in the cause may be inferred with certainty from marks or signs in the effect (Reid, 2002a: 510).

⁹ Self-evident beliefs, for Reid, are expressed in propositions "which are no sooner understood than they are believed" (Reid, 2002a: 452).

Both accounts represent plausible explanations of Reid's intended meaning that "common sense is purely the gift of Heaven" (Reid, 2002a: 433).¹⁰ In the first account, the acceptance of a perceptual belief requires no other reason than the perception itself. In this way, Reid's response to scepticism develops independently from his theistic convictions. The second account is an alternative explanation that credits theism as justification of natural beliefs. Both accounts, however, beg the question by referring to our mental constitution as an already truthful constitution of the knowing subject. This chapter sheds new light on Reid's reference to our mental constitution by distinguishing his approach from subjectivism, and then showing the way in which Reid treated the *discernment* of truth (and not truth itself) as a product of "our constitution". These important distinctions explain the proper sense in which the mind is a subject of knowledge in Reid's anatomy of the mind.

I. In What Way Does Knowledge Depend on Our Constitution?

In an unpublished and undated manuscript "Of constitution", Reid claimed that truth depends on "the constitution of the things" in general, and not on "our" constitution in particular. Only the *discernment* or perception of truth is relative to the knowing mind. Reid argued:

The truth of any proposition cannot depend upon the constitution; we except propositions in which the mind or some of its powers or operations is the subject of the proposition. But here we ought to distinguish between the truth of a proposition and my discernment of that truth. When truths are immediately assented to by all men as they are apprehended without instruction or reasoning, it may I think be said with PROPRIETY that the power by which we perceive the truth of the propositions is a part of our constitution. (Reid, n.d.: f.2)

Although the first sentence is elliptic, the context makes clear that Reid means that the truth of any proposition does not depend on the constitution of the *knowing mind*. Truth depends on the constitution of the thing, which is expressed by some substantive representing the subject of a proposition. (That every adjective must belong to some substantive is a grammatical first principle. The

¹⁰ In addition to the epigraphs in the *Inquiry* and the *Intellectual Powers*, see the numerous hypostatic formulae (Reid, 1997: 174; 2002a: 198, 205, 226, 575).

substantive denotes the *subject* of a proposition. This *subject* is not a *self* or an *agent* of knowledge. It is a *thing*.) Reid believed that everything “as it is made has a constitution [...] from which all its qualities, appearances, powers and operations do result” (Reid, n.d.: f.2). When the mind or an operation of the mind is the subject of a proposition, truth depends on the mental constitution, that is, the constitution of the *substratum* (or the support of observable qualities). But the discernment of that truth must be distinguished from the truth of the proposition.

Remarkably, in this context, the “subject” meant a support, not a self or an agent. Sir William Hamilton’s later editorial interpretation of Reid’s philosophy attempted to disentangle this old notion of *subjectum* as a knowing *subject* and a known *object*. Reid indeed wrote “the distinction between things in the mind and things external, is not meant to signify the place of the things we speak of, but their subject” (Reid, 1854b: 221b). Hamilton commented on the distinction between “things in the mind” and “things external” by saying that it covers the distinction between the thing that is *id in quo* and the thing that is *id circa quod*. In a statement typical of late modern thought, Hamilton identified the former as the subject, the latter as the object. He added that “in psychological language, the *subject* absolutely is the mind that knows or thinks—i.e. the mind considered as the *subject* of knowledge or thought; the *object* that which is known, or thought about” (ibid.). Starting from Hamilton’s metaphysical distinction, the philosophical task is to understand how the subject can know the object. Certainly Reid’s philosophy offered implicit answers to this question. But this formula inserts an opposition between the subject and the object that could be misleading to understand Reid’s use of “constitution” in the philosophy of the mind. At the end of this chapter, we shall recall this point in order to distinguish Reid’s process from Descartes’ and Kant’s philosophies of mind.

