Reid, Rosmini, Mill, and Kripke on proper names

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Abstract. The theory of proper names proposed by J.S. Mill in *A system of logic* (1843), and discussed in S. Kripke's *Naming and necessity* (1980), is shown to be predated by A. Rosmini's *Nuovo saggio sull'origine delle idee* (1830) and T. Reid's *Essays on the intellectual powers of man* (1785). For philological reasons, Rosmini probably did not obtain his view of proper names from Reid. For philosophical reasons, it is unlikely that he got it from Hobbes, Locke, Smith, or Stewart. Although not explicitly indicated by Rosmini himself, he may have been influenced by St. Thomas, who in *Summa theologica* discusses *suppositum* and *natura* in relation to the equivocal functions of the terms "God" and "sun" as common and proper names. As previously observed, forerunners of the idea can be found in Antiquity, in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. From a historical point of view, the fully developed "Millian" opinion that connotation is not a fundamental aspect of proper names, and that their referents are not fixed by description, could more accurately be termed the Reid-Rosmini-Mill theory.

Introduction

In *Naming and necessity*, Kripke[1] famously proposed that proper names and species terms are rigid designators not reducible to descriptions. On this point, he largely agreed with J.S. Mill, who in 1843 proposed that proper names lack connotation[2].

Appropriately acknowledging and discussing Mill's preceding work, Kripke seems to have overlooked that the same theory of proper names was launched thirteen years earlier by Antonio Rosmini. Perhaps this oversight is due to the fact that Rosmini wrote in Italian and was not noticed by Mill. In the interest of history, and considering the impact of Kripke's reasoning, it seems worthwhile to draw attention to some salient passages in Rosmini's *Nuovo saggio sull'origine delle idee*, which was published anonymously in Rome in 1830 and reprinted under the author's name in Milan, 1836[3]. In *Il problema filosofico del linguaggio in Antonio Rosmini*, Brugiatelli[4] instructively exposes Rosmini's view

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[1] S.A. KRIPKE, *Naming and necessity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA 1980.

[2] «Proper names are not connotative: they denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not
[2] «Proper names are not connotative: they denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals.» J.S. MILL, *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive, being a connected view of the principles and evidence, and the methods of scientific investigation*, vol. 1, John W. Parker, London 1843, p. 40. This book and several others in the Bibliography are available as facsimiles on the Internet.

[3] A. ROSMINI-SERBATI, *Nuovo saggio sull'origine delle idee*, vol. 1, Tipografia Pogliani, Milano 1836.

[4] V. BRUGIATELLI, *Il problema filosofico del linguaggio in Antonio Rosmini*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 2000.

of the differences between proper and common names; however, without placing it in perspective of Kripke's discourse and the modern analytical tradition.

The following is a comparison of references to Mill in *Naming and necessity* with some passages in Rosmini's *Nuovo saggio*. In an attempt to assess the degree of historical originality, if any, of the Rosminian and Millian views, attention is also briefly paid to the idea of proper names in a number of other salient philosophers.

Similarities between Rosmini, Mill, and Kripke

That the reference of proper names is fixed by "baptism" (ostensively or by a kind of initial description), is a central theme in *Naming and necessity*. However, in the Preface Kripke[5], allegedly in consonance with Mill, defends himself against being interpreted as favouring the universal substitutivity of different proper names of one and the same referent. He claims that the sentence «Hesperus is Phosphorus» could raise an empirical issue, whereas «Hesperus is Hesperus» cannot, indicating that the two sentences are not completely interchangeable.

For «Hesperus is Phosphorus» to be questionable on empirical grounds, for someone to whom the planet Venus has not been ostensively demonstrated as the Evening star and the Morning star, the names would need to be endowed with the capacity of connoting something, so as to remove the analyticity of the sentence. For instance, in the case of Hesperus, the connotation could be the attribute "being observed at dusk"[6]. However, such limited connotation does not suffice to fix the referent.

