

# Reid's Defense of Common Sense

P. D. Magnus

*University at Albany, SUNY*

© 2008 P.D. Magnus  
<[www.philosophersimprint.org/008003/](http://www.philosophersimprint.org/008003/)>

## 1. Reid misread

Thomas Reid's reply to scepticism involves an appeal to common sense. Since he often claims that no defense of common sense is required, he is sometimes misread as claiming that no defense could be given. Yet Reid does defend common sense. This paper explores how he does so. Before engaging Reid directly, however, I want to consider two other ways in which Reid is sometimes misread.

First, Norman Daniels (1974) reads Reid as follows: Reid finds common sense to be trustworthy only because it is given to us by a benevolent God. Trust in common sense thus relies on theological premises, but these are no more secure than the claims that common sense is meant to support. Daniels writes, "Reid's only defense against the skeptical outcome ... that our constitutions might lead us to systematically false beliefs ... is his belief that God would not deceive us."<sup>1</sup>

Second, Philip de Bary (2002) understands Reid as a reliabilist. Understood in this way, Reid's position is that common sense is justified because it reliably leads to true belief. Common sense would be justified regardless of whether or why we accepted it, but there is this further question: Why should we believe that common sense is justified? It is justified *if* it will reliably lead us to the truth, but why believe that? The claim that our natural faculties are reliable is what DeBary calls the Truth Claim. We can assert the Truth Claim, but we cannot give a non-circular defense of it.

On both of these readings, the defense of common sense is an argument from explicit, metaphysical premises. We can then ask for a defense of the premises, but none can be given. I argue in what follows that both approaches misunderstand Reid's defense of common sense. Admittedly, Reid does think that common sense can be trusted and that it is given to us by a benevolent deity. Yet, I will argue, he does

1. P. 117. Another theological reading is given by Brookes who, in his introduction to Reid (1764), portrays Reid as a 'Providential Naturalist.' On Brookes' view, this appeal to the Almighty is secured by a kind of inference to the best explanation.

not think the former *because* of the latter; that is, he does not think that trust in common sense is something which we ought to deduce from the existence of God. Also admittedly, Reid thinks that common sense is a reliable guide to the truth. Yet he does not think that this is required as a premise to justify our trust in common sense; quite the contrary, he thinks we should trust common sense *even if* it were unreliable. In short, I argue that Reid's defense of common sense is not an argument from dogmatically held premises — not premises about God, about our own capacities, or about anything else.

The next two sections explore Reid's defense of common sense. I distinguish four arguments: (i) the argument from madness, (ii) the argument from natural faculties, (iii) the argument from impotence, and (iv) the argument from practical commitment. One may worry that there are indefensible premises lurking in these arguments. The subsequent section makes this worry precise by reconstructing the arguments in contemporary Bayesian terms. "Indefensible premises" can be formally characterized in the Bayesian framework, allowing us to see that some of Reid's arguments do not require them.

## 2. Natural faculties

Reid insists that belief in an external world is something he is led to as "the immediate effect of [his] constitution" (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 168).<sup>2</sup> He explains:

The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion. (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 168–9)

He trusts in his faculties, trusts that properly applied they will lead

2. In citing Reid, I reference the *Inquiry into the Human Mind* as (Inq) and the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* as (EIP).

to the truth. His appeals to "the Almighty"<sup>3</sup> may seem like Descartes' conclusion that we can trust our faculties because we are endowed with them by a benevolent God the creator. For Descartes, this trust is the conclusion of an argument meant to escape scepticism. Indeed, both Reid and Descartes hold that perception is a source of epistemic authority separate from reason. However, there are several important differences. For Reid, trust in our faculties comes at the beginning of enquiry. If we do not begin by placing some trust in our senses, he thinks, we will be impotent against the sceptic. Reid insists that reason and perception are both to be trusted and, moreover, should serve as correctives for one another.

Clearly with Descartes in mind, Reid says of the sceptic, "[T]hough in other respects he may be a very good man, as a man may be who believes he is made of glass; yet, surely he hath a soft place in his understanding, and hath been hurt by much thinking" (Inq, ch. 5 §7, p. 68). He says elsewhere that while the sceptic is in some ways like a lunatic, in other ways he does not differ from anyone else:

A remarkable deviation from [the principles of common sense], arising from a disorder in the constitution, is what we call *lunacy*; as when a man believes that he is made of glass. When a man suffers himself to be reasoned out of the principles of common sense, by metaphysical arguments, we may call this *metaphysical lunacy*; which differs from other species of the distemper in this, that it is not continued, but intermittent: it is apt to seize the patient in solitary and speculative moments; but, when he enters into society, Common Sense recovers her authority.<sup>4</sup> (Inq, ch. 7.4, p. 215–6)

3. (Inq, ch. 7.4, p. 215) Also "that almighty Author" (Inq, ch. 5 §7, p. 68), "the Author of my being" (ch. 6 §20, 170), *etc.*
4. Reid's example of a mad belief — believing that you are made of glass — is clearly meant to echo Descartes' *First Meditation* list of what madmen believe. Reid also makes the same point elsewhere, in the context of considering Cartesian doubt explicitly: "Can any man prove that his consciousness may

We may call this the *argument from madness*. Schematically, it proceeds in this way:

1. Believing *P* would be mad.
2. Therefore (one should believe)  $\neg P$ .

One may object: 'Madness' is familiar in a pejorative use, applied to views that we find uncongenial — views that we judge are not to be believed. As such, insofar as the argument is valid, the "one should believe" in the conclusion is more about social acceptability than about epistemic justification. It is more like "One should not chew with one's mouth open" than "One should not believe a contradiction." Even if we could make out the argument as one we would want to endorse, the sceptic is free to reject its conclusion. He need not pay any great price to deny inferences of this form. If the sceptic lives without incurring sanction from the community, then his is a benign form of madness and this argument would be insufficient to shake him from it.

