

REID AND BERKELEY ON SCEPTICISM,
REPRESENTATIONALISM, AND IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

Both Reid and Berkeley reject ‘representationalism’, an epistemological position whereby we (mediately) perceive things in the world indirectly via ideas in our mind, on the grounds of anti-scepticism and common sense. My aim in this paper is to draw out the similarities between Reid and Berkeley’s ‘anti-representationalist’ arguments, whilst also identifying the root of their disagreements on certain fundamental metaphysical issues. Reid famously rejects Berkeley’s idealism, in which all that exists are ideas and minds, because it undermines the dictates of common sense. Reid also charges Berkeley with not only accepting but furthering the progress of ‘the Way of Ideas’, a longstanding tradition which has drawn philosophy away from true science and common sense. From Berkeley’s perspective, Reid is a ‘materialist’; that is, he dogmatically accepts that mind-independent things exist. I argue that these important differences can be explained by both thinkers’ construal of certain ‘philosophical prejudices’. Finally, I conclude that despite these differences, both ought to be characterised as ‘anti-representationalists’ in light of their shared epistemological concerns.

Keywords: Thomas Reid, George Berkeley, Scepticism, Representation, Ideas, Knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning at the end of the seventeenth and continuing throughout the eighteenth century, it is possible to trace a lineage of thinkers concerned by certain epistemological implications of Modern philosophy. Soon after the publication of Locke's *Essay*, vehement attacks on what came to be referred to as 'Ideism' began to appear in print.¹ Almost a century later, Reid still saw it as his 'chief philosophical contribution' to provide a series of arguments against what he called 'the Way of Ideas'.² If 'representationalism' is taken to be the view that we gain knowledge of external objects (or 'real things') via ideas in our mind which represent them,³ then this line of thinkers can be characterised as anti-representationalist.⁴ That there is such a trend, and that such 'anti-representationalist' thinkers are largely motivated by the same concerns, is generally under-appreciated in Early Modern scholarship. However, tracing this strand of anti-representationalist thought through the eighteenth century is important, since it leads us to associate thinkers who, looked at in a different context, are generally seen to be diametrically opposed and to challenge certain pre-conceptions regarding the development of Early Modern thought.

Such is the case, I argue, with Reid and Berkeley. Both thinkers maintain that perception is key to knowledge of things in the world and reject indirect theories of perception on the basis that they lead to scepticism concerning such knowledge. In rejecting indirect theories of perception, then, both commit themselves to an 'anti-representationalist' approach to knowledge. Both are troubled by the (representationalist) claim that knowledge of, and access to, the real world is not simply a matter of opening our eyes and taking a look at the things around us. This relates to another famous consistency between Reid and Berkeley: both provide a defence of (what they take to be) common sense accounts of perception. Both attempt to provide a theory of perception that entitles the 'vulgar' (those who are not engaged in philosophical discourse) to plausibly maintain their pre-theoretical approach to the relationship between ourselves and the world.

Tying Reid and Berkeley together in this way, under the banner of 'anti-representationalism', might appear surprising given Reid's numerous criticisms of Berkeley's idealism and, more pressingly, the fact that he considers Berkeley (like Descartes and Locke) complicit in furthering 'the Way of Ideas'. Reid does admit to having, at one time, 'embrace[d] the whole of Berkeley's system' (EIP 162).⁵ But his mature (and published) view is that

Of all the opinions that have ever been advanced by philosophers, this of Bishop Berkeley, that there is no material world, seems the strangest, and the most apt to bring philosophy into ridicule with plain men who are guided by the dictates of nature and common sense. (EIP 168–69)

Thus, it is quite clear that Reid does not consider Berkeley's theory of perception to have contributed in a positive way to philosophical inquiry concerning epistemology and metaphysics nor to have provided anything like a successful defence of common sense (EIP 165).⁶ Nonetheless, I contend that there is valuable insight to be gained by analysing Reid and Berkeley alongside one another as anti-representationalists. In particular, it is worth considering how these two thinkers respond to the sceptical implications of representationalism and why that takes them in very different directions regarding their own positive views. Both quite explicitly depict themselves as attending to philosophy gone astray. Berkeley sees his philosophy as the solution to the problems of abstract and materialist thought (PHK §4), while Reid aims to get philosophy back on track after its having spent almost a century theorising about 'mere fictions'; namely, ideas (EIP 27; also IHM 11–12).

My aim in what follows is to demonstrate that there is an important similarity between Reid and Berkeley's anti-representationalist arguments and their shared concerns about scepticism. The structure of my argument is as follows. In section one, I compare Reid and Berkeley's anti-representationalist arguments. In section two, I demonstrate that Reid and Berkeley are reacting to the same epistemological concern: that representationalism inevitably leads to scepticism about our knowledge of things in the world. Finally, in section three, having identified these similarities, I focus on explaining how (despite their shared starting point) Reid and Berkeley end up with such different pictures of reality. The explanation, I suggest, lies in the way each construes certain philosophical 'prejudices'. To be 'philosophically prejudiced', as both Reid and Berkeley use the term, is to accept certain unargued-for commitments.⁷ From Reid's point of view, Berkeley makes the crucial mistake of accepting the key premise of 'the Way of Ideas'; that 'to be immediately perceived is to be an idea'. For this reason, Reid sees Berkeley's attempt to 'change ideas into things' (DHP 244) as an ultimately *philosophical* rather than a *common sense* endeavour. From Berkeley's perspective, on the other hand, Reid is still committed to the 'materialist' prejudice that 'to be real is to be mind-independent'. In Berkeley's terms, then, Reid is a 'materialist'; which is to say, Reid accepts the existence of mind-independent material objects. This discussion of philosophical prejudices reveals that there are indeed certain commitments at work which push these thinkers in different directions. Understanding these commitments explains why Reid and Berkeley end up in divergent positions *metaphysically* but should not affect our reading of both as reacting to the same *epistemological* concerns. For that reason, I conclude that they should both be characterised as 'anti-representationalist' thinkers.

