**On the Possibility of Metaphysics: A Thomas Reidian Perspective**

Ataollah Hashemi

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**Abstract**

This paper delves into the examination of metaphysical knowledge from the unique vantage point of Thomas Reid. While some philosophers, including Immanuel Kant, assert the impossibility of metaphysical knowledge based on specific epistemological and methodological principles, Reid, a proponent of direct realism, presents alternative epistemological and methodological principles that challenge the skeptics’ stance. The primary objective of this paper is to explore whether metaphysical knowledge is attainable through Reid’s perspective. In this paper, I contend that Reid’s direct realism indeed opens up the possibility of metaphysics. Nevertheless, determining whether we truly possess metaphysical knowledge is far from straightforward. Instead, we rely on reliable tests to evaluate the reliability of some metaphysical beliefs.

**Introduction**

This paper delves into the exploration of metaphysical knowledge from Thomas Reid’s perspective. However, it is essential to clarify what is meant by “metaphysical knowledge” since philosophers often use different interpretations of the term. Historically, two distinct conceptions of metaphysics can be identified. The first characterizes metaphysics as a science that seeks to identify the fundamental categories that underlie reality. In this view, metaphysics is considered an independent epistemic discipline with its own methodology, aiming to provide systematic answers to questions such as the existence of persistent substances over time, the nature of these substances, and the various categories of entities that exist in the world. On the other hand, metaphysics has also been understood as ontology, which is the general science of being *qua being*. Ontology deals with the question of what exists, while metaphysics, as an independent discipline, strives to reveal the true nature of existing entities. According to this interpretation, metaphysics is not a separate and autonomous discipline like other sciences; rather, it constitutes the subject matter that underlies all other epistemic inquiries.[[1]](#footnote-1) Within the realm of ontology, the determination of whether entities like Sherlock Holmes, numbers, events, and anything denoted by the term ‘thing’ truly belong to the fabric of the world is addressed. On the other hand, the responsibility of metaphysics lies in explaining the true nature of these entities and establishing whether they are part of the fundamental structure of reality. For instance, metaphysics takes on the role of demonstrating that Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character or that numbers are abstract entities (Varzi 2011: 407). By engaging in this inquiry, metaphysics goes beyond ontology’s classification of these entities and delves into their underlying essence and existence within the broader framework of reality.

Given the mentioned distinction, one can now differentiate between two types of knowledge: metaphysical knowledge and ontological knowledge. Attaining metaphysical knowledge involves obtaining reliable answers to questions about the most fundamental level of reality. On the other hand, achieving ontological knowledge means understanding what truly exists in the objective and mind-independent universe. As knowledge has traditionally been defined as justified true belief, truth becomes an essential component of knowledge. Consequently, possessing ontological knowledge necessitates having epistemic access to external reality to ascertain what exists objectively. On the other hand, obtaining metaphysical knowledge requires understanding the true state of affairs at the deepest level of reality. This involves delving into the fundamental aspects and nature of existence beyond mere empirical observation.

**2. Skepticism about metaphysical and ontological knowledge**

Some philosophers, especially after David Hume, have raised serious doubts about human’s ability to achieve metaphysical and ontological knowledge in the senses described earlier. Among them, Immanuel Kant is a prominent figure who rejects the possibility of attaining both metaphysical and ontological knowledge. Kant’s primary focus lies in investigating the human mind from an epistemological standpoint and outlining the conditions under which human knowledge is feasible.

Similar to his empiricist predecessors, Kant believes that the scope of human understanding of external reality is limited by experience. However, in contrast to empiricists, he posits that human understanding is constrained by innate internal concepts inherent in human cognitive faculties. According to Kant, human understanding results from the assimilation of sensory data, which is then processed by these internal conceptual structures of the mind. A significant consequence of Kant’s view is that the external world is indeed the source of raw sensory data, but the true nature of external reality, as it exists in itself, remains epistemically inaccessible to us. Instead, we can only comprehend the world through the lens of the innate concepts implanted in our minds. Consequently, in Kant’s view, human beings possess epistemic access only to appearances or how things appear to us, while the reality itself, the “things in themselves,” remains beyond our grasp (Kant 1999: A42/B59–60).