There is another important strand of Reid's argument. He argues that by accepting the authority of reason, the sceptic accepts the authority of our natural faculties. If one is in the business of accepting the authority of natural faculties, and if one concedes that perception is one of the natural faculties, then it makes no sense to attempt radical doubt with respect to the perceivable world.

Reasoning in the Cartesian way allows us to formulate sceptical arguments that discredit sense perception, but reason is one of our faculties just as perception is. Reason and perception are both ways in which we naturally form beliefs. Why should we trust the faculty of reason if we refuse to trust the faculty of perception? Reason cannot prove the reliability of our senses, but neither can the senses observe the reliability of reason. If we are to trust either, we ought to trust both.

---

not deceive him? No man can: nor can we give a better reason for trusting it, than that every man, while his mind is sound, is determined, by the constitution of his nature, to give implicit belief to it, and to laugh at or pity the man who doubts its testimony" (Inq, ch. 1 §3, p. 17).

Reid uses the phrase 'common sense' to mean these faculties other than reason — our senses, our memory, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Reid writes that "original and natural judgements ... serve to direct us in common life, where our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark. They are a part of our constitution, and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them. They make up what is called the common sense of mankind ..." (Inq, ch. 7.4, p. 215). By reason, for example, we believe the consequent of a conditional, given the conditional and its antecedent. By common sense, we believe that there are men in the street when we see them emerge from a coach. Each warrants beliefs in a certain way, and neither can do the work of the other.

We can call this Reid's *argument from natural faculties*. It is sometimes reconstructed as a trilemma. We can trust either (a) all of our faculties, (b) none of our faculties, or (c) some but not all of our faculties. Consider these options in turn:

- a. If we trust all of our faculties, then we trust perception as providing prima facie warrant for believing in the things that we seem to perceive. So too for memory and things remembered. Radical scepticism is swept away.
- b. If we trust none of our faculties, then we have no warrant to believe anything. Just as much, we have no ground for doubting anything. So scepticism would be unmotivated and presumptive.
- c. If we trust some but not all of our faculties, then which ones should we trust? The sceptic rejects the senses because they can be fooled. Yet, as Reid notes,

[Our faculties] are all limited and imperfect ....

5. The fact that Reid thinks of reason as something distinct from common sense is suggested by his rhetoric throughout — e.g., that he aims to "reconcile reason to common sense" (Inq, ch. 7 §7, p. 69).

We are liable to error and wrong judgment in the use of them all; but as little in the informations of sense as in the deductions of reasoning. And the errors we fall into with regard to objects of sense are not corrected by reason, but by more accurate attention to the informations we may receive by our senses themselves. (EIP, *ess.* 2 ch. 22, p. 252)

All of our faculties are fallible. We make errors in reasoning, we misremember, and so on. Fallibility will not privilege reason. Absent some motivation for trusting reason that is not also a motivation for trusting in the senses, scepticism would be capricious.<sup>6</sup>

We have no reason to accept either (b) or (c); they would presume scepticism rather than establish it. The sceptic can reply that (a) is no better established. We might presume (a), of course, but — the sceptic may say — such presumption would be no less capricious than presuming (b) or (c).

We must admit to the sceptic that the argument from natural faculties does not yield an unconditional conclusion. It is not a direct proof and it lacks deductive certainty. Although Reid would not have put it this way, we can think of it as being like a relative consistency proof. Mathematicians can prove that the axiom of choice is consistent with Zermelo-Frankel (ZF) set theory, provided that ZF is consistent. They can also prove it consistent relative to some other set of axioms, but no proof shows that ZFC is consistent *tout court*. Most mathematicians do in fact believe that ZF is consistent, but there can be no direct proof of its consistency.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Reid argues that we should trust our senses

6. The argument from natural faculties is sometimes read as a *reductio* of the system of ideas, *e.g.*, by de Bary (2002). Cuneo (2004) maintains, as I do, that the argument applies more generally. The system of ideas does not enter as a premise of the argument. The conclusion is that we should place *prima facie* trust in our natural faculties, including perception. If the argument goes through, scepticism about the external world is defeated.
7. Any consistency proof must suppose some axioms and — by Gödel's incompleteness theorem — any sufficiently powerful, consistent system of axioms cannot be used to prove its own consistency.

if we trust our reason, but that does not show that we should trust our reason. Reid does in fact trust both, but admits that there is no proof that we should trust either. It is odd even to ask for a proof if we begin distrusting reason.

Reid escapes doubt, perhaps, but does so by trusting his faculties. Trust in a particular perception is not a dogmatically held premise. Common sense allows room for criticism. Our senses have a positive presumption, in that seeing is *grounds for* believing, but the presumption is defeasible.

Moreover, Reid does have more to say against the sceptic. In the next section, I concentrate on a rich section of the *Inquiry* in which Reid gives three further replies to the sceptic.

### 3. Three further replies to the sceptic

As we have seen, Reid's appeal to Common Sense — construed either as an argument from madness or as an argument from natural faculties — is not a direct answer to the determined sceptic. The determined sceptic might still reject reason and the senses both. Reid rarely addresses even the possibility of such an indomitable sceptic, but he explicitly concedes: "Perhaps the sceptic will agree to distrust reason, rather than give any credit to perception" (*Inq.* ch. 6 §20, p. 169). After acknowledging this possibility, Reid offers three reasons why he and "the sober part of mankind" would not follow the indomitable sceptic. I will first uncritically recount all three reasons and then consider each at greater length.

