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Concepts –  
Contemporary and Historical Perspectives

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# CONCEIVING WITHOUT CONCEPTS: REID VS. THE WAY OF IDEAS

*Lewis Powell*

## *Abstract*

*Thomas Reid is notorious for rejecting the orthodox theory of conception (OTC), according to which conceiving of an object involves a mental relationship to an idea of that object. In this paper, I examine the question of what this rejection amounts to, when we limit our attention to bare conception (rather than the more widely discussed case of perception). I present some of the purported advantages of OTC, and assess whether they provide a genuine basis for preferring OTC to a Reidian alternative. I argue that Reid's approach is no worse off than OTC at explaining intentionality of our conceptions, and suggest that OTC diverges less from Reid's view than it would at first seem.*

The Philosopher says, I cannot conceive a centaur without having an idea of it in my mind. I am at a loss to understand what he means. He surely does not mean that I cannot conceive it without conceiving it. This would make me no wiser. What then is this idea? Is it an animal, half horse and half man? No. Then I am certain it is not the thing I conceive.

Thomas Reid, *EIP IV.2*, p. 321

## Introduction

One of the most striking views held by Thomas Reid was his rejection of what I'll call the *Orthodox Theory of Conception*. The Orthodox Theory of Conception (OTC) maintains that what it is to conceive of X is to possess an idea of X (or, perhaps, to have the idea of X present to the understanding in the right way). Reid's explicit discussions of why he rejects OTC suggest dual motivations: First, Reid claims an inability to understand what these ideas are actually supposed to be, and views them as unfounded theoretical postulates (which he abhors). Second, Reid believes that accepting OTC leads us down a path to radical skepticism (which he also abhors).<sup>1</sup> Reid's proposal, instead, is that

1 This second motivation is actually more focused on idea-based accounts of perception or memory, since the deliverances of those faculties, unlike mere conception, are connected to

when you conceive of X, the only object of your act of conception is X. And, Reid says, if X happens not to exist (either because it is fictional, or because it is not a particular), X is, nevertheless, the object of your conception.

Much of the literature on Reid's account of conception has focused on two questions: 1) What sort of views about non-existence must Reid have, if he thinks we can be mentally related to non-existent entities? 2) What is the status, for Reid, of the objects of our general conceptions? In this paper, I do not engage with either of these concerns, though they are questions of central interest for interpreters of Reid views.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I focus on the question of what is involved in the commitment of accepting or rejecting OTC. In other words what is really at stake between Reid and the proponents of OTC.

We can begin to clarify the contrast between Reid and his opponents who embrace OTC by framing the issue in terms of Reid's rejection of mental states. A defender of OTC winds up analyzing acts of conception as mental states: there is a mind, a mental activity performed by that mind, and an object of the activity that is internal to that mind. In a sense, the act of conception is intrinsic to the mind conceiving, and all components of the act are wholly present to the mind when the act occurs. Reid, on the other hand, rejects the analysis of mental activities into mental states, and prefers to treat them as relations. My act of conceiving of the sun has, as its components, me, the relation of apprehension, and the sun itself as that external object.

The natural and obvious role for ideas to play, in OTC, is an explanatory one: mental states involve ideas, and mental states have the objects they do in virtue of the ideas they involve. In short, ideas are supposed to explain the intentionality of mental states. And the *prima facie* charge against Reid, is that his account would fail to explain this.

From Reid's perspective, though, OTC merely provides the illusion of an explanation, and the proponent of ideas is no better off than Reid. In this paper, I argue that the Reidian case against the explanatory powers of OTC succeeds. In the first section of the paper, I present the apparent advantages of embracing OTC, and the complementary worries that arise for Reid. The alleged benefits are a) that OTC explains why our acts of conceiving have the objects that they do and b) that OTC provides a criterion for conceivability. In the second section of the paper, I present a Reidian response to these purported advantages,

our belief in the existence of the things perceived/remembered. Since all mental activities, for Reid, involve simple conception as a component, the issues are interrelated, but, Reid's skeptical worries cannot be motivated by OTC alone.