Rosmini succinctly explains the strictly denotative function of proper names[7]:

> When the common name expresses an individual, it marks and distinguishes it by virtue of one of its qualities; whereas the proper name really does not mark and distinguish the individual by virtue of one of its qualities, but directly and expressly names the very individual and, so to speak, its individuality. Now, the individuality of an object is never transferable to another object; because by the individual name you express precisely that which a being has exclusively for itself, that which makes it what it is and nothing else. So, the proper name can refer to one object only, since, as said, it expresses that which makes it unique. […] Thus *man* denotes a single man and not many, but marks him by means of a common quality, humanity; however, not in such a way that by this sign alone he appears to me distinct and separate from all other men; but, rather, according to the nature of that name I can be led to think indifferently upon this man as much as on whoever else. If, when meeting him, I call this man by the name Peter, by that sign I have marked him as distinct from all other men: and that is so because I have really not deduced the name Peter from a common quality but instead chosen it directly to signify that individuality by which Peter has a being of his own, distinct and not transferable to all the others. [- - -]

> Whether a name is a proper name, or a common name, does not depend on its being used to designate one single object, or more. It depends on the manner by which it designates them. If it designates them by marking them with a common quality, as

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[5] S.A. KRIPKE, *Naming and necessity*, cit., pp. 20–21, 26–29.

[6] *ivi.*, pp. 28–29.

[7] A. ROSMINI-SERBATI, *Nuovo saggio*, cit., pp. 105–107. This and other quotations from Rosmini were translated by the present author.

does the word *man*, which marks the men with humanity, it is a common name. If, on the other hand, it designates them without marking them with a common quality, but directly as individuals, without any other relation between the name and them than the one arbitrarily decided by him who invented the name, then this name is a proper name.

The irrelevance of connotativity for fixing the referent of a proper name is also evident from Rosmini's fierce arguments with Adam Smith and Dugald Stewart over the historical development of proper and common names. According to Smith[8] and Stewart[9], common names have arisen later than proper names as the result of individual proper names being applied to more and more objects of the same kind. Rosmini holds the opposite view that common names are historically prior to proper names. His argument is essentially that proper names do not connote the qualities or attributes that are named by the corresponding common names[10]:

> In conclusion: if one claims that a proper name has changed into a common name by being successively applied to more individuals, I shall see the following alternatives: Either that name is applied to a greater number of individuals, as a proper name of everyone, in which case it has not thereby formed a common name, and hence the formation of common names is not yet explained. Or, by being applied to more individuals it has changed its meaning and instead of signifying the individual as such, as it did in the beginning, it has changed into indicating its species, *i. e.* the individuals, by means of a quality common to them; and in that case it remains to be explained how this transition has occurred, how the human mind has transformed the idea that was initially attached to that word, how the idea of the individual has become replaced by the idea of a quality common to many individuals; and consequently how one has been able to find this common quality;
> [- - -]
> Surely, as an abusement of the meaning of *common name*, one could very well label as *common* a proper name that is applied to a *collection* of individuals, considered as individuals, that is to say to three, four or more who have the name Peter in common. But that name is not *common* in the sense that it denotes a species or genus of things, in which sense it is taken by the grammarians and is treated in our discourse, aiming at explaining how the ideas of *species* and *genus* are formed. The *common name* in the first sense no doubt becomes more common, the more individuals to whom it successively becomes applied. However, the common name understood in the sense in which it is taken in our reasoning, is common already from the beginning and does not become more so by being applied to a greater number of individuals. It is in its nature to belong to every possible member of the species in question, neither more nor less.

Concerning the significance of species names, Kripke deviates from Mill by claiming that «terms for natural kinds are much closer to proper names than is ordinarily supposed»[11]. He regards as outright wrong Mill's contention that the meaning

[8] A. SMITH, *The theory of moral sentiments. To which is added a dissertation on the origin of languages*, A. Millar and A. Kincaid, London 1767, pp. 437 *ff.*

[9] D. STEWART, *Elements of the philosophy of the human mind*, A. Strahan and T. Cadell, London 1792, pp. 151 *ff.*

[10] A. ROSMINI-SERBATI, *Nuovo saggio*, cit., pp. 125–127.

