

## THE FAILURE OF THOMAS REID'S ATTACK ON DAVID HUME

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Thomas Reid launched a scathing attack on David Hume in his first book: *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* published in 1764. But this was ineffective and his arguments failed to persuade Hume to rethink his philosophy. Till the end of his life Hume remained unconvinced by Reid's criticisms of him.

In this paper I examine: (1) what Hume thought of Reid's book, (2) why Hume was unshaken by Reid's arguments against him, (3) whether the arguments of Reid's later book published after Hume died in 1776 were any stronger, and (4) why Reid failed to confront Hume with better arguments before 1776.

We are now better able to reconstruct Hume's reaction to Reid's book following the recent discovery of Hume's letter to Dr Hugh Blair,<sup>1</sup> which criticized an early draft of part of Reid's *Inquiry*. A full chronology of the construction of the *Inquiry*, and of Hume's responses to it, may now be given:

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| 1758-62        | Various discourses read by Reid at the Aberdeen Philosophical Society ('The Wise Club') on the subject matter which eventually became the <i>Inquiry</i> . |
| Summer 1762    | Draft completed of chapters two to five (on smelling, tasting, hearing and touch) and sent by Blair to Hume.   |
| 4th July 1762  | Hume's letter to Blair. <sup>2</sup>   |
| By end of 1762 | 'Abstract' of the <i>Inquiry</i> sent to Blair, who  |

<sup>1</sup> Paul B. Wood, 'David Hume on Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense: A New Letter to Hugh Blair from July 1762*'. *Mind*, 95 (1986) 411-16.

<sup>2</sup> A. U. L. MS 2814/1/39; as published by P. B. Wood in op. cit., pp. 415-6.

	passed it on to Hume. <sup>3</sup>
Early 1763	Chapter six of 'Of Sight' sent to Blair and passed on to Hume. <sup>4</sup>
25th Feb. 1763	Hume's letter to Reid. <sup>5</sup>
18th Mar. 1763	Reid's reply to Hume. <sup>6</sup>
1763-64	The draft revised and chapter one (Introduction) and chapter seven (Conclusion) added before publication early in 1764. Apparently 'significant revisions' were made to the discourses which became the Introduction and chapter six (now 'Of Seeing') of the <i>Inquiry</i> , as compared with other discourses comprising it. <sup>7</sup>

Blair was first sent a draft of chapters one to four of what became Reid's *Inquiry* so that he could give his opinion as to its suitability for publication. Blair in turn sent this draft to Hume for his comments. As a result, Hume responded with this newly discovered letter to Blair who passed it on to Reid. On reading this, Reid concluded that Hume had not followed the drift of his arguments. He therefore wrote an 'Abstract' of the *Inquiry* in which he attempted to counter some of Hume's criticisms.

The received opinion hitherto was that on reading a draft of the *Inquiry* Hume wrote a polite letter to Reid stating with veiled irony and sarcasm that he would not be 'mortified' if Reid had 'been able to clear up these abstruse and important subjects' and revealed his errors.<sup>8</sup> However, the new letter shows that Hume had already been overly dismissive of Reid's efforts, and that Blair had pointed this out to him. Hume had no need to be ironical or sarcastic.

<sup>3</sup> Reid's 'Abstract' as published by David Fate Norton in *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations* ed. by Barker and Beauchamp (Philosophical Monographs, Philadelphia, 1976) pp. 128-30.

<sup>4</sup> That Hume received this 'fifth witness' mentioned in the 'Abstract' is clear from his letter to Reid in *The Works of Thomas Reid D.D.* (ed. Sir W. Hamilton - Edinburgh 1895 - also George Ohms 1983) p. 8a. Also in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. by J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932) Vol. I p. 375:

There are some objections which I would willingly propose to the chapter, 'Of Sight,' did I not suspect that they proceed from my not sufficiently understanding it; and I am the more confirmed in this suspicion, as Dr Blair tells me that the former objections I made had been derived chiefly from that cause.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 7b-8a. Also in Greig, op. cit., pp. 375-6.

<sup>6</sup> Reid's letter to Hume in Hamilton op. cit., pp. 91a-92b.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. K. Holcomb 'Reid in the Philosophical Society' *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, ed. M. Dalgarno and E. Matthews (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989) p. 417.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, op. cit., p. 8a. Greig, op. cit., pp. 375-6.