When, at the beginning of the *Inquiry*, Reid wrote that Hume “leaves nothing in nature but ideas and impressions, without any *subject* on which they may be impressed” or that the sensation is related to “the mind, its subject” (Reid, 1997: 20, 40, my italics), he meant only that the mind is *the thing in which* the sensation exists. In the manuscript, Reid clarified:

As every truth expresses some attribute of a thing, or some relation between two or more things, the truth depends on the nature of the thing whose attribute is expressed. The truth of this proposition that a lion is a ravenous beast, depends upon the constitution of a lion, and upon nothing else. The truth of this proposition, that the sun is greater than the moon, depends upon the magnitude of the sun and the moon, and upon nothing else.

(Reid, n.d.: 5)

In the case of the moral propositions, since the mind is their subject (in Reid's strict sense), their truth (not only our discernment) depends on the constitution of the human mind. But their truth does not depend on our discernment. Reid explicitly said: "the truth of the proposition as well our perception of that truth must be resolved into the constitution of the mind nor does this in my opinion open any door to scepticism" (Reid, n.d., f.2). His reasons for stipulating that this did not "open any door to scepticism" require further examination.

A *moral* proposition could be understood in the restricted sense of an ethical proposition, or as a proposition about human nature more broadly. But in any case a moral truth is not subjective. At first sight, Reid targeted Hume. Nevertheless Paul Wood's chapter in this volume offers an alternative explanation.¹¹ In "Of constitution", perhaps Reid responded to critics claiming that his appeal to common sense as "a part of our constitution" led to scepticism. Joseph Priestley's *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry* (1774) turned Reid's own argument against him. Priestley criticized that the "unknown something" called "common sense" reduces every judgment, either moral or factual, to feelings. If Priestley was correct in this criticism, Reid's references to the facts of our mental constitution resembled exactly what he ridiculed about Hume's system.¹²

Hume claimed in the *Abstract* of the *Treatise* that passion and belief are kinds of "natural instinct, derived from nothing but the original constitution of the human mind" (Hume, 2000: 408). In the second and the third books of the *Treatise*, he appealed to our natural constitution, first by referring to Francis Hutcheson but afterwards, step by step, by subverting the Hutchesonian account. Hume first wrote that "the most probable hypothesis which has been advan'd to explain the distinction betwixt vice and virtue, and the origin of moral rights and obligations, is, that from a primary constitution of nature certain characters and passions, by the very view and contemplation, produce pain, and others in like manner excite pleasure" (Hume, 2000: 194).¹³ He still appeared to agree with Hutcheson when he claimed there are "certain instincts originally implanted in our nature" and gave these examples: "benevolence and resentment, the love of life and kindness to children, or the general appetite to good and aversion to evil"

¹¹ See Chapter 8.

¹² This is a clue to the solution of James McCosh's puzzle: "the paper is the dimmest and yellowest of all: looks old. Query: when written?" (McCosh, 1875: 444). McCosh had suggested that the paper was an early manuscript (442). But it may have been written after 1774. I thank Paul Wood for drawing my attention to this point.

¹³ Here, this hypothesis appears clearly to be an alternative to the explanation by custom (Hume, 2000: 195).

(Hume, 2000: 268).¹⁴ But he diverged from Hutcheson's philosophy at the beginning of the third book. "Take a wilful murder", Hume wrote. Where is the vice? There is a passion, there is a volition. Hume observed, "[h]ere is a matter of fact [but] 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason." He continued:

It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that *from the constitution of your nature* you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.

(Hume, 2000: 301; emphasis added)

According to Hume, though there is a perception in the mind that we feel, there is no real moral quality that is perceived. The hypothesis of double existence (as he called it in the Fourth Part of the first Book) must be avoided, either in the case of secondary qualities or in the case of moral qualities.¹⁵ Reid disagreed with Hume. Reid maintained that the truth of the proposition "I ought to reverence my Maker" does not depend on a feeling or on a sensation (Reid, n.d.: 4). He extended this attack in the *Intellectual Powers*: "I cannot help thinking, that a man who determined that there is more moral worth in cruelty, perfidy, and injustice, than in generosity, justice, prudence, and temperance, would judge wrong *whatever his constitution was*" (Reid, 2002a: 495, my italics). Reid's meaning of "*whatever his constitution was*" represented a rejection of Hume's subjectivism. In this part of the *Intellectual Powers*, he examined first principles of *necessary truths* and this independence from our constitution might seem to be associated with his treatment of them. But, as we shall see, this independence is true of any truth. In his unpublished manuscript, Reid explicitly distinguished his thought from any subjectivism, either in morality or in the account of belief. He criticized Hume's theory of *vivacity* because it rendered the *evidence* dependent on our constitution. For Reid, truth may depend on the attributes that are conceived, or on the relations that the relative notion reveals. But it does not depend on our having conceptions, nor on our discernment.

