

PERCEIVING BODIES IMMEDIATELY: THOMAS REID'S INSIGHT

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Abstract: In An Inquiry into the Human Mind and in Essays on Intellectual Powers, Thomas Reid discusses what kinds of things perceivers are related to in perception. Are these things qualities of bodies, the bodies themselves, or both? This question places him in a long tradition of trying to understand how human perception works in connecting us with the external world. It is still an open question in the philosophy of perception whether the human perceptual system is providing us with representations as of bodies or only as of their properties. My project in this article is to explain how, on Reid's view, we can have perceptual representations as of bodies. This, in turn, enables him to argue that we have a robust understanding of the world around us, an understanding that would be missing if our perceptual system supplied us with only representations as of free-floating properties of objects.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an open question in the contemporary philosophy of perception whether the human perceptual system is providing us with representations as of bodies—representations that are understood to be contentful thoughts with veridicality conditions, which help us segment the environment into bodies.¹ This question has a rich history and, despite new developments in psychology and philosophy of mind, we still do not have an easy way of settling it. Some psychologists and philosophers argue that bodies are not immediately perceived; they think that we perceive only their features and then infer that bodies having those features exist. Others argue that bodies are indeed objects of perception and that no inference is required for perceiving them.² A lot depends on the answer to this question: if bodies are not objects of perception, is there any reason to believe that singular thought is formed in perception? *De re* thought must start somewhere, and perception seems to be

a suitable candidate here. If we perceived only free-floating properties, we would not have a robust understanding of the world around us. In the absence of *body* as a perceptual category, we seem to be burdened with Hume's skepticism about the external world.

Reid scholars have long credited him with shredding the veil of skepticism to pieces.³ But the exact details of this overhaul are still not well settled or appreciated.⁴ There is a tension in the secondary literature, engendered by a corresponding tension in Reid's text itself, regarding the perception of bodies. The problem is even more acute since this tension has gone largely unnoticed. One purpose of the present paper is to show that perception of bodies is indeed possible on Reid's view and to situate his view in the larger context of the aforementioned debate.

To do so, we should first note that some scholars interpret Reid as saying that only primary qualities of bodies can be originally and immediately perceived. Secondary qualities and bodies are, at most, objects of acquired perception.⁵ Other scholars just take it for granted that we can (originally) perceive material substances, without noticing that they are possibly attributing inconsistent views to Reid.⁶ To address this tension, the present paper offers several arguments to show that, on Reid's view, bodies can indeed be immediate objects of perception, in the sense that veridical perception connects us with actually existing bodies, found in the world around us.

Any discussion concerning the *immediate* objects of perception must start with an explanation of the relevant notion of immediacy. George Pappas and Todd Buras discussed the ways in which Reidian immediacy could be understood, and throughout this paper, I will use their important and correct categorization.⁷ According to Pappas, there are two senses of immediacy that Reid employs in his work; according to Buras, there are three, as explained below. First, something is said to be perceived or known immediately if it is not known in virtue of a propositional inference. For example, one can know that a mathematical axiom is true *immediately* by just contemplating it, whereas one knows that a mathematical theorem is true only by having proved that it follows from one or more axioms. The knowledge of the theorem is mediated by the inference needed to reach the conclusion. If perception of bodies turns out to be immediate in this sense, then it will be said to be epistemically immediate. Since all perception, according to Reid, must be epistemically immediate (e.g., *EIP* II.5, p. 96), perception of bodies, if at all possible on his view, should be understood to have this feature, too.

Second, something is said to be perceived immediately if there are no mental entities, for example, ideas, mediating the contact between the perceiver's mind and the external world. If perception of bodies turns

out to be immediate in this sense as well as the first, then it will be said to be perceptually immediate. Since Reid is objecting to the “way of ideas” (*EIP* II. 9; II. 14), which he thinks his predecessors mistakenly put forward, Reidean perception of bodies, to be possible on his view, should be understood as being perceptually immediate.

Third, something is said to be perceived immediately if its perception is direct. For instance, Reid claims that the notion we have of primary qualities, in perception, is direct, while the notion we have of secondary qualities is relative or indirect.

For the present purposes, “immediacy” will be taken in the first and second sense but not in the third: this paper argues that, for something to be perceived immediately, the perception of that object must not be based on a propositional inference, *and* it must also be free of any mental intermediaries interfering with the access of the perceiver to the external world.⁸ On the present interpretation, however, something can be indirectly but immediately perceived: namely, secondary qualities and bodies, since the notions we have of them in perception are relative, not direct.⁹

We should not find it surprising that interpreters have paid less attention to this issue and have offered interpretations that are not always consistent with each other, since Reid himself is not explicit with regard to how bodies or their qualities can be immediately and originally perceived. Still, the logical space is restricted by the text to three possibilities.