[11] S.A. KRIPKE, *Naming and necessity*, cit., pp. 127–128.

of species names, *e. g.* "man"[12] ("human being", "cow", and "tiger" in Kripke), is determined by a specific collection of attributes connoted by the species name. This Millian view, rejected by Kripke, coincides with the one previously proposed by Rosmini[13]:

> In contrast, if someone comes up with a common name, for example the name "man", he does not call only one man by that name, or only those men whom he knows and particularly intends to denominate; but directly all those who have or can have *humanity*, that is to say the common attributes that together constitute being a man; and this he does not do with many announcements but with that one, that single declaration of the name; because that declaration is a general announcement that tacitly says: «everyone who has these qualities I call a *man*».
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> Thus, to make this announcement a general and abstract idea is necessary, an idea not determined by any particular number, as when one imposes proper names.

Historical perspectives

Kripke's breach with the then predominating descriptive theories of referencing amounts to a revival of the Millian view as regards proper names. As shown here, the Millian understanding of proper names, discussed in *Naming and necessity* as a historical forerunner, was predated by that of Rosmini in *Nuovo Saggio*. However, Kripke does not explicitly refer back in history any further than to Mill on this point. So, the question arises as to how original the Rosminian-Millian understanding of proper names is, in comparison with that of preceding language philosophers.

That Rosmini could have got his view of proper names from Stewart or Smith seems out of the question. Proposing that the properties of a named particular individual could form the basis for generalizing the name into a common one, those authors hold a view opposite to that of Rosmini's regarding the historical development of proper and common names. Neither Smith nor Stewart dwell long on proper names *per se* in order to analyse meticulously their function *qua* proper names, but they are quick to suggest the process of generalization[14] and so give the impression that connotation is an important feature of proper names.

In contrast, Reid clearly has the same conception of proper names as Rosmini and Mill. Although proper names may have certain connotations (*e.g.* Westminster bridge is *prima facie* a bridge in Westminster), the significance is not fixed by them and cannot be defined by description[15]. Reid writes[16]:

> There are proper names, and there are common names or appellatives. The first are the names of individuals. The same proper name is never applied to several individuals on account of their similitude, because the very intention of a proper name is to distinguish one individual from all others; and hence it is a maxim in grammar, that proper names have no plural number. A proper name signifies nothing but the

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[12] J.S. MILL, *A system of logic*, cit., pp. 38–39.

[13] A. ROSMINI-SERBATI, *Nuovo saggio*, cit., pp. 124–125.

[14] A. SMITH, *The theory of moral sentiments*, cit., pp. 437–438; D. STEWART, *Elements of the philosophy of the human mind*, cit., pp. 151–154.

[15] T. REID, *Essays on the intellectual powers of man*, John Bell, Edinburgh 1785. pp. 367–368.

[16] *ivi*, p. 494.

individual whose name it is; and when we apply it to the individual, we neither affirm nor deny any thing concerning him.

The last sentence is a striking parallel to Rosmini's assertion, translated in the first quotation above: «il nome proprio non segna già e distingue l'individuo mediante una sua qualità, ma a dirittura nomina espressamente l'individuo stesso, e per dir così, la sua individualità» ("the proper name really does not mark and distinguish the individual by virtue of one of its qualities" etcetera). Both Reid's and Rosmini's expressions emphasize the complete irrelevance of connotation for the fundamental function of proper names.

Although Rosmini makes several references to Reid in *Nuovo Saggio*, he does not take explicit notice of him in connection with the discussion of proper names. Chapter 3 of *Nuovo Saggio I*, Section 3, is specifically devoted to Reid's philosophical system, but the function of proper names is not treated there. Neither are proper names dealt with at the many other places in *Nuovo Saggio I–III* where Reid is referred to. Conversely, Reid is not mentioned in the passage where Rosmini thoroughly discusses proper names − *i.e.* Section 3, Chapter 4, articles 1−12, essentially devoted to Stewart.

Taking into account the intensity with which Rosmini critically scrutinizes Reid's system in general and the emphasis that Rosmini puts on the non-connotativity of proper names, and considering that his views of proper names appear identical to Reid's, the absence of any recognition of the agreement with Reid on proper names may at first glance seem surprisingly negligent. On second thought one may wonder whether Rosmini was in fact unaware of having been predated by Reid on this point.