¹⁴ Hutcheson had judged "probable, that the Pleasure is not the necessary Result of the Form it self, otherwise it would equally affect all Apprehensions in what Species soever; but depends upon a voluntary Constitution, adapted to preserve the Regularity of the Universe, and is probably not the Effect of Necessity but Choice in the Supreme Agent, who constituted our Senses" (Hutcheson, 2004: 80).

¹⁵ Moreover, unlike Hutcheson, Hume argued that vice is as natural as virtue, whatever is meant by "natural" (non-miraculous, habitual, non-artificial), and that selfishness is an original instinct (Hume, 2000: 304–5, 314, and 372).

An objection might be raised as to the dependence of the constitution in the case of knowledge of nominal essences and of secondary qualities. Knowledge or notions are considered relative insofar as they depend on the relationship between the constitutions of things, mind included. But they are not produced by the discernment of the mind. In the fourth essay of *Intellectual Powers*, “On Conception”, Reid maintained that however imperfect (nominal or relative), it is true knowledge (Reid, 2002a: 303). For instance, Westminster Bridge is made of materials that are the work of God. But as the structure is the work of a man (an architect), he can have an adequate conception of it. Reid argued that “though I have never seen or heard of it before, if I am only made to conceive that it is a bridge from Westminster over the Thames, this conception, however imperfect is true” (ibid.). No one could have a conception of the *internal constitution of the thing*. Reid defended that “we must satisfy ourselves” with taking “attributes as facts” without deducing them from the real essence of things, but being convinced that “there is a subject to which those attributes belongs” (Reid, 2002a: 361–2). The only knowledge that we can have of bodies and minds is the knowledge of their *attributes*. Real essence is “above our comprehension”. But the nominal essence is not a *creature of our mind*.

In the case of secondary qualities, Reid believed truth depends on the constitution of the things that are related. A secondary quality is the unknown cause of a sensation with which we are acquainted. “That smell in the rose is an unknown quality or modification which is the cause or occasion of a sensation which I know well,” according to Reid. He believed “[t]he relation which this unknown quality bears to the sensation with which nature hath connected it, is all I learn from the sense of smelling” (Reid, 2002a: 202). Thence, the truth of a proposition assuming a perceived smell or colour does not depend on our discernment.

Besides, the reason for the contradistinction between contingent truths and necessary truths is not that contingent truths depend on our subjective constitution, and necessary truths do not depend on it. Actually, contingent truths are factual truths. Discerning them gives knowledge of *existent things*. Necessary truths are truths implied by the ideas or mere conceptions of things. Thus, logical and grammatical truths are necessary. Reid thought that moral and aesthetical truths were necessary truths too. In the passage quoted earlier, Reid wrote that the judgment on the moral worth of cruelty is held “*whatever our constitution is*”. Actually, strictly speaking, *neither* factual truths nor necessary truths depend on our constitution—only the discernment of contingent and necessary truths depends on the narrowness of our powers as powers of *created beings*. Although already implicit in his *Inquiry* and the sixth essay of

the *Intellectual Powers*, this distinction is more fully developed in his manuscript “Of constitution”:

God has given us the faculty of judgment or common Sense. If we had not this faculty we could not *perceive* evidence even in first principles. I conceive this is all that is meant by those philosophers who say that they believe first principles, only because they are so constituted [. . .] But those philosophers in place of giving a reason for the belief of first principles, which it is impossible to do, give the cause of this belief, which is truly this that we are by our constitution endowed with the faculty of perceiving such first principles to be true. That is we have common sense. If a man asks me why I believe that twice two are equal to four? I conceive I cannot give him a more proper answer than this; I believe it is because I have common sense. But here I do not mean to assign common sense as an argument that persuades [sic] me of the truth of this axiom but as the faculty *by which I discern its truth* without any argument, & therefore my belief may be resolved into common sense as its cause, but not as a reason of my belief.