First, physical qualities could be said to be the only immediate objects of perception, while the bodies to which they belong are only (at most) inferred to exist. Henceforth, this will be called “the qualities-only view.” Its main disadvantage is that, since bodies are not immediate objects of perception, we do not have a simple reply to the skeptic doubting our knowledge of bodies.

Second, logic allows for the possibility that only bodies are immediate objects of perception. On this view, a body is first perceived and then, by an inferential process, certain qualities are attributed to it. This view is only apparently supported by some passages in Reid. But it is not a good view to have. Usually, bodies are distinguished by the qualities they have. On this view, this is not possible: they are first perceived as distinguished objects, and then one attributes some qualities to them; but how is the initial process taking place, in the absence of perception of qualities? This view is mentioned here only for the sake of completeness, and it will be very briefly discussed in what follows, under the name of “the bodies-only view.”

Third, the immediate objects of perception could be both qualities and the bodies to which they belong. We are said to perceive a body by seeing its color, for instance. The perception of the body in question is *immediate*, in the relevant senses: the existence of the substance is not propositionally inferred; it is automatically known, by perception. Moreover, there are no mental intermediaries that preclude the perceiver from connecting with the body in question. This will be called “the qualities-and-bodies view.”¹⁰

There is not enough textual evidence to adjudicate between the first and the third possibilities: the majority of passages support the qualities-only view. In other places, however, Reid argues that bodies are also perceived, and at least one passage may be interpreted as supporting the bodies-only view. This last interpretation does not have a lot to back it up, but the fact that some passages support the first view while others support the third view remains. To address this tension, this paper will look at the broader context and conclude that there are strong reasons, internal to Reid’s philosophy, for thinking that both qualities of bodies and the bodies to which they belong are objects of perception. Although the text is vexed and, passage by passage, it cannot be established what Reid’s view on this issue actually is, the qualities-and-bodies view is the one he should have adopted, given his larger epistemological and metaphysical concerns.

2. EVIDENCE THAT QUALITIES ARE IMMEDIATE OBJECTS OF PERCEPTION

In his earlier work *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (*IHM* henceforth), Reid does not say a lot about what the objects of perception are. He argues that perception necessarily involves a conception of the object of perception and a belief that such an object exists: “the perception of an object implies both a conception of its form, and a belief of its present existence. I know moreover that this belief is not the effect of argumentation and reasoning; it is the immediate effect of my constitution” (*IHM* 6. 20, p. 168). This is seen as the precursor of the “official characterization” of perception, offered in his later work *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (*EIP* henceforth):

If, therefore, we attend to that act of our mind which we call the perception of an external object of sense, we shall find in it these three things. *First*, Some conception or notion of the object perceived. *Secondly*, A strong and irresistible conviction and belief of its present existence. And, *thirdly*, That this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning. (*EIP* II. 5, p. 96)

So, whatever kinds of things may be objects of perception, one must be able to conceive them and immediately and noninferentially believe that they exist, if one is to be said to perceive them.

In *IHM*, there is just one other place where the issue of what can actually be perceived is briefly touched on. Reid argues that there are two kinds of perceptions: original and acquired. Without going into any details concerning the distinction between original and acquired perception, I would like to draw the reader's attention to this passage for different reasons.¹¹ In it, Reid suggests that the things immediately perceived are either primary or secondary qualities of bodies, but not bodies:

Our perceptions are of two kinds: some are natural and original, others acquired, and the fruit of experience. When I perceive that this is the taste of cyder, that of brandy; that this is the smell of an apple, that of an orange; . . . these perceptions, and others of the same kind, are not original, they are acquired. But the perception which I have by touch, of the hardness and softness of bodies, of their extension, figure and motion, is not acquired, it is original. (*IHM* 6. 20, p. 171)

Some matters are quite unclear, but what is crucial for the present investigation is that perceptual experiences start from external qualities of bodies. We are not told whether bodies enter the picture at the perceptual level or at an inferential level. Going by just the evidence presented by this passage, the qualities-only view seems to fare better than the qualities-and-bodies view.

The text of *EIP* does not provide an unequivocal answer to the question regarding the immediate objects of perception either. The qualities-only view is well represented throughout the book, and Reid seems to be at his clearest when he argues in favor of this view.