2 For discussions of these issues, see Castagnetto (1992), David (1985), Heath (1978), and Lehrer (1985).

and defend Reid's position that OTC does not explain the intentionality of conception any better than his rival account. In the third section of the paper, I investigate another possible source of advantage for OTC, drawing on a later conflict between Russell and Meinong. While it is easy to see the differences between Russell and Meinong's positions, we will see their conflict turns on an issue orthogonal to the one at stake between Reid and the proponents of OTC.

It is very important to note the narrow scope of my conclusions, however: I do not claim that the dispute between Reid and the way of ideas rests on pseudo-problems or verbal disagreement across the board. Rather, my claim is that, alleged differences in one's explanations of intentionality cannot be used as a wedge between Reid and the way of ideas. If the core elements of the way of ideas differ substantially from Reid's positions, that difference must be located in some other aspect of those views.

## Section 1: The (Apparent) Benefits of Orthodoxy

As Jerry Fodor is fond of pointing out, if one begins with an account of what concepts are, one automatically takes on an account of *concept possession* and an account of *conceiving* as things one does *with said concepts*.<sup>3</sup> And OTC is the early modern version of the view that conceiving is just such a mental operation with or on concepts. More broadly, one of the core alleged virtues of OTC is that it is supposed to provide us with a productive, systematic account of why acts of conception have the intentional features they do, in terms of features possessed by ideas.

Note that the statement of OTC that I have presented is buck-passing with respect to intentionality. It is a feature of OTC that acts of conceiving inherit their intentional contents from the ideas they involve. A particular mental event of conceiving on my part is my conceiving of a winged horse because it is an activity I am doing with a particular idea, and that idea is the idea of a winged horse. To use a more prosaic example: when I conceive of the sun, OTC provides an explanation of why my conception is *of the sun* as a consequence of the fact that my mental activity involved an idea that was itself *of the sun*. Now, so far, this may not seem like much of an advantage. After all, for all we have said, we may have simply traded in the bare assertion that such-and-such an act of conception is directed at the sun for the bare assertion that such-

3 See Fodor (1998).

and-such idea is directed at the sun. And bare assertions about ideas are no more appealing than bare assertions about acts of conceiving. However, most proponents of OTC also adopt a substantive account of the nature and origins of our ideas, which, as we will see, provides a bit more support to the thought that something is genuinely gained by this maneuver.

Additionally, when OTC is combined with views about the nature and origins of our ideas, we also get principled criteria of conceivability. If conceiving of *X* is something one does by mentally operating on the idea of *X*, then views about where our ideas come from, and the system by which their intentional contents are determined, will tell us which things are in the range of conception for a given individual (or at least, what we'd need to know about that individual to determine whether something is in their range of conception), and which things are outside the range of conception for any individual.

It is worth briefly illustrating the foregoing points with a version of OTC. So, let us consider a simplified picture of David Hume's account.<sup>4</sup> Hume is a molecularist about ideas. That is to say, he thinks ideas can be simple or complex, and that complex ideas exhaustively decompose into simple ideas. Hume is also an empiricist about the acquisition of our ideas, maintaining that our simple ideas are all copies of simple sensory or reflective impressions. Finally, Hume embraces a principle of recombination (or, more accurately, a principle of free transposition and exchange). These commitments about the origins and nature of our ideas tell us how to recursively define the range of ideas available to an individual, given the impressions they have experienced, as well the range of ideas available to people in general. Maria has never seen any colors, and therefore, Maria does not have any idea of the color red, and cannot (in her present state) conceive of red. Vanessa has seen blue things, and has seen round things, so even though she has not seen blue round things, she can transpose the ideas she already has, and acquire an idea of something blue and round. So, Vanessa can conceive of blue round things. There can be no idea of a round square, as any arrangement of simple ideas into a complex idea that qualifies as round will not qualify as square, and vice versa. Hence, a round square is inconceivable. There is an arrangement of simple ideas into the complex idea of a golden mountain, so a golden mountain is conceivable. Details of these examples turn on particular features of Hume's account of the nature and origins of our ideas, but the broader point generalizes: if one adopts

4 There are good reasons to think that Hume's ultimate account in the *Treatise* is more complex than I am making it out to be here. For examples of work along these lines, see Garrett (1997), or Loeb (2005).