(Reid, n.d.: 9–10, emphasis added)¹⁶

Common sense, for Reid, was the “part of our constitution” through which we discern evidence. Common sense sometimes represented a power of judgment, sometimes a set of first principles of beliefs, and sometimes all our natural beliefs. As shown in the introduction to this chapter, Reid entertained a two-sided meaning of “constitution”: its non-phenomenal nature is unknown but its existence is discovered by observation. Thus, the power of judgment is only manifest in the mental operations of believing, which are considered *natural* insofar as they occur “by the virtue of” and as “a part of” our constitution. It remains to understand the connection between the study of our constitution and the identification of first principles.

In spite of the dualism by which Reid radically distinguished “the constitution of the material world” from the constitution of the human mind, he advocated the same method of inquiry in both cases:

We find one phenomenon to be the consequence of another, this of a third, and so on as far as we can go, & the farther the better; but we must stop some where and come at last to phenomena which cannot resolve into any other. And those ultimate phenomena which we cannot account for or resolve we call a part of the constitution of the system, or a law of nature. These laws of nature must be the operation of him that made the system, either immediate or by means of some subordinate causes which we have not discovered. Some

¹⁶ In the *Inquiry*, Reid wrote: “If there are certain principles, as I think there are, *which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe*, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense” (Reid, 1997: 33, emphasis added). In the *Intellectual Powers*, he claimed “such is the constitution of the human mind, that evidence *discerned by us*, forces a corresponding degree of assent” (Reid, 2002a: 481, emphasis added).

part therefore of the constitution of the system is always the last result of our physical enquiries when we proceed analytically [sic]; and to be assumed as a first principle when we would explain the phenomena of nature synthetically. (Reid, n.d.: 1)

A law of nature or a part of the constitution was an ultimate phenomenon which must be accounted for as an original fact. It was a *nescient* result of an inquiry into the causes which, being regressive, was analytical and which stops for *negative* reasons when an investigation could not proceed and further. But it could be considered as a *first principle* from a synthetic point of view, when it satisfactorily “*explains*” the subordinate phenomenon. Indeed, laws of nature were operations of the maker and in the case of the *natural constitution*, efficacy was the operation of the transcendent Creator. Another inquirer may later discern the details of such an explanation by discovering how this original fact occurs (Reid, 1997: 15). We have now to examine why, in the philosophy of mind, the first principles of common sense were principles of *evidence*, which are eventually termed “principles of truth”.

II. Why Does the Discernment of Truth Depend on Our Constitution?

According to Reid, descriptions of evidence in the philosophy of mind must treat evidence as truthful. Evidence represents a value, although in its description evidence is regarded as a *fact*.¹⁷ Reid explained:

We give the name of evidence to whatever is a ground of belief [. . .] What this evidence is, is more easily felt than described. Those who never reflected upon its nature, feel its influence in governing their belief. It is the business of the Logician to explain its nature and to distinguish its various kinds and degrees. (Reid, 2002a: 228–9)

The difficulty of evidence “more easily felt than described”, for Reid, involves not reducing it to a bare *feeling*. Otherwise, logicians run the risk of being charged with subjectivism and scepticism. In the *Intellectual Powers*, Reid recalled that “first principles, or intuitive judgments” must be distinguished from judgments “which may be ascribed to the power of reasoning”. The former are expressed by propositions that are “no sooner understood than they are believed”, in contrast to the latter, which are inferred from another proposition (Reid, 2002a: 452–3). This presents the problem: does tracing discernment to the fact that this power of

¹⁷ On the ‘linking-up between questions of fact and questions of value’, see Rysiew, 2002, 2015.

judgment is part of our constitution beg the question? Undoubtedly, Reid, in a way, *presupposed* the truthfulness of our faculties. The objective of this section is to define his intentions in making such a presupposition. The literature focuses on addressing what allowed Reid to think that our natural beliefs are justified or are true knowledge. This issue involves two further questions: why did Reid claim that the first principles of *truth* were intuitive and was he justified in dismissing scepticism as irrelevant? Contributions to this subject often underline pragmatist arguments that involve an implicit acknowledgement of evidence as evidence. This consideration, however, mainly concerns the justification of our beliefs.¹⁸ But Reid sought an *explanation* for our true beliefs. This explanation necessarily entails a justificatory ingredient, since it must *explain* the *fact* that they are justified or warranted. Reid did not simply claim that knowledge was a natural or a divine gift. His inquiry into our constitution showed *how* natural powers operate and *how* they give us access to reality. In doing so, he applied a method depicted in the manuscript “Of constitution”, which demonstrated that his approach could not be reduced to the mysterious appeal to common sense condemned by Priestley.