One of the outcomes of this comparison is that it ought to encourage us to reconsider Reid's characterisation of 'the Way of Ideas' and his claim that *anyone* who accepts that it is ideas we immediately perceive is committed to a particular

kind of scepticism. Berkeley certainly saw himself as avoiding such a conclusion, and yet explicitly accepts that we immediately perceive ideas. Elucidating the philosophical ‘prejudices’ at work in each case should help us to at least identify the root of, if not resolve, the tension between these two anti-representationalist positions.

I AGAINST PERCEPTUAL INTERMEDIARIES

1.1 Reid’s refutation of ‘the Way of Ideas’

Central to Reid’s own theory of perception, which in turn motivates his theory of knowledge, is his critique of what he calls ‘the Way of Ideas’; the widespread view according to which

The external thing is the remote or mediate object; but the idea, or image of that object in the mind, is the immediate object, without which we could have no perception, no remembrance, no conception of the mediate object. (EIP 26)

As Reid explains, to subscribe to the ‘Way of Ideas’ is to accept, without demonstration, that the immediate objects of perception are necessarily (or by definition) ideas.⁸ Furthermore, on this view, it would not be possible for us to perceive objects in the real or external world (or remember things about it or conceive of things in it) were it not for the fact that we immediately perceive ideas which represent it in some way or another.

Reid explicitly criticises Descartes and Locke in both his *Inquiry* and his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* and argues forcefully against the inclusion of ideas as intermediary steps in the act of perception. As Reid sees it, neither thinker does enough to justify the claim that it is ideas that we immediately perceive and not physical objects. Unless this claim is self-evident, then, he maintains that there is no ground for accepting ‘the Way of Ideas’. Reid’s central objection is that including ideas in one’s account of perception goes against the Newtonian ‘rules for philosophising’ (or ‘*regulae philosophandi*’; see IHM 3).⁹ In line with Newton’s commitment to ‘feigning no hypotheses’,¹⁰ at the beginning of the *Inquiry* Reid explains that ‘there is *but one way* to the knowledge of nature’s works; the way of observation and experiment’ (IHM 2–3, my emphasis). Induction, grounded in observation and experience, is (he argues) ‘a just interpretation of nature [and] is the *only* sound and orthodox philosophy’ (IHM 4, my emphasis). Hypotheses that stretch themselves ‘beyond a just induction from fact, are vanity and folly.’ Reid also characterises these ‘rules for philosophising’ as ‘maxims of common sense’, thus tying them to our everyday observation and experience of things (IHM 3). ‘The Way of Ideas’, in Reid’s view, is a hypothesis that is *not* grounded in observation and experience:

in everyday life we do not find ourselves perceiving *ideas*, but real things in the world.

Reid justifies the claim that ideas are not an empirical posit—that their existence is not confirmed by observation or experience—by appealing to the way we *talk* about our perceptual experiences. For Reid, the structure of language is a kind of empirical data from which we can make inductive judgements. Language, he argues, is framed for ‘the common affairs of life’ (EIP 20) and ‘is the express image and picture of human thoughts’ (EIP 573; see also EIP 32).¹¹ Commonalities across languages, in particular, are a testament to ‘the natural judgement of mankind’ (EIP 14). Anything which is common in ‘all ages, and in all languages’ can provide us with an insight into those views which are naturally attested to by human agents. Returning to our perceptual experiences, it is significant, then, (for Reid) that in common sense discourse when we are said to perceive something we only commit ourselves to talking about; (i) ‘a mind that thinks’, (ii) ‘an act of the mind’, and (iii) ‘an object which we think about’ (EIP 26). In short, since the language surrounding perceptual discourse only justifies accepting a *mind–mental act–physical object* story of perception, that is the account that we should accept. To go any further would be to ‘feign a hypothesis’ not grounded in observation and experience. Yet, as Reid observes, ‘besides these three, the philosopher conceives that there is a fourth—to wit, the *idea*, which is the immediate object’ (see also EIP 184–85). Reid explains that ideas are ‘supposed to be a shadowy kind of beings, intermediate between the thought, and the object of thought’ (EIP 155). But as the example above shows, there is no ground in either the structure of language or observation and experience for introducing such an entity. Thus, when philosophers claim that what we immediately perceive are ideas, which are distinct from the physical objects they represent, they introduce a metaphysical entity that is *not* reflected in language pertaining to perceptual discourse. No person, ‘guided by the dictates of nature and common sense’ (EIP 169) will, upon seeing a tree, say something like ‘I see a tree *by virtue of immediately perceiving an idea of the tree*’ or ‘I see an idea which represents a tree’. That this is true of anyone who is not part of ‘the Way of Ideas’ (in other words, anyone guided by common sense) is testimony to the fact that the philosophers’ picture is a problematic one. For this reason, Reid argues that ideas, construed in the philosophical sense, are ‘mere fictions’ (EIP 27). They are ‘the offspring of fancy’ and not facts of real experience or common sense (IHM 11–12; EIP 268).