In Chapter 3 of *Nuovo Saggio I*, Reid's *An inquiry into the human mind*[17] is referred to eight times, although not by the original title but in French (seven times) and Italian (once) translation. In contrast, *Essays on the intellectual powers of man* is not cited at all, neither in Chapter 3 nor in the relevant twelve articles of Chapter 4 in *Nuovo Saggio I*. This absence of *Essays* is noteworthy, as it is there that Reid presents his views of names, whereas that topic is not covered by *An inquiry*. It is tempting to suggest that Rosmini had not in fact read *Essays*, and so could not have got his views of proper names from there. This explanation is supported by the fact that Rosmini's well-kept personal library at Stresa contains a French translation of *An inquiry* but no copy of *Essays*, neither in English nor in translation[18].

As for Locke, in Book 3 of *An essay concerning human understanding*, he asserts that only substances have proper names[19], substances being defined in Book 2[20]:

> The ideas of substances are such combinations of simple ideas, as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves; in which the supposed, or confused, idea of substance, such as it is, is always the first and chief.

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[17] T. REID, *An inquiry into the human mind on the principles of common sense*, Bell & Bradfute, Edinburgh 1810[6] [1764].

[18] I thank Dr. Samuele Tadini at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Rosminiani for information about books by Reid in Rosmini's library. The French translation of *An inquiry* there present is *Recherches sur l'entendement humain*, Jean Meyer, Amsterdam, 1768.

[19] J. LOCKE, *An essay concerning human understanding*, Thomas Tegg, London 1825[25], p. 340.

[20] *ivi*, p. 97.

Here the expression «distinct particular things» is perhaps not entirely clear, as in other passages Locke applies the term "substance" to appellatives, *i.e.* to a number of similar objects, rather than to a single object[21]:

> But speaking in that place of the ideas of distinct substances, such as man, horse, gold, &c., I say they are made up of certain combinations of simple ideas, which combinations are looked upon, each of them, as one simple idea, though they are many; and we shall call it by one name of substance, though made up of modes, from the custom of supposing a substratum, wherein that combination does subsist. So that in this paragraph I only give an account of the idea of distinct substances, such as oak, elephant, iron, &c., how they are made up of distinct complications of modes, yet they are looked on as one idea, called by one name, as making distinct sorts of substance.

If only substances have proper names, this last quotation would indicate that Locke does not differentiate between proper names and appellatives, which seems odd. However, the way Locke describes the intimate relation between substances and essences indicates that proper names do refer to single individuals[22]:

> It is true, I have often mentioned a real essence, distinct in substances, from those abstract ideas of them, which I call their nominal essence. By this real essence, I mean, that real constitution of any thing, which is the foundation of all those properties that are combined in, and are constantly found to co-exist with, the nominal essence; that particular constitution which every thing has within itself, without any relation to any thing without it.

So, although Rosmini is highly critical of Locke's general view of the origin of ideas, in particular that of substance[23], the two philosophers appear to be on common ground in assuming that a genuinely proper name, *i.e.* not an appellative, refers to the essential individuality of a single, particular being.

In Rosmini the idea of substance, stripped of any quality, appears self-evident and unproblematic[24]. In Locke it is elusive and uncertain[25], in favour of the specific complex of simple ideas that he calls "nominal essence". As these simple ideas are qualitative attributes, it lies close at hand to interpret Locke as being in line with the theory that proper names are connoting and descriptive. However, Locke does not explicitly write about the connotation of proper names, or about ostensive naming for that matter, so

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[21] *ivi*, p. 192 n.

[22] *ivi*, p. 323.

[23] A. ROSMINI-SERBATI, *Nuovo saggio*, cit., pp. 15–32.

[24] *ivi.*, p. 18.