According to Reid, the task of logic was not to find *reasons* for self-evidence. On the contrary, logic *described* every kind of evidence (e.g. perception, memory, deductive inference, probable induction, etc.). Note that a *reason for a belief* is only one of several kinds of evidence, namely an inferential one. The logical accounting for evidence *seems* to introduce a reason for it when it says that the ability to discern evidence is part of our constitution, which is the work of God. In order to avoid Hume’s mistake, Reid argued that our beliefs must be treated as bare effects of the operations of our mind, and we must not reduce evidence to a psychological effect without any normative value. But Reid clearly indicated that the self-evidence of perception, remembrance, induction, and so on, was not conveyed by such a reason. Reid wrote:

Shall we say, then, that this belief is the inspiration of the Almighty? I think this may be said in a good sense; for I take it to be the immediate effect of our constitution, which is the work of the Almighty. But if inspiration be understood to imply a persuasion of its coming from God, our belief of the objects of sense is not inspiration; for a man would believe his senses though he had no notion of a Deity. He who is persuaded that he is the workmanship of God, and that it is a part of his constitution to believe his senses, may think that a good reason to confirm his belief. But he had the belief before he could give this or any other reason for it. (Reid, 2002a: 231–2)

¹⁸ See Rysiew, 2002, 2015; Jaffro, 2010; Poore, 2015.

Reid distinguished between *natural belief*, which assents to evidence but does not need to believe in God to do so, and *philosophical confirmation of belief*, an acknowledgement that natural belief is a “part of our constitution” (common sense) as “the workmanship of God”. The veracity of God is a *reason* from which the conclusion that our natural faculties were truthful is drawn. But we do not need this philosophical justification to discern perceptual, memorial, and other kinds of *evidence*.¹⁹ Focusing on the justification for our natural beliefs, therefore, did not fully explain Reid’s intentions. We have to determine the explanatory function of the inquiry into our constitution. The hypothesis that will be developed in this chapter is the following one: to say that our beliefs are *about* real things according to the laws of our nature is to attribute this to the exertion of powers instituted by a Transcendent Being. This belief assists understanding facts that are observed when we reflect on evidence, because perceptual belief transcends sensation, inductive belief transcends past experience, and testimonial belief transcends words heard.

The first principles, for Reid, represent laws of nature that must explain conceiving an attribute or a relation that does not depend on our having conception, and that we believe in an existence that does not depend on our discernment. They do so because explaining instinctive belief as self-evident is tantamount to describing the operation of transcendence. On suggestion at the beginning of the *Inquiry*, Reid wrote:

Why sensation should compel our belief of the present existence of the thing, memory a belief of its past existence, and imagination no belief at all, I believe no philosopher can give a shadow of reason, but that such is the nature of these operations: they are simple and original, and therefore inexplicable acts of the mind. (Reid, 1997: 28)

The ultimate fact, for Reid, involves acknowledging that a sensation is necessarily taken as a sign of the thing, which is conceived as existent in the perception. Analytically, we cannot say more. But synthetically, the law of suggestion explains every thing that needs to be explained: (1) why we perceive one thing (the extra-mental thing) and why the perception does not have two objects (one in my mind and an extra-mental one); (2) why the belief in its existence is not concluded from another *reason*. This is explained only by the fact that there is a metaphysical *gap* between sensation and perception that is transcended by a power given in our constitution. Rebecca Copenhaver and Keith De Rose stress that there is an “external relation” between the sensation and the object of perception, or in Reid’s words, there is “no connection that arises necessarily

¹⁹ See Poore, 2015.

from the nature of the things”, especially no similitude.²⁰ As we cannot have a perception without having any sensation, there is, however, a connection, which is attested by the regularities of experience. But it does not stem from the nature of the things. Even in the case of the perception of secondary qualities, although the way we describe the object of perception (the extra-mental thing) depends on the sensation, there is no similitude, as we have seen, between the *nature* of the secondary quality and the *nature* of the sensation. The laws of our constitution can explain the fact that we are *in the presence* of the thing only if they are the way in which transcendence, as it were, operates within us.