1.2 Berkeley’s rejection of the thing/idea distinction

Berkeley does not accept a four-part (*mind–mental act–idea–physical object*) account of perception any more than Reid does. Like Reid, Berkeley does not accept the appearance/reality distinction that (he thinks) Descartes and Locke are

committed to. While Berkeley does not employ the Newtonian approach as strictly as Reid, he does explicitly and consistently ground his reasoning in both sensible and reflective experience. As he puts it in the *Three Dialogues*, 'I do not pretend to frame any hypothesis at all. I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them' (DHP 229). Berkeley argues that no amount of experience will confirm that there is a distinction between real qualities of things in the world and the sensible qualities with which we are immediately familiar. In fact, he argues, it is impossible to distinguish, even conceptually, the things that really exist from the things we immediately perceive. For example, in the *Principles* he writes:

Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part I might as easily divide a thing from it self. (PHK §5)

Berkeley's view is that to say of a (sensible) object 'it exists' is to say nothing more than 'it is perceived.' This is confirmed by his famous remark that a sensible thing's '*esse is percipi*' (PHK §3). For Berkeley, our notion of existence is exhausted by our notion of a thing's 'being perceived'. Berkeley also relies on the testimony of common sense to support his argument. This is especially clear in the *Three Dialogues*, where Philonous (Berkeley's spokesperson) states: 'I am content . . . to appeal to the common sense of the world for the truth of my notion' (DHP 234). He goes on to characterise a gardener as a paradigm of one who is guided by common sense:

Ask the gardener why he thinks yonder cherry tree exists in the garden, and he shall tell you, because he sees and feels it; in a word, because he perceives it by his sense. Ask him why he thinks an orange tree not to be there, and he shall tell you, because he does not perceive it. What he perceives by sense, that he terms a real being, and says it 'is' or 'exists'; but that which is not perceivable, the same, he says, has no being.

Like Reid, Berkeley appeals to not only to our everyday experience of things, but also to the kinds of claim we (or 'the vulgar') feel entitled to make based on that experience, in support of his argument. Reid, we saw, emphasises that common sense existence claims make no mention of perceptual intermediaries. Likewise, Berkeley argues that the only (sensible) things of which we say 'it exists' are the things we immediately perceive – and, what's more, that whenever we perceive a thing we take it to exist.¹²

Berkeley's most famous argument against the possibility of distinguishing the existence of an object from its being perceived is his so-called 'master argument'. Berkeley's employment of this argument (in both the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*) demonstrates his commitment to the inseparability of existence and perception. Representationalists (and 'materialists' more generally) he suggests, will maintain that 'there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and no body by to perceive them' (PHK §23). If his opponents are right, and a tree or a book can exist independently of its being perceived, then Berkeley is not entitled to the grounds on which he develops his argument against the appearance/reality distinction. In the *Dialogues* it becomes clear that he is confident that reflection will reveal that no such distinction is possible; that to conceive of something existing unperceived is impossible. As Philonous puts it:

I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatsoever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so (DHP 200)

Soon enough, having initially claimed to easily 'conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independent of, and unperceived by, any mind whatsoever', Hylas (his opponent) admits that this was a mistake. For he realises that he cannot conceive of the difference between a thing that *exists* and a thing that *is perceived*. Though he took himself to be conceiving an unperceived tree, Hylas realises that what he is conceiving of is a tree *as if it were perceived by him* (DHP 200). He is simply conceiving of what it would be like to stand in front of the tree and see it or feel it if it existed. This is made particularly clear in the corresponding passage in the *Principles*, where Berkeley explains that to imagine a tree unperceived is simply to frame an idea of a tree in the mind while 'at the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive [it]' (PHK §23). Experience, Berkeley thinks, even under such reflective scrutiny, supports the view that the things we immediately perceive just are one and the same as the things that exist. We are not equipped, he maintains, to even *conceive* of things as if they were unperceived.

Having collapsed the distinction between the things we immediately perceive and things that really exist and established that a sensible thing's '*esse is percipi*', Berkeley has one final move to make. To avoid the conclusion that we do not immediately perceive real things, Berkeley argues it is necessary to 'change ideas into things' (DHP 244). The reason for this is that the term 'idea', though not 'commonly used for "thing"', is the term used 'by philosophers to denote the immediate objects of the understanding' (DHP 235–36). If 'ideas' are the things we immediately perceive, then ideas just are things. This, then, is Berkeley's concession to 'the philosophers': he uses the term 'idea' to refer to the real things

we perceive, at the cost of using the more common sense friendly ‘thing’. But he emphasises this is the only such concession. By turning ideas into things, he does not mean to deny them any reality (see DHP 244; PHK §§33–34, §36, §40).¹³

Reid and Berkeley both reject the ‘philosophical’ view that we (mediately) perceive things in the world via intermediaries; ideas in our mind which we immediately perceive. They develop different arguments in order to refute this picture, though both are developed on the basis of both sensible and reflective experience (Greco 2006: 140). Reid emphasises that the existence of ideas as perceptual intermediaries is not a common sense belief by pointing out that we do not experience ourselves as perceiving ideas. Berkeley, focusing on our individual reflective experience; argues that we are not equipped to conceive of a thing’s existence abstracted from our perception of it. In the next section, I will demonstrate that Reid and Berkeley develop these arguments in response to a shared concern about the relation between perception and knowledge: that to allow for perceptual intermediaries is to inevitably fall into scepticism about our knowledge of things in the world.

2 ANTI-REPRESENTATIONALISM *QUA* ANTI-SCEPTICISM

2.1 Reid’s anti-scepticism

In this section, I will demonstrate that Reid and Berkeley’s arguments against intermediary accounts of perception are motivated by the same epistemological concern. Both take it that to be a representationalist – to accept that our knowledge of things in the world is not direct but mediated – is to inevitably open the door to scepticism. Thus, both develop an account of perception whereby our immediate experience is immediate experience of *the very things in the world themselves*. In turn, both argue that our (immediate) perceptual experiences entitle us to make unqualified claims about the nature of those things.