OTC, and offers a substantive view of where ideas come from and what they are like, a principled criterion for conceivability will follow.

As part of this picture, such accounts also typically provide a systematic story about why ideas have the intentional contents they do. The story is often bifurcated, as we see with figures like Hume and Locke. To take Hume, ideas are exhaustively categorized as being either simple or complex. One story is given for the simple ideas, and another story, compositional in nature, is given for the complex ideas. Thus, simple ideas have their intentional content in virtue of the impressions they copy, and complex ideas have the contents they do in virtue of their composition from simple ideas (the ingredient ideas and how they are arranged).

## Section 2: Intentionally Passing the Buck

As outlined above, one of the core virtues claimed on behalf of OTC is that it offers (or purports to offer) an explanation of the intentionality of one's mental operations. Since it is common ground between Reid and his opponents that every other operation of the understanding is accompanied by or includes conception, this provides a unified theory of the intentional content of mental operations. Reid even puts this point quite nicely in his discussion, offering the following characterization of his opponents' line of reasoning:

It is the province of the Philosopher to consider how such works of the mind are produced, and of what materials they are composed. He calls the materials ideas. There must therefore be ideas, which the mind can arrange and form into regular structure. Every thing that is produced, must be produced of something; and from nothing, nothing can be produced. (Reid, EIP, 4.2, p. 314)

Reid follows this characterization by assimilating this reasoning to his reading of the motivation for Platonic forms, viewed as the object's of God's conceptions. Reid's criticism of the argument for Platonic forms is very intriguing, but we will leave it to one side here. The upshot of his objections to Platonism (thus understood), is that ideas are not needed to do any work in an account of conceiving, and if they are doing any work, they will get in the way.<sup>5</sup> My concern

<sup>5</sup> One of Reid's objections is that platonic forms, thus understood, demote God from being the architect of the world to being a mere bricklayer. "Nothing is left to the Maker of this world but the skill to work after a model" (ibid). His second objection is a regress worry about the origin of these divine ideas, and how they could have been brought about without God

is to investigate the former horn of this dilemma: the charge that ideas do not do any useful work in a theory of conception. Before examining that, however, I will briefly explain why I am discounting the other horn of the dilemma.

The central basis for Reid's charge that ideas get in the way stems from the fact that he rejects out of hand the relevant category of mediated mental operations. Compare two models of mediated operations: The first model is an account of one operation triggering the production of a distinct mental operation, the latter is that of mediation internal to a single mental operation. To illustrate: if I am habituated to think about fire whenever I think about smoke, then my thought of fire upon seeing smoke is mediated in the former sense. That is to say, the production of that operation is mediated by the prior production of a discrete operation. Reid has no qualms with this sort of mediation, but correctly observes that such state transitions require you to have two individual states, each of which has one immediate object. If defenders of OTC appeal to this form of mediation to explain the relationship between my idea of the sun and my conceiving of the sun, they will still have to admit that I have some conceptions whose immediate object is non-mental. The account would be that conceiving of my idea of the sun triggers in me a conception of the sun itself. So, Reid is correct that OTC cannot be understood in terms of triggered production.<sup>6</sup>

However, the other approach, which looks more promising for OTC, is dismissed by Reid simply as incomprehensible. Formally put, the idea is that the relationship of conception that we ordinarily talk about is a two place relation, between a mind and an entity, but that said relation is underwritten by a pair of two place relations: one between the agent and an idea, and a second between the idea and the entity.<sup>7</sup> It is not hard to find examples of this general structure (though I don't mean to suggest that these specific examples are directly analogous to conception). The relation expressed by "Maria painted Napoleon" is a two place relation, between Maria and Napoleon. But it obtains in virtue of a relationship that Maria bears to a work of art, and the relationship that work of art stands in to Napoleon. The relation expressed by "Janice is niece to Tom" is a two place relation between Janice and Tom. But it is underwritten by a relation Janice stands in to one of her parents, and the relation that parent stands in to Tom.

having a prior conception of them, requiring yet another realm of forms.