[25] «I confess, there is another idea which would be of general use for mankind to have, as it is of general talk, as if they had it; and that is the idea of substance, which we neither have, nor can have, by sensation or reflection. If nature took care to provide us any ideas, we might well expect they should be such, as by our own faculties, we cannot procure to ourselves: but we see, on the contrary, that since by those ways whereby our ideas are brought into our minds, this is not, we have no such clear idea at all, and, therefore, signify nothing by the word substance, but only an uncertain supposition of we know not what, i. e. of something whereof we have no particular distinct positive idea, which we take to be the substratum, or support of those ideas we know». J. LOCKE, *An essay concerning human understanding*, cit., pp. 44–45.

the question should probably be left open. At any rate, Rosmini does not seem to have got his understanding of proper names from Locke.

It is likewise implausible that Rosmini has taken over his views from Hobbes. Mill[26] discusses Hobbes's understanding of the referents of names in general and critcises his alleged claim that they are in the first place ideas, not things. It can be discussed whether Mill gives an entirely correct picture of Hobbes's theory. According to Hungerland and Vick[27], Hobbes distinguishes between the denotation of singular names and the communicative significance of whole utterances depending on the appropriate arrangement of words. The latter interpretation of Hobbes seems akin to Kripke's concession that the statement «Hesperus is Phosphorus» could raise an empirical issue, regardless of the fact that the two names are coreferential[28]. However, Hobbes is not mentioned in *Naming and necessity*, apparently for good reasons. He does not say very much about proper names but exemplifies them by listing together "he who wrote the Iliad", "Homer", "this", and "that"[29]. Evidently, the important aspect here is the restriction of the referents of proper names to singular individuals[30], not whether description suffices to fix the referent. The distinction between proper and common names in Hobbes does not seem to imply any succinct difference in the role of connotativity[31], the striking feature of Reid's, Rosmini's and Mill's views of proper names.

Considering the general signficance of St. Thomas, it is natural to ask whether he might have inspired Rosmini on this point. Thomas is mentioned many times in *Nuovo Saggio,* but not on the pages where Rosmini presents his view of proper names. Of course, there could have been a thomistic influence anyway.

The non-descriptive theory of referent-fixing hinges on the ontological presupposition of substantial individualities, to which one can refer without the use of any connotating common name. In *Summa theologica* (part I, question 13, article 9), St. Thomas discusses the equivocal function of the terms "God" and "sun" as both proper and common names. As proper names, each of them refers to a unique *suppositum.* As common names they refer to the divine or solar *natura* that can be hypothetically conceived of as existing in many supposita. St. Thomas writes[32]:

> For instance this name *lion* is properly communicated to all things of the same nature as *lion* [...] To know, however, what names are properly communicable, we must consider that every form existing in the singular subject, by which it is individualized, is common to many either in reality, or in idea; as human nature is common to many

[26] J.S. MILL, *A system of logic,* cit., p. 27 *ff.*

[27] I.C. HUNGERLAND, G.R. VICK, *Hobbes's theory of signification,* Journal of the History of Philosophy, 1973, vol. 11, pp. 459–482. I.C. HUNGERLAND, G.R. VICK, *Hobbes's theory of language, speech, and reasoning,* in: I.C. Hungerland, G.R. Vick (eds.), *Thomas Hobbes. Part 1 of De Corpore,* Abaris Books, New York, 1981, pp. 9–169.

[28] S.A. KRIPKE, *Naming and necessity*, cit., pp. 20–21.

[29] *De Corpore,* I, 2:9: «...alia singulis rebus *propria,* ut *Is qui scripsit Iliadem, Homerus, Hic, Ille.*» T. HOBBES, *Computatio sive logica: Logic* (Part I of *De Corpore*), Abaris Books, New York, 1981[1655], English translation by A. Martinich, ed. by I.C. Hungerland, G.R. Vick.

[30] See also *De Corpore* I, 2:11 on individual as opposed to universal names.

[31] S. DUNCAN, *Hobbes, signification, and insignificant names*, Hobbes Studies, 2011, vol. 24, pp. 158–178.