Both thinkers explicitly situate themselves in opposition to scepticism. From the beginning of the *Inquiry*, Reid condemns the ‘theory of ideas’ for, though ‘it is indeed very ancient, and hath been very universally received’, it nonetheless ‘hath produced a system of scepticism, that seems to triumph over all science, and even over the dictates of common sense’ (IHM 4). The way of ideas undermines science, for Reid, because it makes it impossible to identify the *first principles* or *common sense maxims* that form the foundation of knowledge. As he puts it, ‘Des Cartes taught men to doubt even of those things that had been taken for first principles’, while Locke ‘acknowledges, that the existence of a material world is not to be received as a first principle’ (EIP 169–70). First principles, for Reid, are self-evident statements which ‘are no sooner understood than they are believed’ (EIP 555). All our knowledge, Reid maintains, rests upon first principles: ‘This is as certain as that every house must have a foundation’

(EIP 558; see also EIP 10). Examples of such first principles (relevant to our current concerns) include the existence of one's self and the existence of the external world. When it comes to such fundamental principles of knowledge, 'There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and no occasion to borrow it from another' (EIP 558). First principles are the kinds of propositions that need not (and in fact cannot) be argued for (EIP 12); they are self-evident and are thus (once understood) intuitively, and immediately, seen to be the case. Common sense allows for the existence of such principles of knowledge (EIP 523, 556), but the danger of 'philosophy' is that it can lead us to a place where we find ourselves trying to provide arguments for them. As Steven Nadler puts it, for Reid it is a 'logical error' to find oneself arguing for a self-evident principle (Nadler 1986: 167; see also Van Cleve 2017: 300). For Reid, this renders any argument for the existence of things in the world a 'logical error'. Such propositions are not the kinds of things that we can successfully provide an argument for – rather, as first principles, they are the kind of propositions that have arguments grounded upon them (EIP 277–78). That the existence of things in the world is a first principle is attested to, Reid maintains, by the fact that, in practice 'a man may as soon, by reasoning, pull the moon out of her orbit, as destroy the belief of the objects of sense' (EIP 274). In fact, Reid argues, it is 'the most evident of all truths, and what no man in his senses can doubt' (EIP 157).

It is impossible to reason away our natural conviction that the things we perceive really exist and that the world is full of objects and qualities perceived via our senses. For this reason, it is clear from the very beginning of the *Inquiry* that Reid is not satisfied by those philosophical views on which one must qualify descriptive statements about the nature of things in the world. As he puts it, 'I am resolved to take my own existence, and the existence of other things, upon trust; and to believe that snow is cold, and honey sweet, whatever they may say to the contrary' (IHM 31). In making this claim, Reid targets the likes of Descartes and Locke, who (he maintains) inevitably accept there is an epistemological gap between the mind and the world (EIP 145; see also Ayers 2007: 11–28). For Descartes, this gap can only be bridged by rational argument derived from clearly and distinctly perceived ideas and grounded in the benevolent nature of God (CSM 2:54).¹⁴ Locke, on the other hand, argues that while we can gain an insight into what is on the 'other side' of this gap, by means of our perceiving sensible qualities, we can never gain genuine knowledge of the natures (or real essences) of physical things (EHU 3.3.15–17). As Rebecca Copenhaver puts it, on such representationalist pictures of perception, 'the mind forms judgements about objects and properties by making inferences from internal representations' (Copenhaver 2013: 107). Ultimately, though, Reid does not accept that the existence and nature of things in the world can be adequately argued for. Thus, to deny their self-evidence is inevitably to set oneself on a path towards scepticism.

2.2 Berkeley's anti-scepticism

Like Reid, it is chiefly sceptical concerns that motivate Berkeley's refutation of indirect theories of perception. In the frontmatter to and the opening sections of both the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, it becomes clear that Berkeley attributes sceptical conclusions to a philosophical mistrust of the senses whereby, 'we are not assured of the existence of things from their being perceived' (DHP 167).¹⁵ This association is particularly clear in §87 of the *Principles*, where Berkeley writes:

[If ideas] are looked on as notes or images, referred to things or archetypes existing without the mind, then we are all involved in scepticism. We see only the appearances, and not the real qualities of things... Things remaining the same, our ideas vary, and which of them, or even whether any of them at all represent the true quality really existing in the thing, it is out of our reach to determine. So that, for aught we know, all we see, hear, and feel, may be only phantom and vain chimera, and not at all agree with real things, existing in *rerum natura*.¹⁶

Berkeley's concern is that the 'philosophical' view of thinkers like Descartes and Locke gives us no firm basis for knowledge of real things. If the only things we immediately perceive are 'the appearances, and not the real qualities of things' then we restrict ourselves to having a solid foundation of knowledge only of those appearances. Berkeley is also concerned that if we take it for granted that the immediate objects of perception are, by definition, mere appearances then we will inevitably be left needing to justify the claim that they provide us with knowledge of anything but themselves. In other words, if, by definition, real things in the world (the 'archetypes' of our ideas) are unperceivable and therefore off-limits to us (at least in terms of immediate perception), then we will need a very good reason to believe that we can know those things at all. As Philonous puts it in the *Dialogues*;

[I ask] what arguments you can draw from reason for the existence of what you call 'real things' or 'material objects'. Or whether you remember to have seen them formerly as they are in themselves? or if you have heard or read of any one that did. (DHP 204)

Like Reid, Berkeley believes that it is (in Nadler's words) a 'logical error' to try and provide an argument for the existence of real things in the world (see Stoneham 2002: 32). What's more, Berkeley insists it is an endeavour that will inevitably fail. His most in-depth treatment of this issue comes in §8 of the *Principles* where, from the fact that 'an idea can be like nothing but an idea; [and] a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure', Berkeley

argues that we could never get from knowledge of ideas to knowledge of their ‘originals or external things’.¹⁷ To accept that the immediate objects of perception are ‘copies or resemblances’ of real things is, for Berkeley, to commit oneself to scepticism about those things.