6 For discussions of these issues in Reid's account of perception, see, e.g., Buras (2008) and Copenhaver (2000).

7 We could instead think of this as a two place relation underwritten by a three-place relation, but the structure is slightly clearer when put this way.

On this view, the operation of conceiving of the sun is (partially or wholly) constituted by some mental interaction with the idea of the sun, and thus, the mediation is internal to the state. By rejecting state-internal accounts of mediation as incomprehensible, Reid denies the defender of OTC the most promising version of their view. To fully investigate this aspect of Reid's objections would require a great deal more space than I have available here. I raise this simply to acknowledge that I am setting aside a fairly major component of Reid's assault on the way of ideas, and to clarify the form of mediation that I understand defenders of OTC to endorse.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to our Humean version of OTC, we can observe that Hume's empiricism is expressed in the language of ideas: every simple idea is copied from an impression that precedes it. The effect of this, in Hume's theory, is to require that we cannot have simple conceptions of things without prior perceptual experience of them. And, it seems that the proponent of this view would maintain that this fact about restrictions on our simple conceptions is explained by the unavailability of certain ideas.

But if the only things ideas are doing in our theory is serving as vehicles for constraining conceptual operations, we could impose those same constraints without reference to ideas at all. We simply assert that one cannot have a bare conception (with a simple content) without having a prior perceptual experience of that content. The point is not to claim that Hume precisely endorses this constraint (one must complicate the statement to account for the missing shade of blue), nor to claim that Reid in fact endorses the same constraint as Hume: Reid has many substantive divergences from Hume on the matter of this empiricist constraint. The important thing is that those qualifications and differences seem to be independent of whether one invokes ideas. Anyone's preferred constraints could be expressed captured either by talking about ideas and how we get them, or simply by describing the preconditions of having certain conceptions. The question we have to ask is this: what commitments, if any, do we adopt in virtue of specifying these constraints in terms of ideas, rather than as bare constraints on operations of conception?

Reid's system looks as though it contains ungrounded constraints on conception. Reid says, "you can't conceive X without meeting condition Y". Proponents of OTC seem to take the position that it is bad for such constraints to obtain without some ground or explanation. So they propose an account in terms of the ideas that partially compose those mental operations. But does this actually help us explain anything, or have we simply introduced theoretic-

8 For a similar criticism of Reid's rejection of the way of ideas, see Yolton (1984), about which more later.

cal posits subject to parallel constraints, which are themselves ungrounded? How does appealing to ungrounded constraints on ideas improve our situation from one in which we simply acknowledged ungrounded constraints on mental operations?

Perhaps the benefits of OTC arise, not from an account of such basic constraints on conceptions, but on the productive, compositional story they provide for derivative cases of conception. Roughly put, the thought here is that going in for ideas, may not help with the ground level constraints, but it will allow us to explain why our complex conceptions have the contents they do, in terms of how complex ideas are built out of simpler ones.<sup>9</sup>

Suppose someone has had a simple perception (say of a yellow point). Both the Humean and someone defending a non-ideational analogue of that Humean view can point to a causal relationship between the perceptual experience and the subsequent act of bare conception, to account for the conception being a conception *of a yellow point*.<sup>10</sup> For this question, neither view is at an advantage.