Transcendence is still at work in other beliefs about reality, testimonial and inductive beliefs included. It is at work, in fact, when we naturally interpret any thing as a sign. In addition to sensation, indeed, there are two other kinds of natural signs: natural language (gesture) and natural causes (Reid, 1997: 58–61).²¹ In the latter case, by virtue of repeated observations, we simultaneously discover that some thing is a sign and learn its interpretation through experience. Then, another first principle describes the “external relation” between past experience and future expectation: the inductive principle. Although Reid agreed with Hume’s observation that there is no *reason* by which the expectation is inferred from past experience, he opposed Hume’s position on the fact of nature involved in our probable belief. Reid, in contrast, tried to account for inductive evidence as genuine grounds for belief and can only do so by appealing to “the constitution of human nature” that “ties together [. . .] those things which were in their nature unconnected” (Reid, 1997: 50). In the case of natural language, without any induction, we know that a specific facial expression signifies a particular emotion. In an analogy between perceptive evidence and testimonial evidence Reid showed that testimonial belief was a belief about the same things signified by the speaker’s discourse, and not only about the speaker’s belief. The object of belief is the thing itself and not any mental object in the speaker’s mind or in the hearer’s mind (nor inferred through this mental object). Artificial signs are not only linguistic signs, but signs of reality by virtue of our constitution. To account for testimonial belief, the naturalist must describe transcendence.

Although Reid does not employ the term “transcendence” in this context, phenomenology currently allows us to use it in the philosophy of mind. Moreover, the term occurred in the nineteenth-century reception of Reid’s writings,

²⁰ Copenhaver, 2004. See also De Rose, 1989 and Buras, 2009. For a different approach, perhaps overlooking the metaphysical gap, see Pappas, 1989.

²¹ Sensation suggests a thing of *which we had never before any notion or conception* (Reid, 1997: 59), although facial expression and signs of natural language suggest some things notions of which are given by nature (Reid, 1997: 51).

which proves relevant for two reasons.²² First, it appropriately denotes the typical gap (i.e. the absence of necessary connection) that is observed in any exertion of true power. Reid argued that “[p]ower in the proper sense is under the command of him who has the power, and *we cannot infer the act from the power because there is no necessary connection between them*” (Reid, 2003: 21–2, my emphasis). This gap occurs both in the philosophy of mind and in the philosophy of nature. The power exerted in perception is as transcendent as the power exerted in gravitation. Notwithstanding, when applied to the typical gap observed in our mental operations, the term is relevant for another reason. In perception, induction, and testimonial belief, the gap is not only *observed* (as it was in the science of nature), it is *crossed*. It would appear odd to call the gap between a so-called cause and a so-called effect observed *in* external nature (‘so-called’ because signs of each other) “transcendent”. Notwithstanding, in the philosophy of mind, the experience of perception (and induction, testimony) proves to be experience of self-transcendence. Close examination of this mental operation shows that there is no reason why we conceive a thing and believe that it exists when we have a particular sensation. And yet we do conceive and believe in this external existence. Referring to our constitution as ‘God’s workmanship’, the anatomist of the mind is in a position to account for this mental gap-crossing without overlooking the gap.

In Reid’s version of common sense philosophy, a first principle provides an explanation. It is a law of nature that describes some induced regularities, produced by an agency. Reid’s methodology in “Of constitution” suggests that, in the philosophy of mind, first principles are *mental facts*. Nonetheless in the *Intellectual Powers*, Reid’s enunciation of the first principles of contingent truths is ambiguous. For instance, the first does not consist in holding that every affirmation of the existence of every thing of which I am conscious is true. Reid rather claims: “I hold as a first principle the existence of every thing of which I am conscious.” In the published work, the *existence* of the thing is the alleged first principle. Although my aim is not to deny this ambiguity, the examination of what the first principles have to account for (namely *evidence as such*) helps to explain why Reid made the enunciation of the first principles in such forms. Since Reid treated the first principles as laws of nature, which must explain our discernment of *truth as such*, he concluded they were *first principles*