[32] ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, part I, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, London 1920[2].

in reality, and in idea; whereas the nature of the sun is not common to many in reality, but only in idea; for the nature of the sun can be understood as existing in many subjects; and the reason is because the mind understands the nature of every species by abstraction from the singular. [- - -]

But if any name were given to signify God not as to His nature but as to His *suppositum*, accordingly as He is considered as *this something*, that name would be absolutely incommunicable; as, for instance, perhaps the Tetragrammaton among the Hebrews; and this is like giving a name to the sun as signifying this individual thing.

Clearly, the referent *natura* is thought of as being within grasp by connotations, whereas the *suppositum* corresponds to the Rosminian *individualità*[33], to which an individual's proper name is directly attached by some kind of ostensive act (''this something'', or pointing at the sun)[34].

This similarity between St. Thomas's view and that of Rosmini concerning proper names makes it natural to suspect a causal link, although not explicitly pointed out by Rosmini. Morover, considering St. Thomas's general dependence on Aristotle, it is noteworthy that the non-descriptive mode of understanding proper names may have its roots already in the Antiquity. According to Searle[35], a germ can be found in Plato. In the dialogue *Theaetetus*, Socrates says[36]:

[…] I heard in my dream that the primeval letters or elements out of which you and I and all other things are compounded, have no reason or explanation; you can only name them, but no predicate can be either affirmed or denied of them […] But none of these primeval elements can be defined; they can only be named, for they have nothing but a name, and the things which are compounded of them, as they are complex, are expressed by a combination of names, for the combination of names is the essence of a definition.

In the seventh (*Zeta*) book of the *Metaphysics*, Part 15 discusses the lack of definition of individuals. In one passage Aristotle asserts the impossibility of defining the individual sun or the human beings Socrates and Cleon. He seems to hold that the names ''sun'', ''Socrates'' and ''Cleon'' refer to substances independently of specific attributes. The example ''sun'' is particularly interesting in apparently forecasting the above quotation from St. Thomas. The Aristotle scholar E.E. Ryan interprets this *Metaphysics* passage as indicating a non-descriptive theory of referencing[37].

Plausible as Ryan's suggestion may seem, it is noteworthy that in *Nuovo Saggio I* the chapter specifically devoted to Plato and Aristotle (Section 4, Chapter 1) does not treat the topic of proper names. In Section 3, Chapter 4, articles 1–12, where the subject of

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[33] A. ROSMINI-SERBATI, *Nuovo saggio*, cit., p. 105.

[34] According to Christian tradition, the referent of the name ''God'' has been made evident by repeated ostensive revelations, although the Bible uses a variety of coreferential nominal expressions, *e.g. Exodus 3, Exodus 33, Matt. 3, 2 Pet 1: 16–18.*

[35] J.R. SEARLE, *Proper names and descriptions*, in: P. EDWARDS (ed.), *The encyclopedia of philosophy*, vol. 5, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York 1967, pp. 487–491.

[36] PLATO, *Theaetetus*, in: B. JOWETT, *The dialogues of Plato translated into English*, vol. 4. Oxford University Press, London 1892³, p. 268.

[37] ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, translated by M. Furth, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, 1985. E.E. RYAN, *Aristotle on proper names*, Apeiron, 1981, vol. 15, pp. 38–47.

proper names is focused upon, Plato and Aristotle are only mentioned in one footnote each, neither of them for favouring the view that proper names are fundamentally non-connotative. Aristotle is there invoked to support the opinion that common names precede the appearance of proper names in children's acquisition of language; Plato, in *Cratylus*, for claiming that the oldest names of natural languages indicate the nature or quality of things, not their individuality. Against this background, it is unlikely that Rosmini has obtained his elaborated view of referencing directly from the less developed arguments of Antiquity.

The following conclusions are suggested:

1. The opinion, generally attributed to J.S. Mill (1843), that proper names are fundamentally non-connotative is well developed by Antonio Rosmini in *Nuovo Saggio* (1830).

2. The same idea of proper names can be found earlier in Thomas Reid and briefly in St. Thomas, with subtle and somewhat obscure roots in Plato and Aristotle.

3. It cannot be concluded with certainty from where Rosmini has derived his opinion. For philological reasons, Reid does not seem to be a source. More plausibly, Rosmini may have been inspired by St. Thomas.

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