Metaphysics, particularly in its first characterization, delves into the exploration of what lies beyond the realm of what is immediately evident to the human mind. According to Kant, metaphysical knowledge should encompass synthetic a priori judgments concerning the most fundamental aspects of reality. Such judgments must be grounded in truth derived from reality itself, rather than being products of imagination or speculation. The faculty of reason is tasked with the discovery of these truths. However, Kant notes that the faculty of reason has limitations; it cannot grasp anything that transcends the confines of the human mind (Ibid B xiv.). This means that while metaphysics seeks to understand profound truths about reality, there are inherent boundaries to what the human mind can comprehend or access. Kant’s view emphasizes the epistemic constraints that prevent us from fully grasping reality as it exists beyond the limitations of human cognition.

As mentioned earlier, the domain of metaphysics aims to reveal insights into the most fundamental aspects of reality. However, a significant obstacle arises from the fact that our access to external reality is only through how it appears to us, not as it truly is in itself. Due to the limitations of our cognitive faculties, the necessary conditions for attaining metaphysical knowledge can never be fully met. Kant argues that as a consequence of these epistemic limitations, metaphysics cannot rightfully be classified as a science, study, or discipline. The inherent constraints of our cognitive abilities prevent us from achieving the kind of knowledge that metaphysics seeks to uncover. Consequently, Kant maintains that the status of metaphysics as a rigorous and attainable area of knowledge is questionable, given the insurmountable barriers imposed by our cognitive limitations.

Furthermore, Kant’s perspective also contrasts with ontological realism, which asserts that we can apprehend what exists in the external world. Although Kant does not explicitly emphasize the distinction between the two senses of metaphysical knowledge discussed here, it is not unreasonable to argue that his account effectively precludes the possibility of ontological knowledge as well. The limitations imposed by our mental faculties restrict our ability to truly recognize what exists in the external world.

In Kant’s comprehensive philosophical project, it is essential to distinguish between its methodological and epistemological aspects. The preceding paragraphs primarily addressed the epistemological aspect of Kant’s critical philosophy. This aspect entails the acknowledgment that things in themselves, or the true nature of reality, remain beyond our epistemic reach. On the other hand, the methodological aspect of Kant’s theory revolves around the approach to initiate a metaphysical inquiry. According to Kant, before delving into the search for metaphysical knowledge, one should first ascertain whether such knowledge is attainable at all. It is incorrect, Kant asserts, to rely solely on self-evident truths and principles as a starting point for metaphysical inquiries (Ibid 46).

Kant is critical of common sense in metaphysics, viewing it as an appeal to the opinions of the masses, an approach of which the philosopher should be ashamed (Kant 1950: 7). In metaphysics, Kant posits that common sense “has no right to judge at all” since there are no self-evident metaphysical truths (Ibid 119). In summary, Kant’s critical philosophy comprises both an epistemological aspect, where the true nature of reality remains inaccessible to us, and a methodological aspect, which advocates for a careful and rigorous approach to initiating metaphysical inquiries, free from reliance on common sense or self-evident truths.

**3. Thomas Reid and Metaphysical Knowledge**

Kant’s argument against the possibility of metaphysical knowledge encompasses both the epistemological and methodological aspects of his philosophy. In contrast, Thomas Reid’s philosophy refutes both of these aspects. Now, the crucial question is whether Reid’s philosophy allows for the possibility of metaphysics as a legitimate epistemic inquiry. Before delving into this, let’s briefly review the epistemological and methodological aspects of Reid’s philosophy.