²² In a note in an abridged edition of Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, James Walker quotes a lecture given by the French translator of Reid’s works, Theodore Jouffroy: “From the results of observation, and solely by the application to these results of a conception of reason, the mind arrives at a consequence that transcends them” (Reid, 1854a: 444).

of truth. The first principle was the *fact* that we discern the truth of the existence of every thing of which we are conscious *as truth*. This explains why, for Reid, the first principle was *the existence* of this thing.²³

In the case of material phenomena, agency is external to any material thing. The philosophy of material nature would not perform any explanatory function if there were no agent transcendent to matter, and there is no evidence that active principles can be inherent to matter.²⁴ Now, in the case of mental phenomena, a first principle provides an explanation of our perception of *evidence*. Remarkably, there is no need to learn by induction that there is a law of nature in mental phenomena to follow it. By feeling a sensation of hardness we instinctively know the cohesion of the parts of the thing we are touching. We do not need to know that divine agency is at work. Reid believed divine agency was *involved* in our mental operation. The explanatory function of the philosophy of mind is only performed if the philosopher, who proceeds first analytically and then synthetically, becomes aware that this transcendent agency is at work. Here, agency is not incompatible with the nature of the subject since this subject is not material—it is the mind as such. The mind is not the agent of the mental operation but the thing in which there is an activity consisting in transcending the nature of our feeling, sensation, hearing, and so on. Now we can address the suspicion that the appeal to our mental constitution is a refuge of ignorance in Reid’s philosophy of mind, especially the fear that Reid’s reply to the sceptic begs the question by presupposing that the mind is a *knowing subject*.

III. Conclusion

By claiming that Reid’s theism “helps the reliabilism”, Philip De Bary hints that it “gives an explanation for the reliability of the faculties” (De Bary, 2002: 187–8). If we are right, indeed, Reid’s reference to God explains their reliability because it makes sense of the observation made by the philosopher when he sees that they *cross the gap*. Reid’s belief that our faculties were part of God’s creation makes intelligible the self-transcendence described in Section II. It did not, however, imply that Reid intended to demonstrate their truthfulness or to refute the sceptic by proving first that our constitution is not delusive. Indeed, Reid’s answer to the

²³ Undoubtedly, there is a shift. Another ambiguity is often pointed out in the literature: are the first principles propositions, objects or beliefs taken for granted? On this point, see Van Cleve, 1999 and Wolterstorff, 2004.

²⁴ Letter to Lord Kames, 16 December 1780 in Reid, 2002b: 145.

sceptic did not consist in saying that because they are God's creation, our faculties are reliable, but rather in using "the means which Nature has furnished" in order to bring controversies about first principles to an issue: the unprejudiced use of judgment, the sense of ridicule, and some "track-record arguments" (Reid, 2002a: 461-7).²⁵ These means aimed at awakening the sense of evidence by prompting the exercise of common sense, not at demonstrating that the sceptic was wrong by inferring the reliability of our faculties from our non-delusive constitution.²⁶ In particular Reid did not think that the reliability must be concluded from a demonstrative reason, as, for instance, from the divine origin of our constitution. He believed that if led to reflect on his own mental experience, the sceptic would confess that he always implicitly acknowledges evidence as a just ground of belief. Reid admitted that it would be impossible to demonstrate that our constitution was suited to discerning evidence. In the manuscript "Of constitution", he conceded that our constitution might appear contingent for two reasons: (1) either the Maker of this constitution might "have given us one part of it without an other, for instance the power of perceiving mathematical or physical truths without the power of perceiving moral truths", or (2) he might "have given a contrary constitution so as that what we now perceive to be true either in morality or in other things, should by means of that other constitution be perceived to be false" (Reid, n.d.: 3). These possibilities were not incongruent with God's omnipotence. Regarding the role of sensation, Reid considered that we cannot conceive a perceived object without it. Perhaps God could have made us in another way. This offered an explanation for why he wrote that it was a "cause or occasion". "Occasion" referred to a fact *without which* perception does not occur given our actual constitution, but which could have been absent in another created nature. Moreover, logic did not require a demonstration to rule out the possibility that God was a great deceiver. Having no reason to think that our constitution was fallacious, Reid sought to describe our cognitive powers by reference to the transcendence at work in it. Refusing the burden of proof, and finding no reason for suspicion, Reid developed a realistic philosophy of mind. We have shown why experimental theism provided him with adequate means to achieve this objective. References to God are very expedient to assist the