First, Reid insists that he is unable to disbelieve all that he perceives. Even the sceptic "may struggle hard to disbelieve the informations of his senses, as a man does to swim against a torrent: but, ah! it is in vain .... For, after all, when his strength is spent in the fruitless attempt, he will be carried down the torrent with the common herd of believers" (*Inq.* ch. 6 §20, p. 169). It is no use for the sceptic to insist we should doubt everything if it is impossible to do so.

Second, Reid suggests that actually doubting the world, were such a thing possible, would only lead to disaster. Suppose, Reid says, "I

resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such wise and rational actions, I am taken up and clapt in a madhouse" (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 170). There is a commitment in practice to the existence of an external world that contains many of the snares and pitfalls in which realists believe.

Third, Reid notes that scepticism about the world can only arise after many years of living in the world; the doubt is only possible after a long history of trust. He puts the point this way: "I gave implicit belief to the informations of Nature by my senses, for a considerable part of my life, before I had learned so much logic as to be able to start a doubt concerning them" (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 170). The track record of perception has been good, and without perception we would never have come so far as to be able to entertain the possibility of doubt. Before taking up the question of scepticism, we have already put trust in our faculties. It is too late to call our whole life into doubt. We are already trusting a great deal.

If the sceptic persists in doubting after such reasons, Reid thinks that there is no ultimate argument with which to force assent. Let's consider each of these arguments in turn.

In the first of the three further replies, Reid alleges that scepticism is in some sense impossible. This *argument from impotence* turns on a psychological claim. Suppose Reid is right that I am utterly incapable of denying the existence of an external world. This does not show that my belief in it is justified. Nevertheless, it does give me a reason to accept that belief.

Consider a parallel case: The fact that perpetual motion is impossible does not show that I *ought not* build a perpetual motion machine, in the sense that it would be wrong for me to do so. It seems plausible to say that neither right nor wrong attach to building such a machine. Nevertheless, this fact convinces me that I should not spend time attempting to invent perpetual motion machines, even though they would be very useful if only they were possible. The force of this 'ought' is both rhetorical and rational. If I come to be convinced that perpetual motion is impossible, I will also come to give up any

research into it. Not only will this reason convince me, it is reasonable for me to be convinced.

The existence of the external world may be thought of similarly. The fact that I cannot help but believe in an external world provides me with a reason not to attempt withholding assent. That said, it remains to be explained how I can know which beliefs I cannot help but accept. Some people claim to be able to withhold assent from the belief in an external world. Perhaps such gifted sceptics are different from the rest of us, but how could we know? Other people at other times have claimed that they could not but believe other, more controversial things. The devout interlocutor may say that it is impossible not to believe in God, the mathematically retrograde interlocutor may say that it is impossible to deny the truth of the parallel postulate, and so on. Not only would I insist that it is in my power to doubt *these* things, I would suggest that their assessment of their own abilities reflects only a lack of imagination or determination. It is open to the sceptic to give the same reply, insisting that Reid's belief that he cannot doubt the existence of the world reflects only his lack of imagination.

The argument from impotence fails, then, not for a lack of rhetorical or justificatory force. Instead, the problem is that it turns on a premise about some matter of fact. Worse, people are often mistaken about this kind of premise, as the examples of God and the parallel postulate show. Any interlocutor may respond to the argument from impotence merely by denying the premise, and after they have done so there is little more to be said.

Reid's second argument is that "it would not be prudent" to be a sceptic (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 169). We could read this merely as a fallacy old and notorious enough to have a Latin name, an *argumentum ad baculum*. With even a modicum of charity, however, it is a richer argument.

Peter Baumann (1999, 2004) interprets Reid's argument here as a bit of implicit decision theory. Epistemically, Baumann suggests, there is no fair way to decide whether we should embrace common sense or embrace scepticism. If there is an external world roughly like the one that we seem to be in, then we would be right to do the former but wrong to do the latter. Otherwise, we would be wrong to do the former

but right to do the latter. This symmetry means that neither common sense nor scepticism wins out, absent dogmatic question-begging.

Practically, the situation is different. Baumann constructs a payoff matrix for the choice between common sense and skepticism (see figure 1).

	<i>There is an external world</i>	<i>No external world</i>
<i>We follow common sense</i>	few broken noses	nothing really
<i>We become sceptics</i>	many broken noses	nothing really

FIGURE 1: Baumann's payoff matrix

As Baumann explains, "The outcomes of common sense are always at least as good as those of scepticism and they are better under at least one circumstance" (2004, p. 75). In the language of decision theory: Given that we prefer few broken noses to many broken noses, following common sense weakly dominates becoming a sceptic. There are worries about dominance reasoning in decision theory, but I do not think any of them are relevant here. Baumann is right to say that we ought to accept common sense *if this is the correct payoff matrix*.

