

Thomas Reid's View of Memorial Conception*

Marina Folescu

University of Missouri

This is the penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* (2018)

Abstract

Thomas Reid believed that the human mind is well equipped, from infancy, to acquire knowledge of the external world, with all its objects, persons, and events. There are three main faculties that are involved in the acquisition of knowledge: (original) perception, memory, and imagination. It is thought that we cannot understand how exactly perception works, unless we have a good grasp on Reid's notion of perceptual conception (i.e. of the conception employed in perception). The present paper argues that the same is true of memory, and it offers an answer to the question: what type of conception does it employ?

Keywords: Thomas Reid; conceptual and non-conceptual content; perception; memory; immediate knowledge of the past; conception

1 Introduction

Thomas Reid believed that the human mind is well equipped, from infancy, to acquire knowledge of the external world, with all its objects, persons, and events. There are three main faculties that are involved in the acquisition of knowledge: (original) perception, memory, and imagination.¹

*I would like to thank Becko Copenhaver, Alex Radulescu, and James Van Cleve for reading earlier versions of this paper and suggesting ways to improve it. In Fall 2017, I was the American Philosophical Association Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, UK. I would like to thank Steve Yearley – the director – and the other fellows for all the fruitful exchanges during my residency there. My residency at IASH was made possible by the monetary support offered by the University of Missouri Research Council. Some of this material was given as a Philosophy Club talk, at the University of St. Andrews in October 2017. I would like to thank the members of the audience for valuable feedback, especially James Harris and Justin Snedegar. Last, but certainly not least, I am grateful for the constructive criticism I received from an anonymous referee for this journal.

¹Throughout this paper, I will assume that Van Cleve (2015) is correct to argue that, for Reid, only *original* perception is responsible for acquiring immediate knowledge of the external world, the type of knowledge that Reid directly opposes to skepticism. Regarding memory, Reid believes that it is a first principle of common sense that it

Each of these faculties is thought by Reid to be simple, and thus, not definable in terms of other faculties or operations of our minds. But, for each of these faculties, Reid presents a schema of operation. Every perceptual experience necessarily involves a conception of the object and a belief that the object is presently extant (*EIP* II. 5, p. 96). Every act of remembering necessarily involves a conception of a past object and a belief of its past existence (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254). Finally, every imaginative experience necessarily involves a conception of the object and no belief that the object ever existed (*EIP* I. 1, p. 24; IV. 1, p. 302).²

Conception is differently employed in perception and in imagination. Without having a good understanding of the central role played by perceptual conception in perception and of imaginative conception in imagination, we cannot fully understand Reid's views on perception or on imagination.³ The present paper is concerned with the same issue regarding the faculty of memory: what type of conception does it employ? Just as in the case of perception and of imagination, without supplying an answer to this question, we are not in a position to fully understand how memory can give us "immediate knowledge of things past" (*EIP* II. 1, p. 253).⁴ Moreover, I will argue, without understanding how exactly memorial conception is employed by memory, we do not have a good way of distinguishing between the faculties of perception and memory.⁵ To be sure, this paper will be building on current secondary literature on Reid on memory and, as such, will make full use of the psychologist's understanding of memory. The *locus classicus* for such a characterization is Tulving (1985), according to whom there are three main kinds of memory: sensory memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory. Long-term memory is further understood to include

also gives us knowledge: "those things did really happen which I distinctly remember." (*EIP* VI. 5, p. 474). As for imagination, in Folescu (2015b) I have argued that it contributes to our knowledge of the external world, by allowing us to manipulate the information received in perception in new and creative ways.

²See Van Cleve (2015, p. 18-19) for a discussion of whether conception and belief are ingredients or concomitants of perception, memory, and imagination. For the present purposes, nothing much rides on this distinction and, for ease of use, I will talk as if conception and belief were necessary ingredients in perception, memory, and imagination.

³I have argued for this thesis in Folescu (2015a).

⁴The literature on Reid's view of memory is growing: Van Woudenberg (1999), Hamilton (2003), Van Woudenberg (2004), Copenhaver (2006), and Van Cleve (2015), and Folescu (2016). However, those papers do not focus on the role conception plays in the acquisition and preservation of our knowledge of the past. This will be topic of the current investigation.