Reid's 'Abstract' of what became the *Inquiry* suggests that he revised his text before its publication in 1764. Hume did not respond till 1775, the year before his death. He asked his publisher, William Strahan, to prefix an Advertisement to his *Enquiries* in which he pointed out that his critics, including Reid, had directed 'all their batteries' against his early work *A Treatise of Human Nature*. He considered the *Enquiries* to be his mature work which alone contained 'his philosophical sentiments and principles'. He told Strahan that the Advertisement was 'a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie'.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently it wasn't Reid's book which prompted this response from Hume; it was the reception of James Beattie's *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770). The lionizing of Beattie by the London literati from 1772 onwards galvanized Hume into replying to his critics. He was understandably galled that Dr Johnson and Edmund Burke, for instance, had proclaimed Beattie's book to be 'true philosophy'. He is reported to have said: 'Truth! there is no truth in it; it is a horrible large lie in octavo.'<sup>10</sup>

Mossner says that Hume's response in placing the Advertisement was 'the petulant retort of an aging man, tired of controversy and sick of body'.<sup>11</sup> But perhaps Hume not only meant what he said but also had good reason for saying it.

In his letter to Blair, Hume made four remarks concerning Reid's draft:

First As far as I can judge, there seems to be some Defect in Method; at least, I do not find the Subject open up gradually, and one part throwing light on another: The Author digresses frequently: For instance, under the Article of Smelling, he gives you a Glimpse of all the Depths of his Philosophy. I own, however, that this Censure of mine is premature, on account of my not having seen the whole.

Secondly. The Author supposes, that the Vulgar do not believe the sensible Qualities of Heat, Smell, Sound, & probably Colour to be really in the Bodies, but only their Causes or something capable of producing them in the Mind. But this is imagining the Vulgar to be Philosophers & Corpuscularians from their Infancy. . . .

<sup>9</sup> Letter to William Strahan in Greig, *op. cit.*, Vol. II p. 301, dated 26th October 1775 p. 301. Hume died on 25th August 1776. The Advertisement appears on page two of Hume's *Enquiries*, ed. by Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (Oxford, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford, 1980) p. 579 and p. 581.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 582.

Thirdly. It surprizd me to find the Author affirm, that our Idea of Extension is nothing like the Objects of Touch. He certainly knows, that People born blind have very compleat Ideas of Extension; & some of them have even been great Geometers. Touch alone gives us an Idea of three dimensions.

Fourthly. If I comprehend the Author's Doctrine, which, I own, I can hitherto do but imperfectly, it leads us back to innate Ideas. This I do not advance as an Objection: For nothing ought ever to be supposed finally decided in Philosophy, so as not to admit of a new Scrutiny; but only that, I think, the Author affirms I had been hasty, & not supported by any Colour of Argument when I affirm, that all our Ideas are copy'd from Impressions. I have endeavourd to build that Principle on two Arguments. The first is desiring any one to make a particular Detail of all his Ideas, where he would always find that every Idea had a correspondent & preceding Impression. If no exception can ever be found, the Principle must remain incontestible. The second is, that if you exclude any particular Impression, as Colours to the blind, Sound to the Deaf, you also exclude the Ideas.<sup>12</sup>

In his 'Abstract', Reid addressed himself mainly to Hume's third and fourth remarks. He wanted to convince Hume that our ideas cannot be copied from any corresponding impressions. He argued at length that when we attend to our sensations we find that they in no way resemble our ideas of hardness, roughness, figure, extension and motion.<sup>13</sup> But to back up this reasoning he merely offered an *experimentum crucis*<sup>14</sup> which is basically the converse of Hume's assertion. Hume stated that his principle depends on there being no exception to the rule that every idea has a corresponding impression. Reid's response was that if any ideas can be shown to resemble corresponding sensations then he 'must subscribe to Mr. Hume's creed'. But on attending to his sensations he found them to be unlike 'sensible qualities'.<sup>15</sup> This amounts to a tit-for-tat dispute – 'prove me wrong', 'no, you prove me wrong' – wherein there are no agreed factors by which to settle it.

The misunderstanding between them was compounded by their use of different terms to refer to the same phenomena in

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<sup>12</sup> Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 415–6.

<sup>13</sup> Norton, 'Abstract', *op. cit.*, p. 128b.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 129b. See also Reid's *Inquiry* in Hamilton, *The Works of Thomas Reid*, p. 128a.