Baumann suggests that the matrix is unproblematic. He writes that it involves only "conditional judgments [that] are not controversial between sceptics and non-sceptics" (2004, p. 75). I find this puzzling. The left-hand column of the payoff matrix seems uncontroversial, but I do not see how to arrive at values in the right-hand column. I am uncertain what the consequences of any of my actions would be if there were no external world. Without some specification of what there is instead, absent a world, there is no well defined utility for doing *anything*. Baumann's argument requires that 'nothing really' means we are indifferent between the two right-hand outcomes. Yet 'nothing really' is uncontroversial only if we treat it not as indifference but as complete inability to say how satisfactory or unsatisfactory the outcome would be.<sup>8</sup>

8. If we were to fill in the cells with numerical values for expected utility, Baumann's argument succeeds if we fill in the two right-hand cells with the

Furthermore, Baumann's interpretation fails to reflect Reid's actual argument. Reid does not argue that scepticism would lead to disaster conditional on there being a world. Quite the opposite. He considers the scenario in which there is no world and in which Nature has designs to deceive us. Even were that so, it would be imprudent to be a sceptic. Quoting Reid at greater length:

If Nature intended to deceive me, and impose upon me false appearances, and I by my great cunning and profound logic, have discovered the imposture; prudence would dictate me in this case ... to ... not call her an impostor to her face, lest she should be even with me in another way. For what do I gain by resenting this injury? You ought at least not believe what she says. This indeed seems reasonable, if she intends to impose upon me. But what is the consequence? I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way .... (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 169–170)

Reid is quite clear that scepticism would end in disaster, even conditional on the assumption that Nature deceives us.

Reid grants *arguendo* that common sense deceives us. Even given such deception, he argues, we should trust common sense. This passage does more than undercut Baumann's decision-theoretic reconstruction; it also undercuts readings of Reid as a reliabilist (*e.g.*, de Bary (2002)). Reid is so far from dogmatically asserting the Truth Claim that he says we would be justified in trusting common sense even if the Truth Claim were false. He is not recommending common sense just insofar as it will lead to the truth, but even on the assumption that it mires us in falsehood.

Baumann's version of the argument might be revised by changing the payoff matrix. Regardless, the sceptic has a ready answer to any decision theoretic argument: Methodological doubt is about belief but

same value. Yet there is no determinate value; it is rather as if we fill in both of them with a number divided by 0.

not about action. In the *First Meditation*, Descartes claims that he “cannot possibly go too far in [his] distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge” (AT 22).<sup>9</sup> Descartes’ method would have us navigate the world just as believers do even while we pretend to doubt. Reid anticipates such a reply, however, insisting that anyone who navigates the world just as believers do *is* a believer, regardless of their written protestations to the contrary. Reid puts the point this way: “If a man pretends to be a sceptic with regard to the informations of sense, and yet prudently keeps out of harm’s way as other men do, he must excuse my suspicion, that he either acts the hypocrite, or imposes upon himself” (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 170). It is easy to misread this passage. In contemporary English, “he imposes upon himself” is awkward at best. When I impose on my relatives, I make their lives difficult; so when the sceptic imposes on himself, one might think, he makes his own life difficult. On this reading, the argument does seem to be about consequences. Yet Reid uses ‘impose’ in an older sense to mean that the sceptic is *self-deceived*.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes makes a similar point when discussing how he should decide what his countrymen believe: “[I]n order to discover what opinions they really held I had to attend to what they did rather than what they said.... [M]any people do not know what they believe ...”(AT 23). We should judge people by their actions, Descartes says, because their actions most reveal what they believe.

Call this *the argument from practical commitment*: The ordinary practices of people who are able to navigate the world indicate that they know their way around in the world and that they believe that there

9. Citations to Descartes are from the translation by Cottingham et al. (1985); pagination follows their marginal numbering, the pagination of the Adam and Tannery edition (AT).

10. Jonathan Bennett treats the passage as I do in his “translation” of the *Inquiry*. Wolterstorff (2001) gives a similar reading of the argument but treats it merely as “an extra filip” that Reid adds to (what I’ve called) the argument from impotence.

is a world. This issues in a conditional conclusion. The sceptic may challenge the form of the inference, of course, by arguing that behaving much as common folk do does not entail believing as common folk do. Perhaps some sense could be made out of a sceptical lifestyle that does not presuppose an implicit belief in the external world.<sup>11</sup> If this cannot be done, then the sceptic must concede that her practice implies certain beliefs. She is left with a choice of abstaining from her practice or accepting the beliefs. The argument from practical commitment cannot force her choice, but it makes her pay a higher price if she remains a sceptic.

In the last of the three further replies, Reid observes that he gave his senses “implicit belief” before he developed enough sophistication to even entertain scepticism (Inq, ch. 6 §20, p. 170, quoted above). De Bary (2002) reads this as a track-record argument, of the sort discussed by Alston (1986). On de Bary’s reading, the argument infers from the faculties’ having led us to the truth in the past to the conclusion that they can be relied on to do so in the future. Such an argument is circular, because it relies on the natural faculties in collecting evidence that the natural faculties are reliable. The debate then becomes whether this circularity is fatal to the argument. I want to suggest a different reading of the passage. Reid observes that he lived as ordinary folk for many years and that scepticism could only be motivated in light of things he had learned in the course of ordinary life. He need not claim that his natural faculties have previously given him the *truth*. Rather, the argument relies on the mere fact that any would-be sceptic has — until now — relied on her natural faculties. The very observations which motivate scepticism come from trusting memory and the senses.

For instance, Descartes says that he has dreamt of such and so. The dream argument yields doubts about his present sensation because he accepts those memories. It fails as an argument for scepticism *tout*

11. Although even Descartes would not allow for such a possibility, the possibility of such a lifestyle is a central issue in evaluating Pyrronism; cf. Burnyeat and Frede (1997).

*court*. But without such an argument, we trust perception as *prima facie* warrant to believe in the things perceived.<sup>12</sup> In appealing to our past experience of dreams, Descartes implicitly asks us to trust our memory and senses; but our belief as to whether we are awake or dreaming will only be underdetermined if we give up trusting our senses once the rival hypotheses are spelled out.