⁵This is building on the work done by Folescu (2016), who argues that we must construe the objects of memory as being of a special kind, if we are to be able to draw a distinction between perception and memory.

explicit memory, on the one hand, and implicit memory, on the other. Explicit memory is believed to be conscious and to include episodic memory and semantic memory. Most Reid scholars agree that Reid construed memory to be *primarily* episodic.⁶ Given this, the question regarding the character of memorial conception should be understood to pertain only to episodic memory.⁷

Perceptual conception is non-conceptual, in the sense that it does not essentially involve (conceptual) descriptions to present its objects to the perceiver. Imaginative conception, on the other hand, is fully conceptual, in the sense that an imaginer must use (conceptual) descriptions to think about a purely imagined object.⁸ In what follows, I will argue that memorial conception falls somewhere in-between these two extremes: it is weakly conceptual (or proto-conceptual).⁹ I will not offer a formal definition of memorial conception, according to Reid, since his views on memory are not sufficiently detailed to allow for this. The thrust of the main argument of this paper, however, is that, in order to have the view on memory that Reid seems to be having, one must construe memorial conception as occupying this intermediary position: it is neither fully non-conceptual (as perceptual conception), nor fully conceptual (as imaginative conception). This will be keeping close to Reid's own methodology: conception and memory, just like all other faculties – i.e. “those powers of the mind which are original and natural, and which make a part of the constitution of the mind” (*EIP* I. 1, p. 21) – are not the kind of things that can be defined. Thus, “we must endeavour to explain them as well as we can, without affecting to give logical definitions, when the nature of the thing does not allow it” (*EIP* I. 1, p. 20).¹⁰

To begin, §2 discusses what type of knowledge of the past memory gives us: Reid argues that

⁶In Folescu (2016) I discuss the secondary literature pertaining to this issue in some detail, concluding that episodic memory holds the key of knowledge of the external world, according to Reid.

⁷For ease of use, throughout this paper, I will continue to use “memory” to mean “mostly episodic memory,” unless it is crucial to getting across a point that it pertains to episodic memory only, in which case I will make it explicit, by writing “episodic memory”.

⁸I argued that perceptual conception and imaginative conception have this role in Reid's philosophy in Folescu (2015a).

⁹This makes full use of the idea that Reid's main concern is episodic memory. I, of course, believe that it is oxymoronic to say that the memorial conception employed by semantic memory is *less than* fully conceptual. The only issue here is whether to think that the memorial conception employed by episodic memory is conceptual and, if so, to what degree.

¹⁰When Reid talks about memory, specifically, he reiterates this: “We know many past events by memory; but how it gives this information, I believe, is inexplicable” (*EIP* III. 2, p. 257).

it is *immediate*. The main issue here is exactly how to understand this claim of immediacy. If we adhere to the view espoused by Hamilton (2003) and Copenhaver (2006), we run into some troubling objections to Reid's views: primarily that his account is too close to an idea theory of memory, as Van Cleve (2015) points out. On the interpretation proposed by Van Cleve (2015), on the other hand, we lose the precision of the distinction between perception and memory – a distinction Reid wanted to maintain. Given this impasse, in §2.1, I argue that we should accept the limitations of a view like Reid's (e.g. closeness to an idea theory of memory). In §2.2, I argue that we should focus, instead, on the progressive elements of such a view, among which is the fact that we can offer a way of distinguishing between perception and memory (as Copenhaver (2006) suggested). In §3, I argue for the thesis that the content of memorial conception is proto-conceptual. This argument is based on circumstantial textual evidence and will help us better draw the line between perception and memory.

2 “Immediate Knowledge of the Past” in the Present

It is not entirely obvious how we can *currently* have immediate knowledge of the past. Reid makes it sound simple; or, at least, he seems to believe that it is a lot easier to understand how memory works, when compared with perception:

In memory, we do not find such a train of operations connected by our constitution as in perception. . . . These operations [the ones that pertain to perception] are so connected in our constitution, that it is difficult to disjoin them in our conceptions, and to attend to each without confounding it with the others. But in the operations of memory we are free from this embarrassment; they are easily distinguished from all other acts of the mind. (*EIP*, III. 1, p. 253-54)

We may agree with Reid that perception gives us immediate knowledge of presently existing things, but how exactly is this type of knowledge preserved by memory? What does it mean to say that the knowledge memory gives us is “immediate”, in the same sense that perceptual knowledge is? To answer these questions, it is useful to keep in mind that Reid believed that “memory implies

a conception and belief of past duration” and that “[m]emory can only produce a continuance or renewal of a former acquaintance with the thing remembered” (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254). I will regard these two features as being the main hallmarks of memory; this is as close as we get to defining or explaining memory, according to Reid.