But now suppose someone has seen a uniformly yellow triangle and a uniformly blue circle, but has never seen anything red. Both accounts can specify the constraints of conceivability so that the person is capable of conceiving of blue triangles and yellow circles, but not capable of conceiving red triangles or red circles. So ideas are not needed to help us frame or state these constraints. But, when we consider the person imagining a yellow circle, the proponent of the way of ideas does have one advantage: they offer a structural story about why the object of conception is a yellow circle. The conception of the blue triangle involves an idea that is complex, and that complex idea is *structurally* related to the idea of the blue point. It involves many instances of the idea of the blue point, arranged in a particular way, i.e. triangularly. Assuming we do not wish to treat the ideas as literally instantiating physical features, the approach here will rely on an isomorphism between the structural features of the complex idea, and the physical features being represented.<sup>11</sup>

9 I write this section as though the basic/derived distinction maps exactly onto the simple/complex distinction, but, in fact, the point generalizes to any way of carving out the basic/derived distinction.

10 Again, this non-ideational view is quite different from Reid's, as Reid's story is clearly not bound up with sensation in the way that a Humean story is, and also, because for Reid conception is a component element of perception. Recall, though, that, in order to get a grip on what is at stake in this debate about *ideas*, it is helpful to examine the minimally different non-ideational version of the Humean position, and not Reid in particular.

11 Some interpreters maintain that Hume attributes literal spatial features to our sensory ideas. We need not concern ourselves with this question of Hume interpretation, though, as the

Of course, this point is only interesting to our current concern if the non-ideational analogue of the Humean picture is not able to offer their own variant of this sort of story. It appears, however, that a denier of OTC *is* able to offer a variant of this story, because complex mental activities would be eligible for structural relationships, just as complex mental particulars are. It may be harder to frame their story in ordinary English, but this is hardly a strong theoretical disadvantage, since it seems clear that complex activities *do* have structural elements. Two dances can overlap with respect to various structural features of those dances. Obviously, there is more to be said here than simply to observe that activities have structural features. But, given that they do, the same strategy for explaining derivative intentionality is available to one who rejects OTC as is available to the proponent of OTC.

It may seem then, that there is no substantive difference between accepting OTC or rejecting it, except for how we speak. Taken at face-value, the details of OTC will be easier to convey in ordinary language, compared to the linguistic contortions that will be required of the OTC rejector (who will, roughly, need to shift all of these structural descriptions into an adverbial position). At the same time, from grounds of parsimony, the rejector of OTC comes out ahead, getting the same work done with fewer entities (and fewer types of entity), but some, including myself, will be left wondering whether the views here are genuinely distinct to begin with. Perhaps they are mere notational variants.

Of course, it also seems absurd to suggest that there is no substantive difference between Reid and his opponents on this front. But articulating what such differences could be is exceedingly difficult, absent the specification of some additional facts about the nature of ideas. For example, if someone were to suggest that ideas were literally physical objects, there would be some clear commitments that came from positing them: they would have to be located in space, they would have to have some determinate size and shape, etc. And, then, we could easily see where Reid and his opponents diverge. But neither this, nor any other specific proposal about the nature of ideas is a clear-cut commitment of OTC.

My concern here is easiest to express by invoking a well-known passage from Locke, on the nature of memory, in which he warns us against a mistaken understanding of his talk of ideas:

The other way of Retention is the Power to revive again in our Minds those *Ideas*, which after imprinting have disappeared, or have been as it were laid

more common approach among defenders of OTC is to appeal to isomorphism, rather than identity.

aside out of Sight: And thus we do, when we conceive Heat or Light, Yellow or Sweet, the Object being removed.