This is a variant of the argument from natural faculties. In terms of the trilemma discussed above, the sceptic accepts (*a*) when collecting evidence but switches to (*c*) when evaluating the evidence. The would-be sceptic has, as a matter of fact, trusted natural faculties like reason, perception, and memory. Any justification for doubting them must rely on evidence obtained by trusting them. So the sceptic is in the unstable position of advocating scepticism and throwing out the motivation for scepticism. Perhaps there is no explicit contradiction in this, but it reveals that the price of consistent scepticism is rather high.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Reid's later work

The previous section considered primarily Reid's response to scepticism in the *Inquiry*. In the later *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, we see similar arguments, especially in the sections concerning first principles. Reid maintains that there are no direct arguments for first principles. Nevertheless, the principles can be defended. Reid explains: "[I]t is contradictory to the nature of first principles to admit of direct or *apodictical* proof; yet there are certain ways of reasoning even about them, by which those that are just and solid may be confirmed ..." (EIP, ess. 6 ch. 4, p. 463). His argumentative strategy is similar to what we have

12. One might instead think that for Descartes methodological scepticism is presumed. The sceptical scenarios serve as exercises to help us shake off our obdurate belief in an external world, rather than as arguments to convince us that we should shake it off. Regardless of what Descartes' intention might have been, Reid and many later commentators read the sceptical scenarios as arguments for scepticism.
13. Wolterstorff (2001) gives a reading of the argument somewhat between mine and de Bary's. He argues, in effect, that perception is presupposed by a track-record argument.

seen. He attempts to show that scepticism would have consequences, and demands that would-be sceptics face up to them. A first principle is connected to other principles, he insists: "It draws many others along with it in a chain that cannot be broken. He that takes it up must bear the burden of all its consequences; and if it is too heavy for him to bear; he must not pretend to take it up" (EIP, ess. 6 ch. 4, p. 464).

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the arguments in the *Inquiry* and those in the *Essays*. The latter are about first principles, principles that are explicitly propositional, "axioms" which enter into inference as self-evident premises (cf. EIP, ess. 6 ch. 4, p. 452). On the face of it, this is incompatible with my reading of the *Inquiry*. If Reid answers the sceptic by appealing to principles of common sense, and if these principles are premises, then Reid is relying on explicit premises rather than trusting in his faculties. It is possible that Reid's thinking on the issue shifted, but I want to argue instead that the defense of first principles — on a more careful reading — reflects the same argumentative strategies as the earlier *Inquiry*.

Reid suggests several ways in which first principles might be identified and defended. First among these is the "argument *ad hominem*" in which it is shown that "a first principle a man rejects, stands on the same footing with others which he admits" (EIP, ess. 6 ch. 4, p. 463). Importantly, Reid does not argue that a sceptic can be answered just by noting that scepticism is at odds with some first principle. Rather, a principle that the sceptic does accept (that reason is reliable, for example) "stands on the same footing" as other principles that the sceptic denies (that the senses are reliable). This is what I've called the argument from natural faculties. Reid's immediately goes on to give a nice summary of the argument:

[T]he faculties of consciousness, of memory, of external sense, and of reason, are all equally the gifts of Nature. No good reason can be assigned for receiving the testimony of one of them, which is not of equal force with regard to the others. The greatest Sceptics admit the testimony



of consciousness, and allow, that what it testifies is to be held as a first principle. If therefore they reject the immediate testimony of sense, or of memory, they are guilty of an inconsistency. (EIP, *ess.* 6 ch. 4, p. 463)

It is important to note that the sceptic is not urged to accept the platitude that the senses are reliable, but rather to admit the testimony of the senses. What our natural faculties testify is to be believed as a first principle, which is just to say that the faculties are to be trusted.

Reid also offers, in passing, a version of the argument from practical commitment. He writes, “Our ordinary conduct in life is built upon first principles ... and every motive to action supposes some belief” (EIP, *ess.* 6 ch. 4, p. 464). To say that beliefs are implicit in our actions cannot be an appeal to explicit premises. Rather, our practice provides an indirect argument for ways of arriving at explicit beliefs.

There is certainly more to be written about the relation between Reid’s early and later works. I only mean to have argued that the interpretation of *Inquiry* §22 that I defended above can be maintained when considering the later *Essay* 6.

### 5. Tom Reid meets Tom Bayes

We have seen so far that Reid *does* offer arguments as to why we should trust common sense: I have called these the argument from madness, the argument from natural faculties, the argument from impotence, and the argument from practical commitment. Not all of these are good arguments, but some of them are. They give us some reason to put *prima facie* trust in our reason, perception, and memory.

As Greco (2004) argues, Reid’s replies to the sceptic rely on a theory of evidence. Roughly, the standard of evidence is this: Beliefs formed on the basis of natural faculties such as reason, perception, memory, and so on should be given a positive presumption of truth. Indeed, this is already our standard of evidence; we are committed to counting perception and memory as sources of evidence. Reid’s arguments will not be an irrefragable answer to a determined sceptic who is willing and able to consistently renounce these commitments. Reid puts the point this way:

### *Reid’s Defense of Common Sense*

If a sceptic should build his scepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to withhold assent until it be proved that they are not; it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this stronghold, and he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism. (EIP, *ess.* 6 ch. 5.7, p. 480)

Although Reid sometimes says that scepticism is *impossible*, that is not the point here. Scepticism (according to Reid) is a natural consequence of the project of doubting everything, whether or not we are constitutionally capable of carrying out that project. If we could execute such a project, then we would refuse to believe anything — but the project presumes an unreasonable standard of evidence.