To begin, let us look at how other authors have unpacked Reid’s idea that “[i]t is by memory that we have an immediate knowledge of things past” (*EIP* III. 1, p. 253). The first thing to note is that whatever Reid means here, he cannot mean that we *presently* have an awareness of things past. Hamilton (2003, p. 231) argues that having any type of immediate awareness of the past would be like having a “telescope into the past”, which we obviously don’t have. Copenhaver (2006, p. 181) emphasizes that, according to Reid: “the events we remember are past rather than present and so cannot be objects of a current apprehension.” She further adds that if the things remembered were objects of a *current* apprehension, there would be no distinction between perception and memory. Since Reid thinks that such a distinction between memory and perception can be drawn, we must be careful how we understand the immediacy of memorial knowledge.

Van Cleve (2015, p. 248-252), on the other hand, argues that Copenhaver (2006) and Hamilton (2003) deny the possibility of direct awareness of things past based on an argument that could be used to show that *any* awareness of the past is problematic, and not just a *direct* awareness of the past. Van Cleve is probably correct. There is just one issue that his discussion doesn’t account for: Reid’s distinction between memory and perception. Making that distinction explicit was one of the main motivations behind the interpretations offered by Hamilton and Copenhaver. They thought that allowing for a direct awareness of the past would blur the line between a perceptual experience and an act of remembering. Van Cleve (2015) argues that the distinction between the two faculties reduces to the distinction between their respective objects: the object of perception is always present, whereas that of memory is always past. Reid certainly talks this way:

The object of memory, or things remembered, must be something that is past; as the object of perception and of consciousness must be something which is present: What now is, cannot be an object of memory; neither can that which is past and gone be an object of perception or of consciousness. (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254)

In many cases, however, it is difficult to draw the distinction in this way. Sometimes the exact same object can be an object of a memory or of a perception. Oftentimes, an object that existed at a previous moment of time does not cease to exist when it is perceived again: for instance, the tree I see outside my window. Unless the object in question is an event – events cease to exist and thus remembering an event involves something different from perceiving one – we need to draw the distinction between memory and perception in a different way.¹¹

There seems to be a more appropriate way of drawing this distinction: Copenhaver (2006) argues that it is only in part determined by the objects these faculties are about. This distinction is also partly determined by the internal workings of each of these faculties. As already mentioned, for each of these faculties, Reid proposes a working schema that involves a *conception* and a *belief of existence* of a present or past object, depending on the faculty. So, let us suppose that Copenhaver is right that the faculties themselves are different. On this assumption, the difference must occur on the conception side, since the belief of existence is just that: a mental affirmation that perception and memory find their marks when they do. To make this hypothesis work, then, memorial conception must be significantly distinct from perceptual conception.¹²

We have a good understanding of what perceptual conception is like: it helps a perceiver acquire a mental grasp on the object of perception, without the use of descriptive imagery, talk, etc. Perceptual conception, thus, mirrors Donnellan's notion of 'having in mind'.¹³ Memorial conception, on the other hand, is, according to Copenhaver, a *preservation* of what was perceptually

¹¹This view depends on one's metaphysics. If one believed that only temporal slices of objects exist, one could draw the distinction between memory and perception this way. Reid, however, believed that objects – like trees, mountains, and so on – exist and, moreover, that events, with duration, begin to exist, unfurl, and then cease to exist: "The past was, but now is not. The future will be, but now is not. The present is equally connected, or unconnected with both" (*EIP* III. 2, p. 258). We thus need a more precise way to draw the distinction.

¹²Another reason in favor of drawing the distinction this way has to do with the fact that if we tried to draw the distinction based on the belief component of each of these faculties, we would be back to square one. The two faculties would seem to be different only because their respective objects are different: in the case of perception, we are dealing with presently extant objects, whereas in the case of memory, we are dealing with objects extant in the past. As I argue in the main text, however, this way of drawing the distinction between memory and perception does not work.

¹³This idea builds on the argument developed in Van Cleve (2004, p. 108) that Reidian conception is like Russellian acquaintance. I argued in a different paper that being acquainted with an object, according to Russell, entails that knowledge about that object is thus acquired. Whereas, having an object in mind, in Donnellan's sense, allows for mistakes – illusions, hallucinations, etc. – to occur. Thus, Reid is closer to Donnellan than Russell, in this regard. For more, see Folescu (2015a, p. 63).

conceived. Thus, “Reid is able to account for memory in terms of previous, rather than present awareness or apprehension [...] Memory preserves past apprehension by conceiving of an event previously apprehended and believing, of this event, that it happened” (Copenhaver (2006, p. 181-182)). The opening of the Essay on memory seems to suggest such an interpretation:

It is by memory that we have immediate knowledge of things past: The senses give us information of things only as they exist in the present moment; and this information, *if it were not preserved by memory*, would vanish instantly, and leave us as ignorant as if it had never been. (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 1, p. 253)

In what follows I evaluate whether this is the best way to go, given the goal of trying to keep perception and memory distinct, as Reid thought we should.