This is *Memory*, which is as it were the Store-house of our *Ideas*. For the narrow Mind of Man, not being capable of having many *Ideas* under View and Consideration at once, it was necessary to have a Repository, to lay up those *Ideas*, which at another time it might have use of. But our *Ideas* being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this *laying up* of our *Ideas* in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our *Ideas* are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where, but only there is an ability in the Mind, when it will, to revive them again; and as it were paint them anew on it self, though some with more, some with less difficulty; some more lively, and others more obscurely. And thus it is, by the Assistance of this Faculty, that we are said to have all those *Ideas* in our Understandings, which though we do not actually contemplate, yet we can bring in sight, and make appear again, and be the Objects of our Thoughts, without the help of those sensible Qualities, which first imprinted them there. (John Locke, *Essay*, 2.10.2, p. 149–50)

Locke speaks of ideas as though they are genuine entities, but at the same time, it is clear that he thinks much of the way we speak about them is too laden with physical metaphor. And so, in this passage, Locke warns us off of mistakenly treating ideas as immaterial parallels of physical objects: the ideas don't have to hang out in some storehouse in order to be in your memory.

The passage even hints at a heavily deflationary account of these ideas, as when Locke says that they are “nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them.” The worries raised by this seeming deflationism about the being of ideas is enhanced by Reid's criticism of the analogy to ideas with pictures:

To avoid [the errors brought about by reliance on imperfect metaphor] as far as possible in the present subject, it is proper to attend to the dissimilitude between conceiving a thing in the mind, and painting it to the eye, as well as to their similitude.[...]

When a man paints, there is some work done, which remains when his hand is taken off, and continues to exist, though he should think no more of it. Every stroke of his pencil produces an effect, and this effect is different from his action in making it; for it remains and continues to exist when the action ceases. This action of painting is one thing, the picture produced is another thing. The first is the cause, the second is the effect.

Let us next consider what is done when he only conceives the picture.[...] Conceiving as well as projecting or resolving, are what the schoolmen call

*immanent* acts of the mind, which produce nothing beyond themselves. But painting is a transitive act, which produces an effect distinct from the operation, and this effect is a picture. Let this therefore be always remembered, that what is commonly called the image of thing in the mind, is no more than the act or operation of the mind in conceiving it. (Reid, EIP, IV.I, p. 300)

What then is the real difference between embracing a seemingly deflationary account of mental particulars vs. instead appealing to primitive features of mental operations? It seems that there is not much room for us to distinguish the accounts apart from the language in which they are couched. So, it would seem, if we leave things here, we could treat the two views as notational variants. They really just differ in whether they use the language of ideas, but no further.

The proponent of OTC could try to suggest that their view has an advantage (and thus, differs more than nominally from Reid's) in light of the ease with which a complex idea is recalled to mind, in comparison to the effort involved in constructing it from scratch. The first time one constructs a complex conception, much work is required to conceive it in all of its detail. On subsequent occasions, the complex conception will return much more readily and easily.

But this ease of repeated conception does not help against Reid, who can correctly point out that it is no surprise when a complex activity is easier to perform subsequent times than it was initially. Reid would suggest that his opponents are reasoning like someone who believes that the performance of a dance produces a new persisting entity—a residual token dance—simply because people find it much easier to dance in some particular way if they have done so previously. While some activities produce residuals (e.g. painting), other activities (like dances) do not. But both classes of activity are easier to perform with practice. For Reid, this ease would simply signal increased skill and facility at performing that complex act of conceiving, and would not seem to be any evidence that there was a residual entity produced by the initial act of conception.

The point I am drawing out here is quite similar to one that emerges in John Yolton's criticism of Reid. He suggests that Reid's predecessors seldom intended to "ontologize" ideas, and that Reid's uncharitable readings of his interlocutors comes from foisting upon them an inappropriately inflationary account of these ideas. In a sense, Yolton opts for a form of reconciliation between the views, regarding Reid as doing a bad job of interpreting the defenders of the way of ideas, but not really diverging as much in the substance of their views:

If the skepticism about the external world which Reid saw in the way-of-ideas

tradition was traced, as he did, to ideas being proxy objects, third things, then, in revising the standard reading of that tradition in the light of what we have discovered, such skepticism should also disappear. Attention can then be directed toward the more important component in accounts of perceptual acquaintance, the meaning and signficatory response. Attention can also be given to the cognitive processes that were so prevalent in this tradition, to what Hume characterized as 'acts of the mind'. (Yolton 1984, p. 221)

This is not to say that Yolton denies any substantive differences, but on the question of whether ideas are "third things", Yolton seems to be suggesting that Locke and Reid are not as far apart as the standard narrative (or Reid himself) would have us believe.