In response, Berkeley argues for a view on which we perceive things in the world immediately and transparently. Like the gardener, who believes the cherry tree exists because he can perceive it there in front of him, Berkeley states that ‘The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see it and feel it’ (PHK §3). Similarly, he accepts that when I judge a thing to exist, based on my perception of it, the belief that forms as a result is irrefutable and self-evident. Reid, we saw, is willing to take the existence of things perceived ‘upon trust’ – and ‘to believe that snow is cold, and honey sweet’ (IHM 31). Berkeley shows the same commitment to knowledge via the senses, emphasising that ‘I cannot for my life help thinking that snow is white and fire hot’ (DHP 230). This is a theme that goes right back to his formative *Notebook* entries (written while preparing his early works). Two entries in particular are of note: ‘In ye immaterial hypothesis the wall is white, fire hot etc’ (NB 19) and ‘There are men who say there are insensible extensions, there are others who say the Wall is not white, the fire is not hot &c We Irish men cannot attain to these truths’ (NB 392). It is quite clear that this intuitive, common sense commitment to things being as we perceive them to be motivates Berkeley’s thought even in its formative stages. Anti-scepticism, as it is for Reid, is the key motivation for Berkeley’s anti-representationalist arguments.

So far, I have introduced and defended the claim that Reid and Berkeley, despite their differences, ought to be read as part of the same anti-representationalist tradition. I have done so by emphasising the similarities between Reid’s refutation of ‘the Way of Ideas’ and Berkeley’s attempt to collapse the distinction between things and ideas. Both forcefully deny that we ought to accept the claim that in any act of perception, we immediately perceive an intermediary (an idea) by means of which we mediate perceive a real quality or thing in the world. I then demonstrated that both reject indirect theories of perception on the grounds that they inevitably lead us to scepticism. Their methods diverge but their motivations and preliminary conclusions are the same: accepting that there are perceptual intermediaries means inevitably falling into scepticism, and so representationalism must be rejected.

3 TWO PHILOSOPHICAL PREJUDICES

3.1 Reid’s critique of Berkeley

The most important (and stark) difference between Reid and Berkeley is that while Reid claims it is a material, mind-independent world that we immediately perceive, Berkeley argues that all ‘the furniture of the earth’ are ideas which are mind-dependent (PHK §6). Nonetheless, the incompatibility

of Reid's 'materialism' with Berkeley's 'immaterialism' is no bar to considering them both part of the same anti-representationalist tradition.¹⁸ Anti-representationalism, I contend, is an epistemological tradition; both thinkers identify the same epistemological problems in representationalism and have very similar epistemological responses. For that reason, the metaphysical pictures at which they arrive do not undermine this reading.

Yet, it is worthwhile considering why Reid and Berkeley arrive at such different pictures – and, in particular, what led Reid to see Berkeley's view as both conducive to scepticism and contrary to common sense. In this final section, I will argue that the methods by which each develop their anti-representationalist arguments are driven by what both thinkers identify as philosophical 'prejudices'; certain commitments on which neither is willing to be moved. This is perhaps surprising, given the fact that both Reid and Berkeley so frequently set themselves in opposition to 'the philosophers' and on the side of common sense. Yet, I contend, by identifying these 'prejudices' we can understand how two anti-representationalist thinkers came to give such contrary accounts of the reality of things.¹⁹

Despite their shared commitment to the importance of evidence provided by the senses, and the fact that both reject the four-part story (*mind–mental act–idea–physical object*) of perception maintained by Descartes and Locke, Reid nonetheless sees Berkeley as emblematic of the problems entailed by 'the Way of Ideas'. Reid accepts that Berkeley is 'no friend to scepticism' (at least in terms of his intentions) but nonetheless concludes that 'the result of his inquiry was, a ferocious conviction, that there is no such thing as the material world' (IHM 21).²⁰ In other words, Berkeley adopts the wrong three-part story of perception. In doing so, Reid argues, Berkeley takes this already problematic account of perception to its inevitable, but regrettable, endpoint: rejecting the existence of real things. As Reid puts it:

[Berkeley] maintains, and thinks he has demonstrated, by a variety of arguments, grounded on the principles of philosophy universally received, that there is no such thing as matter in the universe; that sun and moon, earth and sea, our own bodies, and those of our friends, are nothing but ideas in the minds of those who think of them (EIP 157)

Reid takes it as hardly surprising that Berkeley should arrive at this conclusion for, so long as one accepts that ideas are the only things we immediately perceive, there will always be justifiable reasons for doubting the existence of anything which is not an idea. He explains: 'if philosophers will maintain that ideas in the mind are the only immediate objects of thought, they will be forced to grant that they are the sole objects of thought' (EIP 152). As we saw, this is precisely Berkeley's point. In §8 of the *Principles*, he establishes that we can never get

from our perception of ideas to knowledge of their ‘archetypes’ or ‘originals’. In fact, he argues, if we are committed to the view that we cannot immediately perceive things in themselves, then we inevitably end up in a sceptical position concerning our knowledge of them. The thing/idea divide, Berkeley maintains, inevitably lends itself to scepticism. In response, his aim is to ‘turn ideas into things’, thereby collapsing the divide and ensuring that we have immediate access to things in themselves (DHP 244). In other words, to deny that ideas are the sole objects of thought, Berkeley maintains, would be to once again open the door to scepticism.