 In the history of philosophy, Reid is renowned for rejecting the theory of ideas and advocating direct realism. The theory of ideas, defended by philosophers like Locke, Berkeley, Hume, etc., posits that the immediate objects of thought are always some ideas in the mind. However, Reid argues that this theory leads to skepticism about the external world. To counter this, he develops his own position known as direct realism, which posits that the primary objects of our sense perceptions are physical objects, not mental ideas (Reid EIP: 4.2, 321–2). In direct realism, Reid asserts that the external world exists independently of our perception, and our sensory experiences directly connect us to physical objects. This perspective stands in contrast to the idea that our immediate objects of thought are solely mental ideas. Reid’s direct realism supports the notion that we can gain genuine knowledge about the external world through our senses without skepticism clouding our understanding. Thus, Reid’s rejection of the theory of ideas and his support for direct realism open up the possibility for metaphysics to be considered a legitimate epistemic inquiry, as it does not suffer from the same epistemological and methodological limitations that Kant imposed.

Reid is a realist philosopher, meaning that he assumes the existence of the external world and its physical constituents as a fundamental premise. Furthermore, he contends that, from an epistemic standpoint, we have direct access to some existing entities in the external world. Reid’s direct realism, as explained by Van Cleve, comprises two crucial components: perceptual and epistemological. Perceptual direct realism, according to Reid, asserts that we perceive physical objects directly, without the mediation of any perceived intermediaries. In simpler terms, when we perceive something in the external world, we do so without any mental representations or intermediary mental constructs distorting the direct experience (Van Cleve 2015: 82). This facet of Reid’s direct realism allows us to have unmediated and immediate access to the external world through our senses. The second aspect, epistemological direct realism, posits that some of our beliefs about physical objects are epistemically basic. This means that the justification for these beliefs does not derive from any other propositions or reasons that the subject might hold. Instead, these beliefs are independently and inherently justified (Ibid 81). In other words, certain beliefs about the external world are justified in themselves and do not require further reasons or evidence to support their validity.

Combining perceptual and epistemological direct realism, Reid’s philosophical stance allows us to have direct access to the external world through perception, and certain beliefs about this external world can be justified without depending on other beliefs or evidence. This understanding enables us to have knowledge of the world as it truly is, without the limitations or skepticism that might arise from the theory of ideas or other epistemological hurdles. Moreover, Reid’s epistemological perspective is closely linked to the concepts of commonsense and the first principles. According to John Greco’s interpretation, Reid’s first principles of commonsense can be understood as a faculty of judgment or, perhaps, a collection of faculties of judgment (Greco 2014: 144). Reid accords epistemological priority to these first principles of commonsense, considering them the very foundations of human knowledge (Ibid 143-147).

As some commentators have shown, Reid defends a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification, which consists of two main elements: (1) a set of beliefs that are self-evident or immediately justified, and (2) a set of beliefs that are justified based on their relations with these self-evident or immediately justified beliefs. Within this foundationalist framework, commonsense beliefs serve as the epistemic bedrock upon which all human knowledge is built. In other words, the first principles are known self-evidently; they do not rely on reasoning or arguments derived from more fundamental beliefs. Instead, they furnish evidential grounds for non-self-evident beliefs.

An inquiry might arise as to why the first principles of commonsense hold such epistemological priority. The answer to this question lies in Reid’s comprehensive account of epistemology. As Greco notes, Reid advocates a form of “proper function” faculty reliabilism, where “our cognitive faculties give rise to knowledge as long as they are part of our natural constitution and are not fallacious” (Ibid 149). [[2]](#footnote-2) In essence, Reid’s epistemological framework, centered on the first principles of commonsense, supports a foundationalist approach to epistemic justification, with self-evident beliefs forming the solid foundation upon which our knowledge is built. This approach is aligned with the notion that our cognitive faculties, when functioning properly and reliably within our natural constitution, lead us to genuine knowledge.