<sup>15</sup> 'Abstract', *op. cit.*, p. 129a.

perception. Reid's aversion to 'the theory of ideas' led him to avoid the use of the term 'idea'. Also, he did not make it clear how his term 'sensation' relates to and differs from Hume's use of the term 'impression'.

Reid was no more successful in dealing with the other remarks made by Hume. He failed to counter decisively the accusation that he was harking back to 'innate ideas'. His response to this point was only to say: 'In vision it is very difficult to trace the boundary between what the eye presents to us by our constitution, and what we learn from custom and habit to discern by it.'<sup>16</sup>

In his works, Reid referred consistently to the 'constitution of the mind' since he was justifiably unclear as to the extent to which that constitution is innate. However, it is clear, even in the *Inquiry*, that Reid thought we are only innately predisposed in having the ability to arrive at ideas or conceptions of things. We are not born with the 'notions of body and its qualities'. But the faculties by which we are predisposed to arrive at these notions 'unfold themselves by degrees'.<sup>17</sup>

As regards Hume's second remark, Reid makes no direct mention of this in the 'Abstract'. But he appears to have revised his text to take account of this criticism. Thus, in the *Inquiry* he says, for example:

The vulgar are commonly charged by philosophers, with the absurdity of imagining the smell in the rose to be something like to the sensation of smelling: but, I think, unjustly; for they neither give the same epithets to both, nor do they reason in the same manner from them.<sup>18</sup>

Reid dealt with Hume's first remark at the end of his 'Abstract'. Hume objected to the way the argument of the *Inquiry* is awkwardly expressed under the headings of the five senses. Reid defended his 'method' in saying: 'It is unavoidable in this method to treat of things under one sense which belong equally to another'. And he said he did not think it essential 'to make ostentation' of the method employed in a philosophical work.<sup>19</sup>

Reid's attempt in the 'Abstract' to counter Hume's criticisms was inadequate. It was not an answer expressed in Hume's own terms.

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<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., p. 130a.

<sup>17</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, ch. V sect. VII op. cit., p. 130b.

<sup>18</sup> *Inquiry* ch. II sect. IX Hamilton p. 114a.

<sup>19</sup> Norton, 'Abstract', op. cit., p. 130b.

To appreciate what Reid is saying in it, a prior understanding is required of what he is arguing for and against. Without that prior understanding, it is hardly surprising that Hume failed to see anything challenging in it.

Reid's arguments in the published *Inquiry* were scarcely any better. They lacked the strength and clarity to challenge Hume's view. Most of his attacks on Hume were of a generalized nature. There is a lack of detailed criticism in the letter of what Hume said in his works. Reid attacked, for example, Hume's use of the notions of 'impression' and 'idea' in describing what really happens in perception. But there are no references made to specific passages in Hume's books.<sup>20</sup> Reid also referred to the *Treatise* on ten occasions,<sup>21</sup> and made no reference to Hume's later work at all. He also persistently calls Hume 'the author of the "Treatise of Human Nature"'.<sup>22</sup> In Beattie's *Essay on Truth* there are innumerable references to the *Treatise* but only two references to Hume's later philosophical essays and these merely deal with questions of religion rather than philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Hume was led, with some justice, to believe that both Reid and Beattie were paying too much attention to the *Treatise*. He presumably believed his *Enquiries* stated his views more subtly and succinctly. In his later work he certainly relied less on his attempts to reduce all ideas to the corresponding impressions that allegedly underline them. And he also gave an account of perception which does not appear in the *Treatise* and which Reid eventually dealt with in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* (see below).

In the *Inquiry*, just as in his 'Abstract', Reid did not drive home the point that he differed from Hume in his use of the term 'impression'. Hume used the term extensively to refer to everything that we immediately experience. But Reid narrowed its use to that of being a 'material impression' on the sense organs.<sup>24</sup> But he didn't

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, *Inquiry*, ch. II sect. VI Hamilton op. cit., p. 109a; ch. V sect. VII Hamilton op. cit., p. 129a-b.

<sup>21</sup> *Inquiry* ch. I sect. V p. 102a (twice); p. 102b; sect. VI p. 103a; sect. VII p. 103b; ch. II sect. VI p. 108a; p. 109a; p. 110a; ch. VI p. 210b.