When we reason to a conclusion that we have no other grounds to reject, we accept the argument. When we see a cat sitting on a table and have no reason to suspect dreams or animatronics, we accept that there is a cat. If indeed these are our natural faculties, this is an obvious standard. We *trust* our faculties. How could we do otherwise? How else would we form beliefs other than the ways in which we form beliefs?

Rather than being merely psychological or practical, this is fundamentally rational. It involves a claim about how one should responsibly apportion belief and doubt; that is to say, it involves a theory of evidence. As Reid admits, it is always possible for a sceptic to insist on the strictest standard. In such a case, it will not be possible to dislodge the sceptic with rational arguments alone: What counts as reasonable is just one of the things in dispute! By appealing to the sceptic’s own commitments, both practical and cognitive, we can try to show that the sceptic ought not accept such a strict standard. The commitments serve as an *arational* starting point, but — given these commitments — the force of the argument is rational. It might be nice to make a stronger reply than this, since the sceptic is always free to struggle in an effort to throw off these prior commitments. What would a stronger reply be like? We could argue that the sceptic’s struggle is doomed to failure, but this is a claim about the sceptic’s incapacities. This claim

itself relies on a matter of fact about which it is possible to be sceptical. We could instead argue that the sceptic should in some binding sense accept these commitments, but that proof will itself suppose a standard of proof. Not only are Reid's arguments workable tools, then, but we would be hard-pressed to find better ones.

For all that, one might worry that these arational starting points are just dogmas in fancy dress. Yet they escape the worry, voiced by Daniels, that common sense must bottom out in theism. They also escape de Bary's worry that we must explicitly know a Truth Claim about how our natural faculties will track the truth. They rely just on a standard of evidence that is woven into our cognitive and practical lives.<sup>14</sup> Yet one may worry that there is some illicit premise in these arguments. In the remainder of the paper, I want to argue against this possibility by considering parallel arguments that can be made within Bayesian epistemology.

My approach here becomes somewhat ahistorical. Although Reid was a contemporary of Thomas Bayes and was probably aware of Bayes' work on probability, I do not know of any place in the Reid corpus where it is explicitly discussed. Reid mentions Bayes once, but in the context of natural theology. In the published edition of Reid's 1780 lectures on natural theology, there is a reference to *Divine Benevolence*, a pamphlet by "Boyce" (Duncan 1981, p. 98). Elmer Duncan (personal communication) informs me that this was mistranscribed and that the original refers to Bayes.

Regardless, I want to consider what Earman (1992) has called *Modern Bayesianism*.<sup>15</sup> It consists of the following claims:

1. An agent's beliefs can be represented as assignments of degrees of belief to propositions or

14. Like Van Cleve (1986), I understand Reid to be providing principles of *evidence* rather than principles of *truth*.

15. Jeffrey (2004, p. xi) provides a concise summary of the position, which he calls "basic probability theory from a thoroughly 'subjective' point of view." Reid surely did not have anything like it in mind; on the connection between Bayes' original work and recent Bayesianism, see Earman (1992).

### Reid's Defense of Common Sense

sentences, where degrees of belief are real numbers. As a matter of notation, we denote an agent's degree of belief in  $P$  as  $\Pr(P)$ .

2. An agent's degrees of belief should accord with axioms of the probability calculus. For example,  $\Pr(P) + \Pr(\neg P) = 1$ .
3. After an agent learns something, the agent's degrees of belief should change so that the new degrees of belief (the posterior probabilities) equal the prior probabilities conditional on the evidence. When the agent learns  $E$ ,  $\Pr_{\text{posterior}}(P) = \Pr_{\text{prior}}(P|E)$  for all  $P$ . This is called "conditionalizing on  $E$ ."

The formula known as Bayes' rule follows from this constraint, along with the theorem that

$$\Pr(P|E) = \frac{\Pr(E|P)\Pr(P)}{\Pr(E)}$$

Within this framework, there is no objective constraint on agents' prior degrees of belief. Nevertheless, convergence theorems are taken to show that differences "wash out" in the limit of enquiry. Given a sufficient number of sunrises, for example, any two agents will eventually agree that the sun will rise tomorrow. There is still a sense in which their agreement depends on their prior degrees of belief. Suppose that two specific agents agree after one thousand sunrises. If a third agent had assigned a lower prior to the sun rising tomorrow, then he would not agree with them yet. He would require more sunrises in order to be convinced — perhaps one thousand more, perhaps one million. If his priors are sufficiently eccentric, the time-to-agreement can be arbitrarily long.<sup>16</sup>

There is something wrong with a belief if it depends merely on prior probabilities, *i.e.*, if arbitrary agents would not agree on it in

16. Earman (1992) provides a useful, critical summary of convergence theorems.

the arbitrarily long run. So we have a precise way of saying, within the Bayesian framework, whether an argument relies on dogmatic premises: It does so if it requires specifying a prior probability of 0 or 1 for a contingent proposition, or if it requires specifying priors in a way that will not be washed out by convergence. Within the Bayesian framework, our question of whether Reid's arguments depend on dogmatic premises takes on this form: Do Reid's anti-sceptical arguments depend on prior probabilities in such a way? We need to consider each in turn, but the short answer is that some of them do and some of them do not.