In the opening essay of the book, Reid argues that

[a]ll the things which we immediately perceive by our senses, and all the things we are conscious of, are things which must be in something else as their subject. Thus by my senses, I perceive figure, colour, hardness softness, motion, resistance, and such like things. But these are qualities, and must necessarily be in something that is figured, coloured, hard or soft, that moves, or resist. It is not to these qualities, but to that which is the subject of them, that we give the name of body. (*EIP* I. 2, p. 43)

Qualities of bodies are the only things one perceives immediately, according to this passage. Moreover, whenever we perceive a quality we know that a body having that quality exists. What is unclear is whether we know of that body's existence by perception of the body. This passage

seems to tilt the scales toward the qualities-only view and to suggest that, although we learn that bodies exist, we do not do it by perceiving them.

The next relevant passage is the opening sentence of the section titled “The Objects of Perception; and first, Of primary and secondary Qualities”: “The objects of perception are the various qualities of bodies” (*EIP* II. 17, p. 200). If Reid had wanted to indicate that other kinds of things besides qualities of substances are to be counted as objects of perception, he would have probably written something like “qualities of bodies are *among* the things perceived.” And then it would not be unreasonable to expect a more or less detailed discussion of what is interesting about the other types of things that can be objects of this faculty. However, such a discussion is nowhere to be found in the rest of that section (or anywhere in the book, for that matter). Moreover, the next section (*EIP* II. 18) extends the list of things that can be immediate objects of perception, but that list contains only qualities, too:

Besides primary qualities and secondary qualities of bodies, there are many other *immediate* objects of perception. Without pretending to a complete enumeration, I think they mostly fall under one or other of the following classes. *1st*, Certain states or conditions of our own bodies. *2d*, Mechanical powers or forces. *3d*, Chemical powers. *4th*, Medical powers or virtues. *5th*, Vegetable and animal powers. (*EIP* II. 18, p. 211, emphasis added)

This list, although not exhaustive, does not count bodies among the things that can be immediately perceived. One issue is that bodies are more important than some of the things Reid included on this list, and still they are left out. Judging from these passages alone, which are unequivocally addressing the nature of the immediate objects of perception (taken extensionally), bodies are more like an afterthought of perception rather than its immediate objects: in order to *think* about them, one must perceive their qualities.

3. EVIDENCE THAT BODIES ARE IMMEDIATE OBJECTS OF PERCEPTION

Contrary to the conclusion of the previous section, other textual evidence indicates that, according to Reid, our senses themselves give us knowledge of bodies. This is first seen in a section of the second essay, dedicated to discussing the information our senses give us about matter and space.¹² There, Reid argues that the notion we have of bodies, in perception, is relative, in the sense that we have a conception of matter only inasmuch as we have direct conceptions of its qualities. However, just because we can have only a relative notion of something, it does

not mean that we cannot perceive that thing immediately. Saying that our notion of bodies is relative tells us something about the kind of thoughts we have of them, but not about the way we come to have such thoughts or about the type of knowledge they encode.¹³ A case in point is color, which is a secondary quality, of which we can have only relative notions, but which we perceive originally and immediately (*IHM* 6. 20, p. 171; *EIP* II. 21, p. 236). So, the fact that the notion we have of bodies is relative does not count against our ability to perceive them immediately. To better understand this issue, think about the way we perceive a cube by perceiving its facing side: we perceive the cube immediately *by* perceiving its facing side. The same can and should be said about the way the qualities of the cube contribute to our perception of the cube: by perceiving a colored figure, we actually perceive the cube itself. We should not think that we *first* see the color and figure and then the cube.

It must be noted that we see bodies by seeing their qualities, not the other way around. Human perception is sensitive to the asymmetrical relation that exists between bodies and their qualities: qualities belong to bodies, while bodies do not belong to qualities. However, according to Reid, one does not use one's inferential capacities to reach a body via one of its qualities, in perception. It is an important point for Reid's epistemology that reasoning is not involved in the perceptual process: it is not in virtue of a perceiver's *thinking* that he knows a body having a certain color exists, whenever he sees that color. It is in virtue of our constitution that we perceive bodies whenever we perceive qualities, and this type of perception can, therefore, count as epistemically immediate.

It is a matter of interpretation whether Reid argues that we are hard-wired to perceive bodies by perceiving their qualities. Two of the first principles of common sense that Reid uses to justify his whole enterprise support this interpretation. The first one, given in the first essay, states: "I take for granted that there are some things which cannot exist by themselves, but must be in something else to which they belong, as qualities or attributes" (*EIP* I. 2, p. 43). This metaphysical principle is mirrored by one of the principles of necessary truths, discussed in the sixth essay: "[T]he qualities which we perceive by our senses must have a subject, which we call body" (*EIP* VI. 6, p. 495). These principles tell us only that qualities cannot exist on their own. They do not tell us anything about how perception of bodies comes about. However, we do have knowledge of bodies, and this knowledge is based on our senses, Reid thinks. He argues that, even as infants, we know that beings other than ourselves exist (mother, father, and so forth) and that we know this by the "testimony of our senses" (*EIP* VI. 5, p. 477). One question is whether we gain this knowledge perceptually or inferentially. If we used one or both of these principles as steps or rules in an inference, to