Let’s delve into Reid’s philosophical methodology, which is closely intertwined with his account of commonsense. Reid maintains that “Commonsense holds nothing of Philosophy nor needs her aid. But, on the other hand, Philosophy...has no other root but the principles of Commonsense; it grows out of them and draws its nourishment from them. Severed from this root, its honors wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots” (Reid IHM: 101). As Greco aptly describes, Reid attributes methodological priority to the principles of commonsense. These first principles of commonsense serve as the pre-theoretical commitments that philosophical theories ought to respect, at least unless there are compelling reasons to reject them (Greco 2014: 142). In other words, these first principles act as the initial starting points for philosophical inquiry, guiding the development of theories. To put it differently, the first principles of commonsense constrain philosophical theories, serving as defeasible pre-theoretical commitments that should be upheld. These principles play a pivotal role in shaping the direction of philosophical investigations. By adhering to the foundations laid out by commonsense, philosophical theories are firmly rooted and aligned with our natural intuitions and basic understanding of the world. Straying from these principles, on the other hand, risks disconnecting philosophical theories from the fundamental insights provided by commonsense and may lead to problematic or unsustainable conclusions.

One compelling argument that supports the methodological priority of commonsense beliefs is that it is the most plausible and practical approach available to us. According to Reid, in the realm of epistemological or philosophical investigations, we essentially have three methodological choices: “(a) we may begin by trusting none of our faculties until we have reason for believing them trustworthy, (b) we may begin by trusting some of our faculties but not others, (c) we may begin by trusting all of our faculties until we have reason for believing them untrustworthy” (Ibid 149).

Reid convincingly argues against the first option as a non-starter because it inevitably leads to skepticism. The second option, resembling the Kantian methodology, appears inconsistent as it suggests that certain faculties are reliable while others are not. Reid argues that there is no non-arbitrary criterion to discern which faculties are dependable and which are not (Reid IHM:183). Hence, the only tenable methodological choice is the third one, wherein commonsense beliefs hold methodological priority in all philosophical inquiries, including metaphysical investigations.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Reid’s account of direct realism supports the idea that he should be seen as an ontological realist. According to Reid, we have direct access to external reality through our perceptual senses and empirical investigations based on our experiences. This provides us with knowledge about the external world. Consequently, we have good reasons to believe that what appears to us in healthy circumstances is reliable and real. Therefore, Reid’s philosophy allows for the possibility of ontological knowledge. However, the question remains whether metaphysical knowledge, specifically in the first sense of characterizing metaphysics, is also attainable. Can one achieve metaphysical knowledge according to Reid’s perspective? Considering Reid’s emphasis on the methodological priority of commonsense first principles, we cannot rule out the possibility of acquiring metaphysical knowledge. Reid believes that first principles serve as the foundation for all branches of human knowledge, including natural philosophy, grammar, logic, mathematics, aesthetics, morals, and metaphysics. To gain knowledge in any of these branches, one must identify relevant first principles and build other beliefs upon them.

Given Reid’s model of broad and moderate epistemology, it is plausible to apply this method to metaphysical investigations. By relying on commonsense first principles and expanding our understanding through careful reasoning and empirical observation, we can potentially develop insights into metaphysical questions. Reid’s approach encourages a balanced and inclusive epistemology that does not discount metaphysical inquiry but rather invites us to explore it using a foundation of reliable first principles.

Reid not only acknowledges the possibility of attaining metaphysical knowledge but also presents a list of self-evidently true metaphysical first principles in his works. Among the principles he listed are the following:

1. “[T]he qualities which we perceive by our senses must have a subject, which we call body, and that the thoughts we are conscious of must have a subject, which we call mind”
2. “[A] figure cannot exist, unless there be something that is figured” or “I not only perceive figure and motion, but I perceive them to be qualities: They have a necessary relation to something in which they exist as their subject”
3. “… whatever begins to exist, must have a cause which produced it”
4. “… design and intelligence in the cause, may be inferred, with certainty, from marks or signs of it in the effect” (Reid EIP VI, VI: 495, 497, 503).

At first glance, it appears that in order to acquire metaphysical knowledge, one must construct her metaphysical theories on the foundation of these and other metaphysical first principles. However, a significant concern arises, preventing us from hastily arriving at this conclusion. According to Reid’s methodology, we can assert that metaphysical knowledge is potentially attainable, but possibility does not necessarily imply actuality.