First, consider the argument from madness. If we suppose that  $P$  is a claim of common sense, then the argument is that  $\neg P$  is *mad* — it is so outré that a rational agent would never adopt it. Within the Bayesian framework, the only way to make a belief so taboo is to assign it a prior probability of 0. Since  $\Pr(\neg P) = 0$ ,  $\Pr(\neg P|E) = 0$  for all possible evidence  $E$ . One could never rationally come to assign a higher probability to  $\neg P$ . This relies entirely on the value of the prior  $\Pr(\neg P)$ . If an agent were to assign *any* non-extreme degree of belief to the claim of common sense, then there might be evidence that would lead to an upward or downward revision of that degree of belief.

Second, consider the argument from impotence. Suppose that an agent is unable to resist a belief in  $P$ . If the agent assigns a prior probability between 0 and 1 and yet is still utterly incapable of shaking the belief regardless of the evidence, then the incapacity is irrational. This would fail to capture Reid's argument. Reid thinks that common sense cannot be established by reason but does not think that it overtly contradicts reason; it is arational but not irrational.

So suppose instead the incapacity is rational. Within the Bayesian framework, the prior probability of  $P$  must be 1. Again, the argument depends entirely on this prior probability.

Third, consider the argument from practical commitment. We might naïvely reconstruct the argument in this way:

1.  $\Pr(\text{I believe that } P | \text{I act in a certain way})$  is high.
2. I act in that way.

3. Therefore,  $\Pr(\text{I believe that } P)$  is high.

Construed in this way, the argument is a disaster. An agent who accepts the argument is not thereby led to a high degree of belief in  $P$ . Rather, the agent has a high degree of belief in 'I believe that  $P$ '. This yields a belief in  $P$  only if the agent has a high degree of belief in the further premise  $\Pr(P | \text{I believe that } P)$ . There is no requirement that Bayesian agents accept premises of this kind.<sup>17</sup>

This formulation conditionalizes on 'I act in that way' and thus relies on a rational constraint to establish the reliability of the senses. Yet, according to Reid, reason cannot justify perception. So this formulation fails to capture what Reid had in mind. It over-intellectualizes the appeal to practice.

Reid's argument is not offered as a straightforward argument that  $P$ . Rather, it is offered as a tool for dislodging ersatz sceptics from their feigned scepticism. It makes use of a connection between belief and action. This connection is not merely a matter of prior probabilities in the Bayesian framework but instead is built into the framework itself.

Take a step back and ask what, for the Bayesian, connects practice to belief. Rational constraints on degrees of belief are often justified by Dutch Book arguments. If an agent violates constraints of rationality — for instance by assigning  $\Pr(P) + \Pr(\neg P) > 1$  — then it is possible to construct a Dutch Book: a series of bets that the agent would judge to be fair but that would result in the agent's losing money regardless of what the world is like. Such arguments make sense only if we think that an agent's behavior will reflect their degrees of belief. More precisely, what count as an agent's degrees of belief are determined by the way that the agent would make risky decisions.<sup>18</sup>

The argument from practical commitment can be understood in this way: The sceptic pretends to assign a low value to  $\Pr(P)$ . Yet when

17. One might try to argue for such a requirement. The premise  $\Pr(P | \Pr(P) = 1) = 1$  is an instance of the Reflection Principle; but the Reflection Principle is controversial. Failure to assign a high degree of belief to this premise would lead to Moore's paradox; but Moore's paradox is not a logical contradiction. In any case, the argument so construed is not Reid's argument.
18. Although such discussions typically resolve around betting behavior, an agent has degrees of belief even if they refuse to take overt bets.

performing actions to which  $P$  is relevant, the agent acts as if  $P$ . The agent is thus self-deceived in denying the degrees of belief that are apparent from his actions.

Fourth, consider the argument from natural faculties. Providing a Bayesian explication of the argument from practice required asking how practice is reflected implicitly in the Bayesian framework. Similarly, explicating the argument from natural faculties requires asking how perception, memory, and testimony are construed in the framework.

When an agent observes  $E$ , she conditionalizes and sets  $\Pr(P)$  to the prior value of  $\Pr(P|E)$ . The new value for  $\Pr(E)$  is directly set at 1. The new value of  $\Pr(E)$  is not determined by any rational constraint.  $E$ 's counting as evidence is a necessary precondition for conditionalizing. As Reid might say, the Bayesian agent trusts perception.

One might object that this is too quick. The Bayesian framework presupposes that there are exogenous changes of belief (ones not prompted by conditionalization). Calling some propositions 'evidence' is suggestive, but the account gives no guidance as to which propositions those ought to be. These might be deliverances of natural faculties, but they might be any other propositions whatsoever.

It seems to me that this just underscores the parallel with Reid. As Reid would have it, rationality must be supplemented with trust in our senses. There is no ultimate principle that can stop us from becoming sceptics and refusing to accept the evidence of our senses. It is no accident, however, that typical Bayesian models describe agents who conditionalize on propositions that we would count as evidence. We do trust our natural faculties, and we build this into the models.

With respect to perception, the Bayesian reconstruction of Reid's argument from natural faculties does not depend on prior probabilities. A fortiori, it does not rely on degrees of belief in the existence of God or in the reliability of our natural faculties. Yet Reid aims to defend more than just perception with the argument. Consider two further faculties.

First, memory. It appears in the Bayesian framework only implicitly. Bayesian agents may change their degrees of belief in some

$P$  by conditionalizing on some evidence  $E$  or if  $P$  is itself evidence. Otherwise, they are presumed to maintain a constant  $\Pr(P)$ . That is, Bayesian agents remember their degrees of belief. A faculty of memory is thus a presumption of the Bayesian framework. It is crucial to note that this is not a *belief* presumed by Bayesian agents themselves. They do not observe "I seem to remember that  $P$ " and conditionalize with  $\Pr(P|I \text{ seem to remember that } P)$ . Rather, Bayesian agents are constituted so as to accurately remember their degrees of belief. This, like perception, is distinct from reason. Bayesian agents with no memory would exogenously change all their beliefs from moment to moment. This would be logically consistent, but nonetheless epistemically bankrupt. In Reid's idiom, memory is a crucial natural faculty.