contribute to our “perception” of bodies, that perceptual knowledge of bodies would not be epistemically immediate. However, as Keith Lehrer showed, first principles, in Reid’s philosophy, should be understood as being explanatory rules, providing a way of understanding how the human mind functions, just as a law of physics provides a way of better understanding a certain physical phenomenon.¹⁴ If we agree that this is the function of first principles, the knowledge we have of bodies in perception is epistemically immediate, and not the effect of reasoning.

It is an additional question whether this type of perception of bodies can and should count as perceptually immediate. One might object that, on such a view, in order to perceive a body, a perceiver must be aware of the perception of a quality of that body and, in that sense, it might be thought that the perception of the quality is a thought intermediary between the perceiver and the external body. To answer this objection, we should again think about the way Reid understands human perception, based on the two principles of common sense discussed above. A natural law describing the human perceptual process states that, whenever we perceive qualities, our minds are immediately (noninferentially) aware of bodies having those qualities. It is not the awareness of the *perception* of the quality that leads us to the external body; it is the awareness of the *quality* itself that results in our perceiving the body itself. As Van Cleve argues, according to Reid, perceptually mediated perception is an “oxymoron”: we are said to perceive something only if we perceive it without any intermediaries.¹⁵

Bearing all of this in mind, let us look at some relevant passages, which, when read in this light, show that bodies are indeed perceived, whenever their qualities are perceived:

I perceive in a billiard ball, figure, colour, and motion; but the ball is not figure, nor is it colour, nor motion, nor all these taken together; it is something that has figure, and colour, and motion. This is a dictate of Nature, and the belief of all mankind. As to the nature of this something, I am afraid we can give little account of it, but that it has the qualities which our senses discover. (*EIP* II. 19, p. 217–18)

We are said to perceive color, figure, etc, *in* a billiard ball. It is difficult to understand how this is possible without perceiving the billiard ball itself. The qualities of a body need a body to belong to; they cannot exist by themselves. But without perceiving the body they belong to, how can we know to which body they belong? In this particular case, it is a dictate of nature that the perceived qualities belong to a material substance, but it cannot be a dictate of nature that they belonged to a *billiard ball*, instead of something else. The attribution of such-and-such qualities to a body cannot be explained solely by invoking natural laws. I take Reid to

be arguing that there is no way of recovering the immediate knowledge of the existence of the body by perceiving only a certain combination of qualities. This passage indicates that the qualities-and-bodies view is better suited to explain how different pieces of the puzzle are held together in perception.

The following passage reinforces this interpretation:

It seems therefore to be a judgment of nature, that the things immediately perceived are qualities, which must belong to a subject; and all the information that our senses give us about this subject, is, that it is that to which such qualities belong. (*EIP* II. 19, p. 218)

We are told that we immediately perceive qualities and that they need a subject in which to inhere, which cannot be anything but a body. Since no quality can exist by itself and since perception tells us that qualities exist, their subjects must exist too. Reid thinks that we do not reach this conclusion by reasoning: it is a dictate of nature and immediately available to everyone undergoing a perceptual experience. The belief in the existence of a material substance, supporting the qualities thus perceived, is as immediate as the belief in the existence of the material qualities themselves.

Thus, by perception of qualities, we have a relative notion of the subject to which they belong and an immediate belief in the existence of this subject. Two necessary conditions for perception are, therefore, met for body, just as they are met for the secondary quality of color (*IHM* 6. 20, p. 171; *EIP* II. 21, p. 236).¹⁶ There is no reason to discount the idea that bodies are perceived, any more than there is for the idea that color is perceived.

One last piece of indirect evidence that bodies, as well as their qualities, are immediate objects of sense is supplied by the following passage:

I think it requires some ripeness of understanding to distinguish the qualities of a body from the body. Perhaps this distinction is not made by brutes, nor by infants; and if any one thinks that this distinction is not made by our senses, but by some other power of the mind, I will not dispute this point, provided it be granted, that men, when their faculties are ripe, have a natural conviction, that sensible qualities cannot exist by themselves without some subject to which they belong. (*EIP* II. 19, p. 219)

Here Reid argues that, to distinguish qualities from bodies, one must either have their sense faculties fully developed or some of the other faculties, possibly abstraction and reasoning, must be usable to their fullest capacity. Furthermore, it is probably because we lack any clear notions of qualities and bodies that we are unable to distinguish them

early on in our development. This, in turn, suggests that Reid thinks that it is at least a metaphysical possibility that, in our infancy, perception does not have enough power to mark qualities as separate from bodies.