To attain metaphysical knowledge, one must place trust in the faculty of reason, which is responsible for generating synthetic a priori beliefs about the fundamental structure of reality. This faculty serves as the origin of metaphysical first principles, forming the bedrock of dependable metaphysical theories. However, the question arises: do we possess sufficient grounds to rely on this faculty?

As mentioned, Reid advocates a broad and moderate form of foundationalism. His broad foundationalism allows for a diverse array of sources for immediate knowledge, while the moderate aspect does not demand infallibility from these sources (Greco 1995: 294). Furthermore, Reid contends that we should trust a faculty until substantial reasons arise to doubt its reliability. For instance, our faculty of memory deserves trust due to compelling inductive evidence supporting the veracity of our memory beliefs. This evidence demonstrates that our memories consistently lead to knowledge, establishing the faculty’s dependability. In contrast, the faculty of reason’s track-record in generating metaphysical beliefs lacks a similar degree of assurance. A cursory examination of the history of metaphysics reveals an absence of consensus among metaphysicians. Consequently, it is reasonable to withhold trust in the faculty of reason when it produces metaphysical beliefs. Unlike Kant, Reid does not outright reject the possibility of attaining metaphysical knowledge. Nevertheless, considering the track-record of the faculty of reason in yielding metaphysical beliefs, it is reasonable to exercise caution in trusting this faculty.

Hence, for Reid, the first principles of commonsense do not directly contribute to achieving metaphysical knowledge. Nevertheless, these principles serve a crucial role in our philosophical inquiries, including metaphysics. As discussed earlier, Reid believes that methodologically, “commonsense should serve as a check on ‘speculative understanding,’ on pains of falling into dishonor and metaphysical lunacy” (Greco 2014:152). This allows us to assess the plausibility of our philosophical and metaphysical theories in a critical manner. A theory that contradicts our reliable first principles is likely to be false. However, the mere compatibility of a theory with commonsense beliefs does not guarantee its truth.

For instance, it is a commonsense notion that our mental states influence our bodily behaviors. We recognize ourselves as agents with responsibility for our intentional actions. We also acknowledge that living beings like turkeys, trout, trees, and artifacts such as chairs are composite objects. In contrast, arbitrary combinations like “trout-turkeys” are not genuine composite objects. Reid attributes such beliefs to faculties, such as commonsense, which possess a reliable track-record. However, there exist metaphysical theories that clearly contradict these beliefs or render them illusory and unreal. For example, some versions of physicalism, like eliminative materialism, reject the idea of mental causation, while some forms of determinism deny the reality of human agency. Additionally, certain theories about ordinary material objects, such as universalism, allow for the existence of objects like “trout-turkeys.” From Reid’s epistemological methodology, we learn that instead of wholeheartedly embracing such comprehensive metaphysical theories, we have an epistemic duty to rely on our immediate appearances and maintain skepticism toward metaphysical theories that blatantly falsify reliable first principles.”

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the strong connection between Reid’s direct realism and ontological realism. Direct realism posits that our perception of the world accurately reflects its mind-independent existence, giving rise to what Reid refers to as ontological knowledge. However, it is not straightforward to claim that we also possess metaphysical knowledge in the sense of fully characterizing metaphysics. Nevertheless, we can rely on reliable tests to evaluate the falsity of certain metaphysical beliefs.

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1. Indeed, the question of whether the distinction between metaphysics and ontology truly holds or if one collapses into the other is a matter of controversy. However, in this paper, I maintain neutrality on this question and proceed with the assumption that ontology is different from metaphysics, as noted above. For further exploration of this topic and to gain more insights, consider referring to the works of Quine (1963), Schaffer (2009), Varsi (2011), and van Inwagen and Sullivan (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All sources of knowledge, including commonsense first principles, are ‘given us by Nature’ and are ‘the result of our constitution;’ thus, they are “equally trustworthy in their normal and healthy state” (Greco 2014: 148). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Therefore, Kantian view which holds that in metaphysics commonsense ‘has no right to judge at all’ is wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)