²⁵ "Conceiving that the testimony of our senses, and of all our faculties, excepting that of consciousness, ought not to be taken for granted, but to be proved by argument" was Descartes' mistake according to Reid. "Other men, from the beginning of the world, had taken for granted, as a first principle, the truth and reality of what they perceive by their senses, and from thence inferred the existence of a Supreme Author and Maker of the world" (Reid, 2002a: 515). Reid's criticism of Descartes' circle is widely stressed from Alston, 1985 to Poore, 2015.

²⁶ See Etchegaray, 2013: 142-5.

philosopher for the *description* of evidence, and such assistance is useless to convince the sceptic.

In this approach, is the mind a *knowing subject*?²⁷ Section I has shown that the proper method for the *philosophy of mind* must avoid subjectivism. The mind is termed ‘a subject’ in the sense of a *SUBJECTUM* to which discernment is inherent. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the *Essay on the Intellectual Powers*, Reid introduced the following “principle taken for granted [. . . that the] very operation we are conscious of supposes an agent that operates, which we call mind” (Reid, 2002a: 42). In doing so, we conceive our mind as *ours* only through common sense. On the second of the first principles, Reid argued “that the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of a being which I call *myself*, *my mind*, *my person*” and again, on the sixth that “we have some degree of power over our actions” and consequently that we are “agents” (Reid, 2002a: 472). Certainly, we may believe that we have *some* degree of power over our mental acts. In other passages, Reid suggested that this power is mainly a power of attention (Reid, 2002a: 64). Thus, the mind can function to some degree as an agent—at least we have a *natural belief* that it can play such a role. For instance, we believe (we know, strictly speaking, according to Reid) that we could perceive better. But the laws of our mental constitution remain the creature of another agent, its Creator.²⁸ Our agency is exerted only in the use of law-governed intellectual powers.²⁹ In Reid’s work, the notion of subject in the sense of self, agent, and person occurred through a *belief* that stems from the transcendent efficacy of our nature. This modern concept of *subject* is not a *philosophical* requisite to answering the sceptic, nor to describing our mental operations.

For this reason, the Reidian response to scepticism departed from a Cartesian order and did not presuppose the mind as a transcendental subject of knowledge. A ‘Cartesian order’ is the name that Reid would willingly apply to the following: first I know that I exist as a self, and then and only then, I have to prove that the other objects of my ideas are existent too, thanks to God’s veracity.³⁰ Reid’s logic and response to the sceptic involved a naturalistic method (a method examining the nature of things, mind included) that required an appeal to God’s efficacy

²⁷ On the role and significance of Reid’s concepts in the emergence of the modern subject, see De Libera, 2008, 2014.

²⁸ On the distinction between operation and action, activity and agency of the mind, see Jaffro, 2014.

²⁹ Strictly speaking, an active power is not law-governed.

³⁰ Although this interpretation of Descartes’ *Meditations* is questionable, it is Reid’s own. Actually Descartes does not proceed so in the *Meditations*. But this is the way Reid introduces it (2002a: 115–16).

for the explanation of our true beliefs. In Reid's view, the mind knows because *in it* some true beliefs (especially the belief that it is a self) occur, not because it is a self whose conscious thoughts are to be justified by God's veracity, nor because it is an agent constituting evidence. Reid's experimental theism in his anatomy of the mind opened the way for psychology by assuming a "divine" power of the human mind.³¹

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³¹ On this subject, Reid drew from Cicero in writing "So with the mind of man, though thou sees it not, as thou seest not God, nevertheless as thou recognized God from His works, so from memory, power of discovery, rapidity of movement and all the beauty of virtue, thou shalt recognize *the divine power of mind*" (Cicero *Tusculanae disputations*, I.xxviii.70, quoted in Reid, 2002a: 58, my emphasis).

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