Unfortunately, this captures only declarative memory. Reid does not treat memory as primary declarative. *Remembering that  $P$*  is, for Reid, merely *knowing that  $P$* . Genuine memory, as Reid thinks of it, is episodic. I remember a conference in Waco because I can recall having been there and not merely because I know facts about it. (Copenhaver (2006) provides further discussion of Reid on this point.) I do not see any straightforward way to represent episodic memory in the Bayesian framework.

Second, testimony. Reid thinks that the argument from natural faculties justifies trust in the testimony of others. Not so for the Bayesian. It is natural to treat testimony, as Earman (2000) does, as evidence that *somebody  $A$  says  $E$* . The resulting degree of belief in  $E$  is the posterior  $\Pr(E)$ , which is equal to the prior  $\Pr(E|A \text{ says } E)$ . This conditional probability need not be high, so — for the Bayesian — a priori trust in testimony requires specific values for prior probabilities; that is, it requires unjustified premises.

Note that these caveats about memory and testimony apply only to the argument from natural faculties, not to the argument from practical commitment.

In this section, I have treated Bayesianism as including a commitment to conditionalization. Although defenses of conditionalization are problematic, it is often presumed in applications of Bayesian

confirmation theory. Moreover, as Earman puts it, “Bayesianism without a rule of conditionalization is hamstrung ...” (1992, p. 161). Without it, Bayesianism has no account of inference — the change of belief over time. I have been considering strict conditionalization (in which evidence is assigned probability 1) but nothing depends on this. The points I have made about Reid’s argument apply given the general probability kinematics (so-called Jeffrey conditionalization, in which evidence is given a probability between 0 and 1). In fact, this accords better with Reid’s insistence that our beliefs are defeasible; if I see a cat, then my degree of belief that there is a cat becomes rather high, but it does not become an unassailable probability 1.<sup>19</sup>

### 6. Conclusion

As we have seen, Reid does give arguments in defense of common sense. Admittedly, they are not answers to the determined global sceptic. They are meant to dislodge the partial sceptics (who doubt their senses but accept reason, for example) or the would-be sceptics (who think for some reason that perhaps they ought to be sceptics). Still, they do not rely on some indefensible premise like the existence of God or the reliability of our natural faculties. I have tried to make this explicit by considering Bayesian analogues of Reid’s arguments. The arguments— some of them, anyway — do not rely on agents’ prior probability assignments; which is to say that they do not rely on agents having prior beliefs of any specified kind.<sup>20</sup>

19. In so far as it can be rendered in the Bayesian framework, Reid’s epistemology is a variety of what Jeffrey (2004) calls “softcore empiricism”.

20. Parts of this paper are descended from material in Magnus (2003) and (2004) and an earlier draft was presented at the “Hume and his Critics” conference in April 2005. I would like to thank Stephen Boulter, Becko Copenhaver, Elmer Duncan, Gordon Graham, Ryan Nichols, Susan Purviance, and Ken Westphal for helpful discussion at the conference; Todd Buras and Margaret Tate at Baylor University for organizing the conference; and anonymous referees for helpful comments on the penultimate draft.

### References

- William P. Alston (1986). “Epistemic circularity”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 47(1): 1–30.
- Peter Baumann (1999). “The Scottish pragmatist?” *Reid Studies*, 2(2): 47–57.
- Peter Baumann (2004). “On the subtleties of Reidian pragmatism: A reply to Magnus”. *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 2(1): 73–77.
- Jonathan F. Bennett. Some texts from early modern philosophy. <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/>.
- Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, editors (1997). *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Hackett, Indianapolis.
- Rebecca Copenhaver (2006). “Thomas Reid’s theory of memory”. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 23(2): 171–89.
- Terence Cuneo (2004). “Critical notice: Philip de Bary’s *Thomas Reid and Skepticism: His Reliabilist Response*”. *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 2(2): 194–199.
- Norman Daniels, editor (1974). *Thomas Reid’s Inquiry*. Burt Franklin & Co, New York.
- Philip de Bary (2002). *Thomas Reid and scepticism: his reliabilist response*. Routledge, London, 2002.
- René Descartes (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Cambridge University Press. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch.
- Elmer H. Duncan, editor (1981). *Thomas Reid’s Lectures on Natural Theology (1780)*. University Press of America, Washington, DC.
- John Earman (1992). *Bayes or Bust?* MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- John Earman (2000). *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*. Oxford University Press.
- John Greco (2004). “Reid’s reply to the sceptic”. In Terence Cuneo and René Van Woudenberg, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, 134–155. Cambridge University Press.
- Richard Jeffrey (2004). *Subjective Probability: The Real Thing*. Cambridge University Press.

- P.D. Magnus (2003). *Underdetermination and the Claims of Science*. PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego.
- P.D. Magnus (2004). "Reid's dilemma and the uses of pragmatism". *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 2(1): 69–72.
- Thomas Reid (1764). *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, edited by Derek R. Brookes. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1997.
- Thomas Reid (1785). *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, edited by Derek R. Brookes. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 2002.
- James van Cleve (1986). "Reid on the first principles of contingent truths". *Reid Studies*, 3(1): 3–29.
- Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001). *Thomas Reid and the story of epistemology*. Cambridge University Press.