As should be evident, I think that there is much right about Yolton's assessment on this front. The difference between these views is, at best, subtler and more difficult to articulate than we may have appreciated. In the next section, we will examine a seemingly parallel conflict between Russell and Meinong on the existence of *mental content*, to see if it can shed light on this dispute between Reid and OTC.

### Section 3: Paintings vs. Pointings

Russell (1992) describes in detail a difference of opinion with Meinong regarding the existence of mental content. Russell is opposed to mental content, while Meinong believes that every mental state must possess some existing content (in addition to its object). The parallels between Russell's rejection of content and Reid's rejection of ideas are striking, and fortunately for us, Russell engages with Meinong's direct argument for the existence of mental content. Here is Meinong's position, as quoted/translated by Russell, on this point:

That it is essential to everything psychical to have an object, will presumably be admitted without reserve at least in regard to that psychical material which will here exclusively concern us. For no one doubts that one cannot have a presentation without having a presentation of *something*, and also that one cannot judge without judging about *something*. People will probably also concede just as willingly that there is no presentation or judgment without content; but for not a few this readiness comes from the assumption that content and object are pretty much the same thing. I also long believed that the two expressions could be used indifferently, and that therefore one of them could be dispensed with. To-day I regard this as a mistake. (Russell 1984, p. 41)



Russell goes on to characterize the reasoning behind this Meinongian view about content:

The argument which has probably done the most to produce a belief in ‘contents’ as opposed to objects is the last of those adduced by Meinong, namely that there must be some difference between a presentation of one object and a presentation of another, and this difference is not to be found in the ‘act’ of presentation. At first sight, it seems obvious that my mind is in different ‘states’ when I am thinking of one thing and when I am thinking of another. But in fact the difference of the object supplies all the difference required. (Russell 1984, p. 43)

The argument that Russell is presenting here as giving rise to the Meinongian view is an interesting one. Roughly, the reasoning is this: The presentation of  $O_1$  to  $S$  and the presentation of  $O_2$  to  $S$  (where  $O_1$  and  $O_2$  are distinct) are different states. Since the subject is the same in both states, and the mental relation—acquaintance—is the same in both states, there must be something else about the states, i.e. the content of the state, which explains their difference. Russell’s critique of the argument is that it depends on a “internal” theory of relations. He says, “[if] the complex ‘my awareness of A’ is different from the complex ‘my awareness of B’, it does not follow that when I am aware of A I have some intrinsic quality which I do not have when I am aware of B but not of A. There is therefore no reason for assuming a difference in the subject corresponding to the difference between two presented objects.”

I confess that when I first read Russell’s discussion here, I was quite perplexed. I was not able to make sense of what Russell had in mind until I realized that Russell was thinking about these mental relationships as something like pointing, while Meinong is thinking about them as something more like depicting.

Consider the physical act of pointing. I extend my arm out, and the result is that I am pointing at a certain green couch. There is some difference between pointing at the green couch, rather than pointing at a red chair, but it does not follow from this that there is any difference intrinsic to me or *my contribution to the pointing event* between the two cases. Imagine that I remain exactly as I am, and someone swaps the locations of the two pieces of furniture. Now my pointing has a different object, but there has been no change in my contribution to the act of pointing.<sup>12</sup>

However, to think that this is an adequate reply to Meinong is to misun-

12 I am here abstracting away from the role that human intent likely plays in determining the object of pointing (e.g. was I pointing at the couch, or at a particular cushion, or at the region of space, etc.). The point is meant as illustrative, and not as a serious analysis of human pointings.