Suppose, however, that infants perceived only qualities and that the existence of the bodies these qualities belonged to were inferred, based on the perception of their qualities. On this scenario, our senses would not inform us of the existence of bodies. Infants would lack not only the ability to know that “sensible qualities cannot exist by themselves without some subject to which they belong” but also the ability to perceive bodies as well as qualities. However, this is not how Reid thinks of the issue. He argues that mature human beings are able to draw the distinction in question because both types of things—qualities and bodies—are objects of perception. Since drawing a distinction does not add any element to an equation but helps to separate already existing ones, it is clear that the distinction in question can be drawn only between things that are already present to the mind.

Based on the evidence discussed so far, Reid seems to be endorsing one of the qualities view, but not the bodies-only view. At the outset, I said that one passage might be seen as providing support for the last view:

if I may trust the faculties that God has given me, I do perceive matter objectively, that is, something which is extended and solid, which may be measured and weighed, is the immediate object of my touch and sight. And this object I take to be matter, and not an idea.
(*EIP* II, 11, p. 154)

Reid writes this in the course of discussing Berkeley’s idealist system. His main concern is to argue that what we perceive is physical and external to our mind, not just an idea, which is mental and thus internal. Reid argues that matter is the immediate object of one’s perception—at least of the senses of sight and touch. If we think that the use of the definite article indicates that matter, namely, body (since Reid uses these terms interchangeably), is exclusively the object of perception, this passage will be seen to contradict all the passages surveyed so far. But this is not the only interpretation possible: the use of the definite article indicates exclusivity, but of a different kind. The contrast here is between things of the physical world and things of the mind, and, by using the phrase “the immediate object of my touch and sight” to describe matter, Reid flags his opposition to Berkeley and the tradition to which he belongs. No mental entities, be they ideas or something else, are immediate objects of perception; the only things that have that role are material objects. Read in this light, this passage supports the idea that bodies, too, are immediate objects of perception, just as their qualities are. It does not support the bodies-only view, but the qualities-and-bodies one.

One problem remains, however: Reid is inconsistent in his claims. He sometimes argues that only qualities can be immediately perceived, while, at other times, he says that bodies are immediate objects of perception. To address this issue, the next section discusses some Reidean reasons for endorsing the qualities-and-bodies view.

4. WHICH VIEW SHOULD REID HAVE ADOPTED?

The qualities-and-bodies view agrees more with the rest of Reid's philosophy than the qualities-only view, which is the only other viable option. To show that this is so, let us look at some arguments against the qualities-only view and some advantages of the qualities-and-bodies view.

4.1. An Argument against the Qualities-only View

Reid should have supported the qualities-and-bodies view for at least two reasons, which I discuss in turn. The first is an argument meant to clear away some obstacles to the qualities-and-bodies view, rather than to support it directly. It provides grounds for rejecting both the qualities-only view and the bodies-only view, but since the latter view lacks clear textual support and it is a bad view to have anyway, I focus on showing that someone with Reid's philosophical commitments should not endorse the former. Let us call this argument "no knowledge of bodies without knowledge of qualities."

To fully understand this argument, we need a more detailed analysis of the process of perception, to which I now turn. Reid argues that two other faculties are necessary ingredients of every perceptual experience. As already indicated, the official characterization of perception, in *EIP*, requires the perceiver to have a conception of the object perceived and a belief in its present existence that is "immediate, and not the effect of reasoning" (*EIP* II. 5, p. 96). Before going any further, I would like to explain how "perceptual conception" and "perceptual belief" work.¹⁷

With regard to perceptual conception, I subscribe to the view that it is akin to Russellian acquaintance, as William Alston and Van Cleve have argued.¹⁸ Alston argues that perceptual conception is not about the use of "general concepts"; hence, its role is not to subsume an object under a concept.¹⁹ Another way to put this point is that perceptual conception does not have any kind of conceptual content; its role is to present the bare object to the mind of the perceiver, without focusing the attention on what kind of object that is.²⁰ Perceptual conception does not function as a faculty that explicitly predicates properties of objects; its content is not given by descriptive propositions.