2.1 Some Objections

Reid’s view that memorial conception preserves the information made available to us by perceptual conception is open to objections. In this section, I discuss them and the solutions proposed by Van Cleve (2015). I will argue that no easy answer could be given to at least one of them: on a certain (not entirely uncharitable) interpretation, it turns out that a view like Reid’s is quite close to an idea theory of memory. This is a difficult objection to address and I will not offer a way out here. Instead, in the following section, I will argue that the positive aspects of a view like Reid’s should determine us to view it in a better light than its competitors.

Van Cleve (2015, p. 244-248) indicates that Reid’s account of memory comes too close to either a “trace” theory of memory or to an “idea” theory of memory, both of which he criticizes in no uncertain terms. Briefly, according to *a trace theory of memory*, the physical impressions caused by external objects would persist after the object is not present to the senses, and thus, these *traces* would enable our memories. According to *an idea theory of memory*, on the other hand, the “immaterial impressions”, in Hume’s sense, would be somehow stored by memory and revived, with a lesser degree of vivacity, whenever somebody would remember something.

From the passage quoted above, we can easily see that Reid talks about memory preserving

information, which is not of the physical variety, and thus clearly different from a Reidian impression. Since a trace theory of memory takes as a given the preservation of the (physical) impressions themselves, Reid's account is not a trace theory.¹⁴

It is more difficult to answer the other challenge, which states that Reid's account is nothing more than a dressed-up version of an idea theory of memory. It is certainly true that Reid wanted to distance himself from such a view, given that he considers all things related to ideas to have dubious epistemic consequences. It is unclear whether he manages to do so, however. Copenhaver (2006, p. 181) argues that, according to Reid, the object of a memory is not a past apprehension; in other words, the object of memory is not something like a Humean impression that someone passively receives via perception. However, according to Hume, the object of memory is not an impression either: it is an idea derived from an impression, which, although it has less vivacity than the original, it "is somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea" (T 1.1.3.1; SBN 9). In the passage quoted above, Reid talks about memory preserving the information from the senses, and not about what exactly is the object of memory. So, based solely on that passage, we could say that however the information the senses give us is preserved by memory, the objects of memory are external, and not internal. This is sufficiently different from Humean ideas, which are, by their nature, internal.

However, if we look at another passage in Reid's writings, things become muddier. Reid objects to both Locke and Hume (*EIP* III. 7, p. 285-289), by saying that past impressions (or ideas, or perceptions) cannot actually be revived, so an impression cannot *re*-appear as an idea, as Locke and Hume seem to think. Reid's objection to Locke and Hume, however, seems to be less forceful than he thinks:

I must therefore have perceived it [the transit of Venus over the sun] when it happened, otherwise I could not now remember it. Our first acquaintance with any object of thought cannot be by remembrance. Memory can only produce a continuance or *renewal* of a former acquaintance with the thing remembered. (emphasis added; *EIP*

¹⁴Reid argues against a trace theory of memory, more directly, in *EIP* III. 7, p. 281-282). Going through all the details would take too long and not a lot more would be gained than just saying that Reid's is not a trace theory of memory.

III. 2, p. 255)

If we took “acquaintance” to mean something close to a Humean “impression” or a Lockean “perception”, memory, for Reid, would play a similar role, at least some of the time it is employed: it renews or revives the acquaintance we had with an object via perception. Maybe we shouldn’t think about Reidian acquaintance in these terms. However, as discussed above, the conception involved in perception is best understood as enabling the perceiver to simply have in mind, or to be *acquainted* with, the object of perception. Perceptual conception is non-conceptual, much like Humean impressions and ideas, which are often likened to images. So, there are similarities between Reidian perceptual conceptions and Humean impressions. These similarities are more difficult to disregard when thinking about memory than perception, given that Reid claims that the acquaintance someone acquired in perceiving an object is *renewed* by memory. On this view, it is difficult to see how the object of memory turns out to be whatever external object was once perceived, and not the perceptual conception that someone got by perceiving that external object.