<sup>22</sup> For example, *Inquiry*, ch. I sect. V p. 102a, 102b; ch. II sect. VI p. 110a; ch. VI p. 210b.

<sup>23</sup> In the 8th edition of Beattie's book (London, 1807), the *Treatise* is mentioned or quoted on the following pages: 6, 11, 47, 61, 64, 68, 110-14, 169-73, 172-3, 176, 208-12, 272-300. On p. 90 of the same book, Hume's 'Essay on Miracles' is mentioned, and on pp. 76-79, Hume's 'Essay on a Particular Providence and a Future State'.

<sup>24</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, ch. VI sect. VIII Hamilton op. cit., p. 146a. See also *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* Essay II ch. II Hamilton, op. cit., p. 247a onwards.

make clear how this change of use differs from Hume's and how it improves on the latter's use.

Reid thus failed to attack Hume's notions at the metaphysical level where Hume used them. (Indeed, he admitted in his letter to Hume that he would always avow himself Hume's 'disciple in metaphysics'.<sup>25</sup>) He resorted to a psychological analysis of perception in the *Inquiry*, (especially in chapter six 'Of Seeing') and did nothing to show why such an analysis threatened the cogency of Hume's arguments at the level at which they were conducted. For Hume had already dissociated himself in the *Treatise of Human Nature* from any psychological study of perception.<sup>26</sup>

This lack of incisiveness in criticizing Hume contrasts markedly with Reid's *Intellectual Powers* in which there are detailed criticisms of particular passages of Hume's writings. Perhaps if these had been brought to Hume's attention then he would have had more cause to think again.

For example, in the *Intellectual Powers* there is an attack on the imagist view expressed in the *Enquiries* where Hume said that nothing is ever 'present to the mind but an image of perception'.<sup>27</sup> Reid commented witheringly that 'Mr Hume surely did not seriously believe that an image of sound is let in by the ear, an image of smell by the nose, an image of hardness and softness, of solidity and resistance, by the touch'.<sup>28</sup>

Hume argued that the real table is not present to our minds but only an image of it. Reid undermined this argument by distinguishing between the real and the apparent magnitude of the table. Apparent magnitude concerns the measurement of an object relative to the eye perceiving it. Reid informs us that the apparent magnitude of the sun's diameter is about thirty-one minutes of a degree, but its real magnitude is several times the diameter of the Earth.<sup>29</sup> Thus, everything before us changes in respect of its apparent magnitude but not of its real magnitude.

He accused Hume of drawing a false conclusion from correct premisses:

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<sup>25</sup> 'Letter to David Hume' in Hamilton, op. cit., p. 91b.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739 - ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Niddich - Oxford, 1978) Book I part I section II p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Hume, *Enquiries* section XII part I para. 118 p. 152.

<sup>28</sup> Reid, *Intellectual Powers* Essay II ch. XIV Hamilton, op. cit., p. 303a.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303b.

- a. The table seems to diminish as we move away from it – apparent magnitude.
- b. But the real table does not alter – real magnitude.
- c. Therefore, it is not the real table we see.

Hume was mistaken in confounding apparent and real magnitude. We always see the real table because we learn to relate the apparent magnitude of things to their real magnitude.

We learn by experience to judge of the distance of a body from the eye within certain limits; and, from its distance and apparent magnitude taken together, we learn to judge of its real magnitude.

Mr. Hume's argument . . . leads to the contrary conclusion – to wit, that it is the real table we see; for this plain reason, that the table we see has precisely that apparent magnitude which it is demonstrable the real table must have when placed at that distance.<sup>30</sup>

This is not a decisive argument against Hume but it is noticeably more direct and challenging than anything found in the *Inquiry*. Such criticisms in the *Intellectual Powers* would obviously have merited more serious attention by Hume than those of the *Inquiry*. Even so, Reid never claimed to be presenting a *system* of philosophy to rival that of Hume: he offered no more than 'Essays'.<sup>31</sup> His attack on Hume was not meant to challenge or supersede Hume's system of philosophy in the way Kant attempted to do. Indeed Reid's successors in the Scottish common sense movement despaired of making sense of Reid's views as a whole.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Reid might well have enlivened Scottish philosophy and given it a more lasting future if he had been able to challenge Hume with his best arguments before the latter's death.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304a–b.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Reid's unpublished remarks on an early version of Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* Vol. I (A. U. L. MS 2131/3/II/3) p. 11:

I have an Aversion to the having a System imputed to me especially by my Friend. I may be a Defect in a System to leave any part of the Subject untouched. Innumerable Defects of this kind may be found in my Book, and therefore I neither call it a system nor would have it considered as a System but as what the title imports [i.e. 'Essays'].