However, we do form some notion of what kind of properties and/or bodies we perceive, so, if conception is not responsible for indicating what

attributes the substances have, one could think that that role is played by “perceptual belief,” Copenhaver argues; but I think that there is not enough textual evidence to support this interpretation.²¹ Reid consistently says only that, in perception, one is seized by a belief that the object perceptually conceived *exists* when it is thus conceived.²² This can be seen as attributing a certain type of property—namely, existence—to the object of perceptual conception. However, this is not full-blown predicate attribution, not even on the assumption that existence is indeed a predicate. One may believe that something exists without thinking that it is a certain kind of something. For instance, someone may see something at a great distance and have no idea whether it is a rock or a man with an umbrella and still believe that what he sees (whatever that is) does indeed exist. Furthermore, perceptual belief attributes the same property to every object that is perceptually conceived. In order for perceptual belief to work as Copenhaver says it does, it would have to attribute properties like colors, shapes, or sizes to the objects perceptually conceived, and Reid says nothing about perceptual belief having this role. So, *contra* Copenhaver, perceptual conception presents a physical substance to the mind, without describing it as some specific type of substance, and perceptual belief just affirms the existence of the thing thus conceived.

On this understanding of perceptual conception and belief, material substances cannot be the only immediate objects of perception. If bodies were the sole objects of perception, we would not get enough information to specify where a body ends and another begins. Nothing would help us identify the figure, size, color, and so forth of the respective body.

Nor can qualities of material substances be the only immediate objects of perception. If all that we perceived were colors, shapes, sizes, and such, we would have no way of entertaining singular thoughts about the substances themselves, in perception. I could never think about my friend that I am just seeing, without that thought being entirely descriptive. If taken to the extreme, this view would have bodies be logical reconstructions out of the physical qualities one perceived, as in Russell’s logical atomism, where bodies are nothing more than logical constructs out of our sense data.²³ On such a view, a body would not be perceived, but understood to exist as that thing, whatever it is, that satisfies a certain description. The table I am currently touching would be thought of as being whatever object simultaneously has this particular texture, together with this particular rectangular shape and this particular size. This is a counterintuitive view. My intuition here aligns with that of those philosophers, Reid among them, who think that singular thoughts about material substances are required for knowledge of the material world.²⁴ Without being able to supply singular thoughts about real, existing objects, perception would fail to satisfy our continued

interest in material objects, even when certain of their qualities have changed. We want to be able to talk about *the tree* outside our window both in summer and in winter, even though many of the visible qualities that it has during the summer are altogether absent in the winter. Our interest in an object survives the loss of some of its qualities, and Reid is one of the first philosophers to recognize and attempt to explain the role of perception in the production of singular thoughts.

Immediate perception of bodies has another advantage for Reid. In some of the passages discussed so far, Reid argues that our perceptual faculty cannot stop at qualities; it has to have a way of getting information about the body having those qualities. This is meant to help Reid rebut a particular brand of skepticism, which claims that having perceptual knowledge of qualities of objects is not enough to gain knowledge of the world. This skeptic would say that, in order to claim knowledge about the material world, one's mind must have a way of getting direct access to the bodies populating that world.²⁵ Reid, of course, would want to show that this type of skepticism is as wrong and contrary to common sense as any other kind. These reasons should rule out the qualities-only view.

The combined view is the only one able to do all this work. If the immediate objects of perception are both qualities *and* the bodies they belong to, we learn quite a lot about the external world by perception. We conceive of and believe in the existence of color, figure, size, and so forth as instantiated in the body currently perceived. Even if this type of conception is nonconceptual, in the sense that it does not descriptively inform me that *red* is presently existing in my immediate environment, we will end up knowing more about the body to which those qualities belong, if we take both its qualities and itself to be immediate objects of perception. Namely, we learn that there are qualities, and, since qualities cannot exist by themselves, we also learn that they belong to a body that is currently existent. We move past the qualities, to their subject, and we are thus capable of entertaining singular thoughts about that body itself. On the bodies-only view, we would know only that there is a material substance existing before me—but it would be hard to see how we learn what kind of substance that is. On the qualities-only model, we would know only that certain qualities presently exist—but this would not give us the substance itself.

4.2. Dispelling an Objection against the Qualities-and-Bodies View

The first reason did not directly favor the combined view but showed that both of the other views are wrong. The present argument is meant to dispel an apparent objection to the qualities-and-bodies view. For all that has been said so far, one might think that we can perceive bodies

only if we know their essences, since otherwise our notions of them are quite obscure. But we do not have such knowledge, according to Reid: only the creator of these substances has access to their essences. So, the objection goes, we cannot perceive bodies. To show that this objection does not work, I argue that knowledge of a substance's essence is not required for perception of that substance.