To try to address this challenge, let us instead focus on Reid’s claim that “memory produces a continuance of a former acquaintance”, as Copenhaver (2006) does, and unpack this to mean that memory preserves a past apprehension of or an acquaintance with the object of a past perception. If it is preservation of acquaintance, rather than the acquaintance itself, the object of memory will not be a perceptual conception. This way of interpreting Reid puts some distance between his views and Hume’s: memory is not about anything “mental”, like ideas; it is about something that was once perceived.

Thinking about the role of memory as preserving previous apprehensions engenders, however, a related issue: does this mean that memory is a repository of perceptual conceptions? How is this different from claiming, with Locke, that memory is “a storehouse of ideas”?¹⁵ In particular,

¹⁵Reid criticizes Locke for saying this (*EIP* III. 7, p. 284). If I am correct, Reid himself falls into a similar trap. Maybe Reid criticizes Locke for arguing that ideas that no longer exist can be laid into a storehouse and then revived. By contrast, Reid does not say that the acquaintance we originally had with an object of perception goes out of existence: more often than not, that acquaintance is continued by memory. However, it is still difficult to explain how and why there is a need for memory to renew that acquaintance in some cases: has the person remembering something lost his initial grasp of the object once perceived? If so, how does memory revive that original grasp? I am not sure how to answer these questions. I bring them up because I don’t think that we can just ignore them.

Reid seems to be very much the product of his age when he writes that memory produces “the renewal of a former acquaintance” (*EIP* III. 2, p. 255). However we interpret this, there seems to be no escaping the fact that Reid believed that one function of memory is to help us remember, by renewing it, the initial contact that we had with an object while perceiving it. Probing further, it turns out that one object of (episodic) memory is the initial acquaintance itself: (episodic) memory presents that initial apprehension again to the mind. This is a thorny issue that I don’t know how to solve. I propose, however, to focus on the progressive aspects of Reid’s theory, while acknowledging the difficulty of the issues he and his contemporaries were grappling with. Even if his theory is flawed in ways that are reminiscent of Locke’s and Hume’s accounts, it may still be the case that it solves some of the issues the others only talked about in passing.

2.2 Some (Purported) Advantages

One of the main advantages of an account like Reid’s is that memory is thought to give us knowledge, in the same way as perception does. On the assumption that perceptual conception is key to acquiring knowledge of the external world,¹⁶ it is easy to see how memory contributes to our knowledge of the external world. After all, we are working under the assumption that one of the main functions of memory is to preserve the information gotten via perception. What could stop Reid, or anyone sharing his views, from thinking that memory just preserves the knowledge gotten in perception? Well, common sense should!

A surprising omission in this regard is Reid’s seemingly ignoring the fact that memory rarely perfectly preserves the information the senses give us. It is all too obvious that the information memory preserves is not the whole of the information received via one’s senses, in perception. If I think about what I remember, even episodes I was a part of in my recent past, there are some details that are either effaced or absent altogether. We may think that the details that are preserved are “essential”, in the sense that they may be salient, or striking, etc. A metaphor may be useful

¹⁶This is an assumption shared by most everyone working on Reid’s theory of perception. I have argued for the more specific interpretation, that it is due to *perceptual* conception that perception gives us knowledge in Folescu (2015a).

here: we only remember the details that are left after a process of distillation and evaporation. As in distillation, so in memory: the things that remain are concentrated.¹⁷ For example, we remember the color red of a rose that we saw yesterday, as *red*. We might not remember the particular shade of red the rose had, but we would probably know that the rose was red when prompted to recall its color. By contrast, according to Reid, in perception we are apprehending the object perceived, without necessarily deploying our conceptual apparatus.¹⁸ It seems that to preserve in memory what we perceived at an earlier moment of time, we must use some (low level) concepts. Otherwise, the information apprehended in perception would not get fixed. Once we acquire more and more concepts, we are able to retain more and more from what we perceive and to consciously retrieve that information when we need to.¹⁹

What Reid says regarding duration and how human memory differs from the memory of non-human animals is illuminating in this regard.²⁰ First, Reid argues that, to be able to remember anything, one must already have a notion of duration:

It is essential to every thing remembered that it be something which is past; and we cannot conceive a thing to be past, without conceiving some duration, more or less, between it and the present. As soon therefore as we remember any thing, we must have a notion and a belief of duration. It is necessarily suggested by every operation of our memory; and to that faculty it ought to be ascribed. (*EIP* III. 3, p. 259)

This is in stark contrast to perception, which does not presuppose any other notion, in order to let the perceiver acquire information about the objects and events of the external world. Moreover, it seems that this notion of duration must be explicitly used by the one who is remembering for memory to work properly. Thus, some concepts – involving duration – seem to be necessary,

¹⁷Interestingly, in talking about abstraction, Reid employs an analogy between intellectually analyzing an object and chemically decanting a compound into its ingredients (*EIP* V. 3, p. 370). My inclination to common sense leads me to believe that this process starts with (or maybe even presupposes) memory.