The reason that Reid cannot accept Berkeley’s ‘solution’ to the sceptical problems of representationalism is to do with the principles on which Berkeley develops his argument. Reid certainly thinks that Berkeley’s idealism, on which all that exists are minds and ideas, is contrary to our common sense commitment to the existence of the material world (EIP 169–70, 274). But elsewhere Reid indicates that a proposition’s being contrary to common sense does not necessarily rule out its being true (EIP 523, 531; see Greco 2011). So its failure to cohere with the dictates of common sense is not sufficient, for Reid, for rejecting Berkeley’s system. Rather it comes down to the fact that Berkeley inherits what Reid calls the ‘original defect’ of ‘the Way of Ideas’ (IHM 29). This ‘defect’ in Berkeley’s system, Reid explains, means that ‘scepticism is inlaid in it and reared along with’. Despite Berkeley’s best intentions his philosophy is contaminated by the scepticism inherent in ‘the Way of Ideas’. The ‘prejudice’ that Berkeley has succumbed to, and which renders his system vulnerable to this ‘defect’, is to accept that the immediate objects of perception are ideas. Granted this premise, Reid accepts, ‘the existence of the material world must be a dream that has imposed on mankind from the beginning of the world’ (EIP 161). But, he argues, for that argument to be successful its foundation must be ‘solid, and well established’.

Berkeley’s failure to provide such a solid foundation reveals his philosophical prejudice and the inconsistency of his position with the dictates of common sense, Reid maintains. ‘If he means that it is self-evident’, Reid explains, ‘this, indeed, must be a good reason for not offering any direct argument in proof of it’ (EIP 161). Reid has no problem with self-evident truths *per se*. In fact, as we saw previously, he argues that self-evident truths—those propositions that carry the ‘light of truth’ within themselves—form the basis of all our knowledge. But self-evident truths are those which ‘appear evident to every man of sound understanding who apprehends the meaning of them distinctly, and attends to them without prejudice’ (EIP 161). It is on this count that Reid accuses Berkeley, like his predecessors in ‘the Way of Ideas’, of mis-identifying a self-evident truth. For, he argues, to ‘any man uninstructed in philosophy, this proposition will appear very improbable, if not absurd’ (EIP 567).²¹ It is especially concerning

that the only evidence Berkeley provides in favour of this proposition is ‘the authority of philosophers’ (EIP 162).

Berkeley’s idealism, Reid maintains, is the perfect example of why properly identifying self-evident truths, or first principles, is so important. All knowledge must be built on a foundation of first principles. Conversely, though, misidentifying first principles can lead one to develop an ‘absurd’ system of knowledge. Berkeley’s prejudicial acceptance, without demonstration, that ideas are the immediate objects of perception means that Reid cannot accept his ‘solution’ to the problems of representationalism.

3.2 Reid’s ‘materialism’

As Reid reads it, Berkeley’s appeal to common sense is not really an attempt to either defend or validate it, but rather an attempt to mitigate common sense objections. As Reid puts it, Berkeley was ‘tempted to do so, from a just apprehension that, in a controversy of this kind, the common sense of mankind is the most formidable antagonist’ (EIP 167). In other words, in order to avoid the objection that his view is contrary to common sense, (Reid thinks) Berkeley instead brought common sense ‘nearer’ to his own. Nonetheless, Reid argues, it remains the case that Berkeley accepts what common sense does not permit: that we immediately perceive ideas.

Berkeley is very careful to qualify his employment of the word ‘idea’ and to clarify his aims in collapsing the thing/idea distinction. At the end of the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley accepts that it is the view of ‘the philosophers’ that ‘the things immediately perceived, are ideas which exist only in the mind’, while the vulgar believe ‘those things they immediately perceive are real things’ (DHP 262). Earlier in the dialogue, when Hylas charges Philonous with endorsing scepticism by ‘changing all things into ideas’, Philonous responds, ‘You mistake me. I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception, which according to you, are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves’ (DHP 244). Things in the world retain their reality; they are still the things we see and feel immediately. It is also not the case, as Reid sometimes suggests, that things only exist when you or I think of them (EIP 162) or that the world around us is reduced to the status of a dream or illusion (EIP 161). As Berkeley puts it, ‘Whatever we see, feel, hear, or any wise conceive or understand, remains as secure as ever and is as real as ever. There is a *rerum natura* and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force’ (PHK §34).²²

Berkeley, then, sees himself as a realist; there is a natural order of things, and the distinction between the things which make up that natural world and those that merely exist in our minds remains as clear and obvious, and as real, as ever. What’s more, Berkeley takes himself to have provided a metaphysics consistent

with an anti-representationalist epistemology. Since ideas are things, and ideas exist only in the mind (and are immediately perceived), there is simply no room for scepticism concerning our knowledge of the nature and existence of those things.