Let us look at the relevant passage, and see what conclusions we can draw:

[O]ur conception of [individuals] is always inadequate and lame. They are the creatures of God, and there are many things belonging to them which we know not, and which cannot be deduced by reasoning from what we know: They have a real essence, or constitution of nature, from which all their qualities flow; but this essence our faculties do not comprehend: They are therefore incapable of definition; for a definition ought to comprehend the whole nature or essence of the thing defined. (*EIP* IV. 1, p. 303)

Even if we thought that we can perceive only things we know the nature of, this would not show that bodies cannot be objects of perception. At most, this would show that bodies cannot be perceived without other things being also perceived, namely, their qualities. By perceiving bodies via their qualities, we would not find out what is the nature of the material substances themselves, but we would definitely learn something about them: they have a certain color, shape, and so forth.

The objection would have some force, on the assumption that we perceive only bodies. If that were the case, Reid would need to explain why our perception of bodies does not give us knowledge of their essences. If perception were just a relation between a perceiver and a body, such a limitation would be mysterious. However, on his understanding of perception, we can acquire an immediate knowledge that certain qualities exist in the real world and also immediate knowledge that certain qualities belong to certain bodies. Perception gives us enough information to know that certain qualities belong to certain bodies, but not enough information to know which qualities constitute the essence of a certain body. This, however, should not be surprising, given Reid's idea that only their creator knows the real natures of substances.

Let us take stock. Reid should not adopt the bodies-only view, since, on this view, perception would not provide crucial information regarding what type of object one is perceiving. He should also not adopt the qualities-only view, since, on this view, perception is incapable of giving us singular thoughts about the objects perceived. He should have adopted the combined view, since it is the most attuned to his overall epistemological commitments.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the evidence that Reid consistently thought that qualities and material substances are immediate objects of perception is not conclusive, this paper offered several arguments to show that his writings not only allow for this view but also support it better than any of the competing ones. Material substances are immediate objects of perception; they are just not *bare* objects of perception: we need to perceive some of their qualities, in order to perceive them. Bodies do indeed populate the world around us; we just interact with them with the help of their qualities.

Thus, this paper argued, one should not disregard the passages favoring the qualities-and-bodies view, even though they are at odds with those supporting the qualities-only view. While one should acknowledge this tension, one should also look at the broader context, provided by Reid's general philosophical commitments, before deciding which of these views is better. The qualities-and-bodies view is the view that Reid should have endorsed. An explanation of how perception of bodies actually works, and what role the qualities of bodies actually play, is needed, but such an explanation would have taken us too far from the main considerations of the present paper and is best left for a future occasion.²⁶

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NOTES

1. The use of the word “representation” in a paper on Thomas Reid should not be met with disapproval. Reidean thoughts have contents and, if the contents are perceptual, they may match the reality or not, depending on the circumstances (see, for instance, his discussion about the errors of perception, in *EIP* II. 21 and 22). Reid's key antirepresentationalist criticism is that, if we allow ideas as intermediaries between our minds and the external world, we lose the battle with skepticism: we do not perceive the world; we perceive only more or less accurate mental images of the world. Having contentful thoughts about the objects around us, however, does not lead to any kind of mediation between the mind and the world. The objects themselves (be they qualities or bodies) are the things that are immediately perceived, and this is all that matters for the present discussion.

2. For more details on this debate, see Tyler Burge, *Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 438–42. Burge argues that *body* is a perceptual attributive and that our perceptual apparatus gives us representations as of bodies. Elisabeth Spelke, on the other hand, argues that we do

not perceive bodies; we learn that they exist at a conceptual level. See her, "Where Perceiving Ends and Thinking Begins: The Apprehension of Objects in Infancy," in *Perceptual Development in Infancy*, The Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology 20, ed. A. Jonas, 197–234 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1988). This debate is not the focus of the present investigation; hence, it will not be analyzed in greater detail. However, it is important to note that a careful scrutiny of its history should help us better understand the origins of the debate and the reasons for still being at a standstill in reaching a solution.

3. In this paper, all references will be made to Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition* (1764; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). Citation as follows (*IHM*, chapter, section, page number). The other references will be made to Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: A Critical Edition* (1785; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002). Citation as follows (*EIP*, essay, section, page number.)

4. Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London: Routledge, 1989), has a good exposition of Reid's reaction to skepticism.

5. Keith Lehrer and John Christian Smith, "Reid on Testimony and Perception," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (1985): 21–38. Special issue, supplementary vol. 11, "New Essays in Philosophy of Mind," series 2.

6. This category is represented, among others, by Todd Buras, "The Problem with Reid's Direct Realism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52 (2002): 457–77; and Rebecca Copenhaver, "Thomas Reid's Direct Realism," *Reid Studies* 4 (2000): 17–34. Copenhaver, on p. 20, cites one problematic passage for the view that bodies are objects of perception, but the focus of her article is different; thus, she takes it for granted that, for Reid, the phrase "objects of perception" (extensionally understood) denotes bodies.