¹⁸For the details of this view, see Folescu (2015a).

¹⁹Someone might wonder whether concepts, or something close to them, namely partially descriptive notions, are always needed for this type of memory. For instance, can someone remember a pain they had non-conceptually? I think that the contents of episodic memory always contain some conceptual elements. It is probably not necessary to remember the pain itself under (something close to) a description, but concepts anchoring the pain to an episode will probably be needed.

²⁰I thank a referee for this journal for bringing this to my attention and commenting on its relevance to the main thesis of the paper.

according to Reid, for the proper operation of (episodic) memory in humans.

Second, although Reid believes that non-human animals can remember things, he points out that their ways of remembering differ significantly from how humans remember:

Yet I see no reason to think that brutes measure time as men do, by days, months, or years, or that they have any distinct knowledge of the interval between things which they remember, or of their distance from the present moment. If we could not record transactions according to their dates, human memory would be something very different from what it is, and perhaps resemble more the memory of brutes. (*EIP* III. 7, p. 294)

For the memory of non-human animals to be the same as that of humans, they should be able to acquire and use the concept of duration, in a manner similar to how humans do. Reid thinks that there is no evidence for this, so he claims that the two types of memory are distinct. This is even more interesting, given what he says about perception. Reid believes that humans and non-human animals perceive the external world in the same way. I take this to be evidence for the main thesis of this paper. Reid is probably thinking that humans do not share a lot with non-human animals, when it comes to memory, because human memory is more conceptual than the memory of non-human animals.

Another indication that this interpretation is on the right track is Reid's choice to talk about memory after talking about perception, and before discussing conception and abstraction. We should recall that his is a developmental story of how the mind functions, and that he uses this as an organizing principle of the *Essays*. On the contrary, Reid believes that memory develops later in life, supposedly when other faculties are well-developed so that they allow memory to function properly:

In the gradual progress of man, from infancy to maturity, there is a certain order in which his faculties are unfolded, and this seems to be the best order we can follow in treating of them. The external senses appear first; memory soon follows, which we are now to consider. (*EIP* III. 1, p. 253)

I do not claim that this passage shows that memorial conception is conceptual; it just indicates that Reid thinks that memory comes later in the development of a human being. One explanation

of why this happens is to think that the ability to form concepts must also be underway, and maybe even interact with memory in such a way that memory (or one type thereof) is actually instrumental in our ability to form general concepts. This is not the only possible reading of the above passage, but I think it will help us better understand the distinction between perception and memory. In the next section, I discuss some philosophical reasons for thinking that Reidian memorial conception is weakly or proto-conceptual.

3 Memorial Conception is Weakly Conceptual

It all starts with thinking that the perceptual information that memory preserves is never perfectly stored. Reid briefly touches on this idea when he writes:

There are cases in which a man's memory is less distinct and determinate, and where he is ready to allow that it may have failed him; but this does not in the least weaken its credit, when it is perfectly distinct. (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254)

There seem to be two complementary ways of understanding this passage, and I propose that the best way of interpreting it is to think that both ways are cogent. First, one may think that the conception employed in memory is non-conceptual, just like the one employed in perception. On this interpretation, we may suppose that here Reid is addressing a case where the perception of the object was distinct and determinate, and thus our acquaintance with the object, via *perceptual conception*, was distinct and determinate. However, we should note that some of that distinctness and determinacy is lost in memory, and the acquaintance provided by *memorial conception*, this time, although non-conceptual, is somewhat fuzzier than before. This way of reading the passage makes Reid a Humean of sorts: our memorial conception of a thing is less vivid than our perceptual conception of the same thing.

Second, we could think that the loss of distinctness and determinacy is to be expected, given the aforementioned process of distillation: some details probably vanish completely; others become less vivid, and those that get fixed and are remembered are even more vivid, in some respects,

than what was perceived. If we understand memorial conception to be different from perceptual conception, in the sense of having more conceptual meat on its bones, we can get a better idea of how objects can be remembered with a higher degree of vivacity. This vivacity, in turn, is probably connected with a higher degree of clarity.