It could also be argued that although Reid claims that the ‘defect’ of ‘the Way of Ideas’ is accepting that we immediately perceive ideas (see Greco 2006: 135), his criticisms reveal that what he really thinks leads us to scepticism is accepting that we immediately perceive ideas which represent external objects. This second clause is what gets us into a sceptical position by distinguishing between the things with which we are familiar (ideas) and those which we want to be familiar with (that is, external objects). If this is Reid’s central concern then it should not, despite his claims to the contrary, automatically tie Berkeley’s position to scepticism. For, as Copenhaver explains, ‘Berkeley did *not* hold what Reid objected to most . . . that the mind is directed towards ideas that are representations of extra-mental objects’ (Copenhaver 2013: 116).²³ As Marina Folescu puts it, this is ‘Reid’s key antirepresentationalist criticism’ (Folescu 2015: 33 n. 1).

So why can’t Reid accept this picture? And why does he go so far as to claim that it is ‘the most apt to bring philosophy into ridicule with plain men who are guided by the dictates of nature and common sense’ (EIP 169)? His claim is that there is no justification for the ‘philosophical’ view that we immediately perceive ideas and that to accept this view is to undermine one of the first principles of common sense. This first principle is that there is a material, mind-independent reality. To a degree, Berkeley himself is also willing to accept that the ‘vulgar’ are committed to the existence of a ‘material’ world. For example, in the *Principles*, he tackles the claim that common sense commits us to the existence of material substance.²⁴ His response, however, pushes us to clarify exactly what a commitment to ‘material substance’ involves: ‘if the word “substance” be taken in the vulgar sense, for a combination of sensible qualities, such as extension, solidity, weight, and the like, this we cannot be accused of taking away’ (PHK §37).²⁵ This is relevant to Reid’s criticisms, for Reid emphasises that common sense commits us to the existence of extended, tangible, solid objects. Berkeley’s system allows for the existence of such things. ‘To be plain’, he explains, ‘it is my opinion that the real things are those very things I see and feel, and perceive by my sense’ (DHP 229). After all, it is the existence of ‘what the philosophers *call* “material substance”’ that Berkeley seeks to refute (DHP 172, my emphasis).

Faced with Reid’s criticisms, then, Berkeley is likely to put them down to the philosophical prejudice which he is most eager to address; what he calls ‘materialism’. Berkeley’s characterisation of ‘materialism’ is best encapsulated in §4 of the *Principles*, which reads:

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world; yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?

Throughout both the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley's aim is to validate the common sense view that 'real things' are the immediate objects of our senses. Insofar as *that* is a first principle of common sense, Berkeley's system can be said to be grounded upon it. Reid argues that common sense commits us to the existence of a material world that is mind-independent. To that extent, Reid is, from Berkeley's perspective, a 'materialist' and thereby caught up in his own philosophical prejudice. Berkeley encourages his readers to re-evaluate what is meant by the term existence and render existence claims consistent with those made by (for example) the gardener who, when he says of an object 'it exists', means nothing more than that 'he sees and feels it' (DHP 234).²⁶ Reid's failure to deviate from the position that real existence means existence outside the mind is, from Berkeley's perspective, indicative of the fact that he still thinking within the confines of this 'strangely prevailing opinion'.

It is the commitments behind these two philosophical 'prejudices' ('the Way of Ideas' and 'materialism', as they are characterised by each thinker respectively), that lead Reid and Berkeley to tackle the sceptical problems thrown up by indirect theories of perception in such different ways. Reid develops a few on which we immediately perceive things in the world which are mind-independent,²⁷ while Berkeley argues things in the world are ideas which are, by definition, immediately perceived. In both cases, when perception occurs, there is no room for scepticism about the knowledge that results. It is nonetheless the case, however, that both thinkers are motivated by anti-sceptical concerns which are raised by the representationalist epistemology they identify in thinkers like Descartes and Locke.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that both Reid and Berkeley can be appropriately characterised as anti-representationalist thinkers. Both, I have shown, argue against the view that our perception of things in the world is mediated by ideas which exist only in

our minds. Both associate this theory of perception with the representationalism of thinkers like Descartes and Locke; an epistemological view which, they both argue, necessarily entails scepticism about knowledge of things in the world. It is sceptical concerns that chiefly motivate their rejection of representationalism and their respective moves towards a direct theory of perception.

Reid and Berkeley's metaphysical views are incompatible; Reid takes it that the things we immediately perceive are material objects distinct from the minds which perceive them. Berkeley, on the other hand, argues that sensible ideas (sensible qualities which exist in the mind) just are the things in the world around us. I have argued that the details of these 'positive' accounts are not motivated by their epistemological concerns, but by certain commitments which neither thinker is willing to deviate from. Both Reid and Berkeley identify these commitments in their opponents' thought and characterise them as philosophical 'prejudices'. Berkeley is committed to 'the philosophers' claim that ideas, which exist only in the mind, are the only immediate objects of perception, while Reid is committed to what Berkeley identifies as a 'materialist' commitment to the mind-independence of real things. Both develop their positive views in light of these constraints.

It is clear, therefore, that despite both thinkers' attempts to solve the sceptical problems thrown up by representationalism, a widespread view throughout both the seventeenth and eighteenth century, neither is entirely successful in clearing the way for a theory of knowledge that is grounded in common sense, observation, and experience. The reason is that neither Reid nor Berkeley manages to provide an account of things free from philosophical prejudice.²⁸ Thus, one might argue, despite their protestations to the contrary, neither Reid nor Berkeley can help but 'feign hypotheses'.²⁹