7. For more, see George Pappas, "Sensation and Perception in Reid," *Noûs* 23, no. 2 (1989): 156–67; and Todd Buras, "Three Grades of Immediate Perception: Thomas Reid's Distinctions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76, no. 3 (2008): 603–32.

8. It might seem that some passages could be taken to support one notion of immediacy, and not the other; but, in light of all the evidence that we have, I argue that, whenever this happens, one should rather understand that one of the two notions of immediacy is foregrounded, while the other, although still alive, should be kept in the background. For instance, when Reid argues that perception is epistemically immediate, that is the sense he is interested in right then and there. But it is never a good idea, given Reid's commitments against "the way of ideas," to think that perception could ever be *perceptually* mediate.

9. This position is not as eccentric as it may seem. I will not develop it further in this paper, because what is relevant for the present purposes is the suggestion that we should discount this sense of immediacy when we are wondering whether our perception of bodies is immediate, not whether immediacy is a synonym for directness. Other scholars think that the notion of immediacy

is not essentially linked to that of directness, for Reid: for instance, Copenhaver argues that Reid's realism is simultaneously mediated and direct. For more on this issue, see "Thomas Reid's Direct Realism," 18.

10. This view is inspired by a suggestion briefly put forward by James Van Cleve, "Reid's Theory of Perception," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo and Rene van Woudenberg, 101–33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In discussing Pappas's definition of direct perception, Van Cleve makes it sound as if, according to Reid, one is able to perceive bodies by their qualities. In this paper, I take this suggestion and develop it further by showing exactly how it is possible to perceive a body via its qualities and by discussing whether this is, indeed, Reid's view. Such an analysis is missing from Van Cleve's article and is needed to address the issues I deal with in this paper. For more, see Van Cleve, "Reid's Theory of Perception," 113–14.

11. The contrast Reid draws between original and acquired perception is not the focus of the present investigation, so it will not be addressed at any length in this paper. The primary issue under consideration here goes beyond the debate regarding whether to think that acquired perception is perception proper, as Copenhaver argues, or not, as Van Cleve believes. For more on this debate, see Rebecca Copenhaver, "Thomas Reid on Acquired Perception," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2010): 285–312; and Van Cleve, "Reid's Theory of Perception," 125–28.

12. Reid uses "matter," "material substance," and "body" interchangeably, as indicated here: "We give the names of *matter*, *material substance*, and *body*, to the subject of sensible qualities; and it may be asked what this *matter* is?" (original emphasis) *EIP* II. 19, p. 217).

13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for helping me clarify this point.

14. This interpretation is developed in Lehrer, *Thomas Reid*, 152–64.

15. Van Cleve, "Reid's Theory of Perception," 107.

16. These two are necessary conditions for perception, according to both IHM 6. 20, p. 168, and *EIP* II. 5, p. 96.

17. The marker "perceptual" indicates that both conception and belief, when involved in perception, have certain characteristics that set them apart from other types of conception and belief, respectively.

18. See William Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception," in *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, ed. Melvin Dalgarno and Eric Matthews, 35–47 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); and Van Cleve, "Reid's Theory of Perception."

19. Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception," 43.

20. This is a controversial point among Reid scholars. However, since a full presentation and evaluation of this debate would take us too far from the concerns of the present paper, I simply invoke the Alston-Van Cleve arguments, since

I believe they conclusively show that perceptual conception is not descriptive. For more on the other side of the controversy, see Roger Gallie, "Reid: Conception, Representation and Innate Ideas," *Hume Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 315–35; and Buras, "Three Grades of Immediate Perception," 613.

21. For more, see Copenhaver, "Thomas Reid on Acquired Perception," 285–312.

22. For instance, this is clear from passages like IHM 6. 20, p. 168, and EIP II. 5, p. 96, where Reid is offering his "official" characterization of perception.

23. See, for instance, Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999).

24. I will not talk about the complex issues surrounding the notion of singular thought in this paper, but I want to draw attention to the fact that one mark of singular thought is the ability to use proper names to directly pick out particular objects. Reid argues that proper names do have this function, and this indicates that his philosophy allows for a notion of singular thought (EIP IV. 1, p. 303).

25. Stillingfleet accused Locke of endorsing this type of skepticism. Even if he was wrong, speaking as a scholar, and Locke did not support such a view, this well-known debate shows that alleged examples of this type of skepticism did indeed exist. Reid was probably aware of this debate, so it is not unreasonable to think that he might have responded to this type of skepticism. For more on this issue, see the correspondence between Stillingfleet and Locke, published in John Locke, *The Works of John Locke* (London: Printed for Thomas Tegg, W. Sharpe and son, G. Offer, [et al.], 1823), vol. 4.

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