It is difficult to say exactly which reading of the above passage should be preferred: we do not have enough evidence to draw a firm conclusion. I submit that we need not have a firm preference, if we think that some type of memory, namely memory of events, in virtue of the memorial conception it employs, uses something close to concepts, whereas other types of memory do not (for instance, sensory memory and maybe even short-term (working) memory). It may seem like I'm reading too much between the lines; after all, Reid does not say any of this explicitly. As I discuss momentarily, however, this interpretation might better illuminate to us why memory preserves some of the information made available to us in perception, but not all of it.

My interpretation is based on circumstantial evidence: Reid argues that for infants, and for people suffering from a disorder of the mind, it may not be obvious that what they remember is actually remembered, and not imagined, or vice-versa:

Perhaps in infancy, or in a disorder of the mind, things remembered may be confounded with those that are merely imagined; but in mature years, and in a sound state of mind, every man feels that he must believe what he distinctly remembers [. . .]. (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254)

I submit that it is possible for memory and imagination to cross paths in this way because both imaginative and memorial conception are more conceptual than perceptual conception.²¹

This interpretation is supported by something else Reid says, this time about the notions of external things (acquired via our senses), and of the operations of our minds (acquired via consciousness). These notions, which are “first notions”, are neither simple, nor distinct. Memory, Reid believes, aids us in making these conceptions distinct, once they are accessed via our external or internal senses; without memory, our powers of categorization do not function well:

²¹This is based on the interpretation I defended in Folescu (2015a).

For, although our first notions of material things are got by the external senses, and our first notions of the operations of our own minds by consciousness, these first notions are neither simple nor clear. Our senses and our consciousness are continually shifting from one object to another; their operations are transient and momentary, and leave no distinct notion of their objects, until they are *recalled by memory*, examined with attention and compared with other things. (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 5, p. 269).

Reid believes, thus, that memory is the next step on the road to obtaining simple and clear notions of external and internal things. Memory, in other words, can help us see the light among the jumbled notions of reality that the senses give us. Reid does not make the interaction between memorial conception and the more rationally developed faculties of abstraction, generalization, and reflection explicit, but some parts of (at least one type of) memory seem to be doing double-duty. On the one hand, something in memory retains the information we have from perception and consciousness – and because of this, I believe we are entitled to think that memorial conception is *not* conceptual. On the other hand, memory helps us *form* certain concepts, by eliminating and synthesizing some of the information perception gives us. This is what makes me think that memorial conception is more conceptual than perceptual conception.

Let me offer a story of how I believe the account should have gone, had Reid made it explicit. This account will be based on the work done in Folescu (2016), who argued that, according to Reid, memory is involved in perception of events. Reid believes that for movement, which he takes to be a paradigmatic case of events, one needs to remember the intermediary positions an object was at, in order to have perceived the motion of that very object.²² Based on this, Folescu (2016, p. 13-14) argues that remembering events involves two separate mental acts, which are themselves events: (i) remembering being conscious perceiving (a color) and (ii) remembering perceiving that very color, with the act of perception being the same in (i) and (ii). According to Folescu (2016) this type of memory is episodic. Episodic memory is subject to the previous awareness condition, so whatever is remembered in this way has once been perceived by the person having that memory. Given what we know about episodic memory, perception of events must have an analogous structure to that of

²² “[T]he operations of both [perception and consciousness] are confined to the present point of time, and there can be no succession in a point of time; and on that account the motion of a body, which is a successive change of place, could not be observed by the senses alone without the aid of memory” (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270).

the (episodic) memory of events. Thus, the suggestion seems to be that perception of causal events involves the putting together of two mental events: (i) being conscious perceiving (a color) and (ii) perceiving that very color (the act of perception, in both cases, is the same, just as in the case of memory).

So how exactly does this “putting together” happen and what significance does it have for the main question addressed here regarding the conceptuality / non-conceptuality of memorial conception? Let us start with the easy case: object perception. Psychologists argue that infants, as young as three or four months, perceive objects in their environments, but do not perceive the causal events such objects are part of until they reach the next developmental stage, at around ten months.²³ This developmental story that Reid would probably have appreciated suggests that some learning and experience may be needed to be able to register a ball’s falling from the table, and not just the ball and the table. Given this framework – according to which we start by having object perception and then develop to have event-perception – perception of causal events thus involves a complex operation. Building on a suggestion discussed in Folescu (2016), one way to think about this complex operation is to acknowledge that it probably involves some type of recognition / cross-identification across different operations of the mind that the perceiving (of the ball falling from the table) *is* of the ball falling from the table. To be sure, there are two events involved here: (i) being conscious of a *perceiving* and (ii) *perceiving* of the ball falling from the table.