<sup>32</sup> Thus, James Ferrier was moved to comment:

His opinions are even more confused than they are fallacious, more incoherent than they are erroneous; and no amount of expository ingenuity has ever succeeded in conferring on his doctrines even the lowest degree of scientific intelligibility.

(*The Institutes of Metaphysics* as in *Philosophical Works* Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1875) sect. III prop. IX para 19 p. 496).



But it wasn't lack of ability that prevented Reid from delivering the goods in time. The principal reason appears to be his decision to leave Aberdeen in 1764 and take up Adam Smith's post at Glasgow College. In so doing, Reid severed his close links with friends and colleagues of the Aberdeen 'Wise Club'. It had enabled Reid to discuss and test his philosophical views in a formal, yet intimate and receptive, atmosphere. The most active members published books admired in their day. Thus, A. C. Fraser wrote:

The *Inquiry* of Reid, Beattie's essay on *Truth*, Gerard on *Taste* and on *Genius*, and Campbell's books on *Miracles* and on *Rhetoric* appear in fragments or in germ in the minutes of the 'Wise Club' of Aberdeen.<sup>33</sup>

Many of these works were translated into French and German, and they had more influence on Kant's contemporaries than he cared to acknowledge in his *Prolegomena*.<sup>34</sup> Despite the international acclaim which the literary products of the 'Wise Club' attracted, it survived for only nine years after Reid's departure to Glasgow.<sup>35</sup>

Reid took up his appointment at Glasgow in June 1764 and was elected a member of the Glasgow Literary Society in November. This society was founded in 1752 by Adam Smith and other college professors, and Hume was briefly a member. But it apparently kept no minutes until Reid became a member. In January 1765 'Laws' were introduced to penalize members for lateness and failure to attend meetings or have adequate excuses. It appears therefore that Reid attempted to make this society as disciplined and committed to the pursuit of knowledge as the 'Wise Club' had been. He failed however; and though many papers were read and questions discussed before this society, it was not, in its latter stages, as productive in terms of publications as compared with the 'Wise Club'. It was finally dissolved in 1800.<sup>36</sup>

Reid also became embroiled in fractious College disputes which dragged on for years. He complained in letters to friends in Aberdeen about these disputes among his colleagues, saying that

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<sup>33</sup> A. C. Fraser, *Thomas Reid* (Edinburgh, 1898) p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* (1783) trans. by P. Carus (Indianapolis, 1950) p. 8. Cf. M. Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800* (Kingston and Montreal, 1983 and 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Its last minutes were in February 1773. See J. McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy* (London, 1875) pp. 227-9 and 467-73.

<sup>36</sup> Minutes of the Glasgow Literary Society, G. U. L. MS Murray 505 and MS Gen 4.

there was 'a good deal of intrigue and secret caballing when there is an election' and 'There is nothing so uneasy to me here as our factions in the College, which seem to be rather more inflamed than last session.'<sup>37</sup> Evidently, the atmosphere in Glasgow College was not conducive to constructive philosophical debate. As a result, Reid was unable to find the time and energy necessary to prepare his writings for publication, until after he retired in 1780.

Reid might also have challenged Hume by discussing his views with him, face to face. However, Reid was a quiet man who was apparently a better listener than a talker. Dugald Stewart described him as being 'reserved and silent in promiscuous company' as compared with the lively extroverted behaviour of his friend, Lord Kames.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps it is understandable that there is no record of their ever having met.

In conclusion, therefore, Reid's attack of Hume failed, firstly, because he was unable to present Hume with his best arguments within the latter's lifetime; secondly, because his arguments lacked the metaphysical depth, coherence and consistency to persuade even his successors that his philosophy was worthwhile in itself. Later Scottish philosophers turned increasingly to Kant and then to Hegel. By 1850, as George Davie has put it: 'The classic age of common sense had ended.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to Andrew Skene in Hamilton, op. cit., p. 40a and p. 47b.

<sup>38</sup> Dugald Stewart, 'An Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Reid' in Hamilton op. cit., p. 33a.

<sup>39</sup> George Davie, *The Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh, 1981) p. 289.

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