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NOTES

- ¹ See, in particular, John Sergeant’s *Solid Philosophy Asserted Against the Fancies of the Ideists* published in 1697. Sergeant frequently uses the phrase ‘the way of ideas’ almost a century before Reid.
- ² See Beanblossom ‘Introduction’ in Beanblossom and Lehrer (eds.) (1983), xiii; see also Greco 2006: 134.
- ³ I take ‘Ideism’ and ‘the Way of Ideas’ to be roughly synonymous with ‘representationalism’. For a characterisation of ‘representationalism’ (in an early modern context) see (for example) Pappas 1989: 156–57; Copenhaver 2004: 61; Dicker 2011: 27–28; Copenhaver 2013: 107. It should be noted that my usage of ‘representationalism’ differs from its usage in contemporary debates, where it suggests a view in which one’s experience of the world is wholly determined by the representational (or intentional) contents of that experience.
- ⁴ James Frederick Ferrier, a rare defender of Berkeleian idealism (and a critic of Scottish common sense philosophy), claims that Reid was ‘among the first’ (and that Berkeley was *the first*) to reject representationalism on the grounds of anti-scepticism (Ferrier 2011: 111). However, I think this position can be traced back even earlier. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, elsewhere I identify other thinkers who might be considered part of this ‘anti-representationalist’ tradition, including Antoine Arnauld, John Sergeant and Henry Lee.
- ⁵ DHP = George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*; EHU = John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; EIP = Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*; IHM = Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*; NB = George Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*; PHK = George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*; SAT = Nicholas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*.
- ⁶ Reid does, however, accept that Berkeley’s *New Theory*, in which the existence of a ‘tangible world’ outside the mind *is* admitted (on Reid’s reading – though this is somewhat contentious), ‘contains very important discoveries’ (EIP 159).
- ⁷ Philosophical prejudice, Reid seems to suggest, can lead to thinkers talking past (or *at*) each other (EIP 563–64).
- ⁸ Malebranche and Locke, for example, appear to accept this claim. See SAT 3.2.1 or EHU 4.1.1.
- ⁹ See Newton (2004: 87). See also Greco (2006: 138) and Copenhaver (2013: 117).
- ¹⁰ See Newton (2004: 92).
- ¹¹ While Reid’s emphasis on observation and experience invokes Newton, the connection he draws between common sense and language echoes Francis Bacon. Like Reid, Bacon maintains that ‘words are imposed according to the apprehension of the vulgar’ (Bacon 1873: 54). It is also worth noting that Berkeley likewise accepts that ‘Common custom is the standard of propriety in language’ (DHP 216).
- ¹² See Pearce (2017: 15–16).
- ¹³ For discussion of Berkeley’s reification of ideas, see Stoneham (2002: 13–14) and Hight (2008: 22–27).
- ¹⁴ For Reid’s critique, see EIP 169–70.

- ¹⁵ The frontmatter of the *Principles* explains that ‘the Chief Causes of Error and Difficulty in the Sciences, with the grounds of Scepticism, Atheism, and Irreligion’ will be inquired into; while the frontmatter of the *Three Dialogues* situates it ‘In opposition to sceptics and atheists’.
- ¹⁶ See also PHK §40 & §86.
- ¹⁷ The force of this argument comes from the fact that Berkeley reads his opponents (representationalists) as maintaining that ideas represent external objects by means of resembling them (PHK §8). There is a great deal that can be said about Berkeley’s characterisation of his opponents as well as his so-called ‘Likeness Principle’ (and considerable literature concerning it) but that is beyond the scope of my present concerns.
- ¹⁸ Reid is a ‘materialist’, in Berkeley’s understanding of the term, simply by virtue of accepting that mind-independent things exist.
- ¹⁹ In other words, I explain how from a shared ‘negative’ position (denying that representationalist ought to be accepted) Reid and Berkeley arrive at inconsistent ‘positive’ positions (their respective metaphysics).
- ²⁰ Hume similarly notes the difference between Berkeley’s anti-sceptical intentions and his (as Hume reads it) sceptical conclusions. See *Enquiry* 155, n. 31.
- ²¹ Reid maintains that absurdity is the antithesis to common sense.
- ²² The distinction between ‘realities’ and ‘chimeras’, for Berkeley, is grounded in the distinction between ideas of sense (which are ‘real’) and ideas of the imagination (which are ‘ideas or images’ of them). For this distinction, see PHK §§28–29. Reid discusses this distinction in EIP 178–182.
- ²³ For more on Berkeley’s rejection of the view that ideas are representative entities, see Bolton (1987).
- ²⁴ I take it that Berkeley’s discussion of ‘material substance’ applies equally (in this instance) to ‘material things’.
- ²⁵ It is for this reason that Samuel Johnson’s infamous ‘refutation’ of immaterialism, in which he kicked a stone and exclaimed ‘I refute it thus!’, ultimately misses the point. See Boswell (1791: 333). As Ferrier explains, ‘[Berkeley] certainly never denied the existence of matter in the sense in which Johnson understood it’ (2011: 90).
- ²⁶ For similar claims in Berkeley’s notebooks, see NB 408, 593, 604.
- ²⁷ Reid is thus a ‘direct realist’ about perception. See Van Cleve (2006: 112) and Hoffman (2002: 163).
- ²⁸ Scottish idealist James Frederick Ferrier criticises Reid for moving beyond ‘given fact’ towards hypotheses in his 1847 essay ‘Reid and the Philosophy of Common Sense’. Like Berkeley and Reid, he also accepts that representationalism (or ‘representationism’ as he calls it) inevitably falls into scepticism, but also argues that Reid’s own theory is, at bottom, a representative one. See 2011: 106–138 (esp. 111 and 126).
- ²⁹ Thanks to Manuel Fasko, Jennifer Keefe, and Kenneth Pearce for comments on drafts of this paper. Thanks also to participants of the International Berkeley Society meeting in Newport in June 2018 (especially Patrick Connolly) for discussions and feedback on an earlier version of this paper.