The interesting question, then, is how should one think about this whole process? Is this process akin to that of enabling acquired perceptions, in Reid’s terminology? In some sense, yes, because it involves something more than “just” being in the world with an object, as is the case for object perception. In another sense, no, unless we are ready to say that events are never perceived, since I endorse the arguments developed in Van Cleve (2015) (and elsewhere) regarding the non-perceptual character of Reidian acquired perception. Thus, I propose to think about this process as a building-blocks type of process. In Reid’s developmental story, the human mind must first develop all of its perceptual abilities; only then will it be able to work on developing memory

²³See Oakes & L. B. Cohen (1990) for more details.

and, still later, on developing its reasoning abilities. Perception of events, given its complexity, should be placed somewhere along the line, after perception of objects and close to memory. This operation, I surmise, is more conceptual than bare perception, because it involves the type of recognition mentioned above. What I have in mind here is close to a thesis Falkenstein (2006, p. 141) attributes to Kant: “For Kant, our senses are insufficient for the perception of particular objects. Perception only occurs when the information acquired by the senses is recognized by us as an instance of an object of a certain kind.” In the case I have a mind, a particular mental operation must be recognized by us to be the same across two different operations; otherwise perception of events cannot occur. Perception of events is, thus, as conceptual as needed in order for such recognition to occur.

We are now in a position to answer the question regarding the conceptuality of memorial conception. As discussed by Folescu (2016), episodic memory works off of this complex perception of events (otherwise, the previous awareness condition on episodic memory isn’t satisfied). In this sense, memorial conception is more conceptual than simple perceptual conception (of particulars). It is, moreover, as conceptual as the perceptual conception involved in perception of events. Perception is thus distinct from memory: memorial conception marks this distinction at the level of content, given that, as opposed to perceptual conception, it is “more” conceptual.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to recapitulate the main findings of this paper. Reid dedicates an entire Essay to the faculty of memory and he argues that it functions in much the same way as perception does, with an important exception. Whereas perception gives us immediate access to presently existing objects, memory gives us immediate access to objects existing in the past. Other Reid scholars have discussed what issues arise from several possible interpretations of the idea that the type of access to the past is *immediate*. Here, I focused on discussing some consequences of holding the view that the type of memory that gives us such access is episodic (a fact noticed

by everyone else working on Reid's faculty of memory). The main conclusion of this paper, if my arguments are correct, is that the type of conception involved in episodic memory is proto-conceptual or "more" conceptual than the one involved in perception of objects.

References

- Copenhaver, R. (2006). Thomas Reid's Theory of Memory. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 23(2), 171–187.
- Falkenstein, L. (2006). Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic. In G. Bird (Ed.) *A Companion to Kant*, (pp. 140–153). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Folescu, M. (2015a). Perceptual And Imaginative Conception: The Distinction Reid Missed. In R. Copenhaver, & T. Buras (Eds.) *Thomas Reid on Mind, Knowledge, and Value: Essays in Honor of Reid's Tercentenary*, (pp. 52–74). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Folescu, M. (2015b). Thinking About Different Nonexistents Of The Same Kind. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12196.
- Folescu, M. (2016). Remembering Events: A Reidean Account of (Episodic) Memory. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Early view: DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12333.
- Hamilton, A. (2003). 'Scottish Commonsense' about Memory: A Defence of Thomas Reid's Direct Knowledge Account. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81(2), 229–245.
- Oakes, L., & L. B. Cohen (1990). Infant perception of a causal event. *Cognitive Development*, 5(2), 193–207.
- Tulving, E. (1985). How Many Memory Systems Are There? *American Psychologist*, 40(4), 385–398.
- Van Cleve, J. (2004). Reid's Theory of Perception. In T. Cuneo, & R. Van Woudenberg (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Reid*, (pp. 101–133). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Cleve, J. (2015). *Problems from Reid*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Woudenberg, R. (1999). Thomas Reid on Memory. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 37(1).
- Van Woudenberg, R. (2004). Reid on Memory and the Identity of Persons. In T. Cuneo, & R. Van Woudenberg (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, (pp. 204–221). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.