derstand the motivation for the Meinongian position. Instead of a pair of pointings, let's consider a pair of paintings: Depiction A is a depiction of a white winged horse. Depiction B is a depiction of a centaur. The two paintings have different objects.<sup>13</sup> But we cannot explain this difference in terms of some causal or spatiotemporal relationship that one painting bears to a centaur and which the other bears to a white winged horse. And on the face of it, it seems that the one depiction needs to differ intrinsically from the other, in order for the one to have a centaur as its object while the other has a white winged horse as its. At the very least, it is intuitively plausible that part of what makes something a depiction of a white winged horse arises from intrinsic features of the depiction.<sup>14</sup>

This helps blunt the Russellian criticism because it reveals the situation in which Meinong views content as doing indispensable work (and work that cannot be done by the object): the case of imagining the non-existent. When someone imagines a centaur, Meinong sees a need to explain why the object of the imagining is a centaur, and not a white winged horse. Since the centaur can't do that explanatory work itself, there needs to be something about the person doing the imagining that explains it.

The context of this discussion in Russell focuses on perceptual cases, so he does not describe his account of the basis of mere imaginings. In a sense, though, we know part of Russell's answer already: the objects of our mental relations must exist. And thus, Russell will not agree with Meinong's set-up for the case, and attempt to resolve it some other way.<sup>15</sup> I don't have the space to run through all the options that Russell could appeal to, but crucially, Russell's combination of views tells us that he will reject the key premise in the Meinongian argument. Whether he appeals to existing, but uninstantiated property complexes, ersatz objects standing proxy for the mythical beings (such as spoken myths or the books in which such myths are written), or something else, he will not accept that centaurs or white winged horses are really the objects of those states, and thus, won't have to go along with Meinong on the remainder of the argument.

And this is where the parallel between Reid and Russell breaks down. We know that Reid explicitly endorses that conception can relate us to non-existent

13 At present, we will simply assume that it is perfectly fine to allow for the objects of paintings to be non-existent objects.

14 As with the oversimplification of pointings, I do not intend this to be a complete account of visual depiction. Presumably the intent of the artist or the judgment of the viewer will play some role in such an account, which I omit here.

15 The question arises even in the perceptual case, and one can see a discussion of some alternatives available in William Alston's "Back to the Theory of Appearing" (1990).

objects. As the following quote illustrates, Reid is quite insistent that we can conceive of objects that do not exist:

[T]he powers of sensation, of perception, of memory, and of consciousness, are all employed solely about objects that do exist, or have existed. But conception is often employed about objects that neither do, nor did, nor will exist. This is the very nature of this faculty, that its object, though distinctly conceived, may have no existence. (Reid, EIP, IV.I, p. 311)

In fact, Reid even thinks we can conceive of things that are literally impossible, such as round squares, triangles with one side that exceeds the length of the other two combined, or that the square root of two is a rational number. With Russell's story, it is quite clear how we can make sense of the difference between accepting and denying content: does something internal to the state in question play a role in determining the object of the state? Russell says no. And so, for Meinong, the issue is not necessarily about *reifying* the content as a distinct entity (though his language suggests he believes that contents are things that exist), but rather, the simple commitment that something *about the state* and *internal to it* plays a role in determining the object.

So, superficially, it appeared as though Reid sided with Russell in rejecting mental content. At the very least, he diverged from Russell in permitting non-existent mental objects. Since Russell's rejection of mental content played a crucial role in responding to the Meinongian argument for content, we must ask ourselves what Reid would say in reply to the Meinongian reasoning discussed above. It seems that Reid faces a dilemma here: Either, he can accept the Meinongian reasoning, but maintain that it is compatible with the rejection of OTC, or, on the other hand, he can reject the Meinongian reasoning, in which case, we are owed an external account of why the conception of a white winged horse has a different object than the conception of a centaur. Though Reid's discussions of this point are not conclusive, I think there are some reasonable suggestions about which option we should view him as taking.

While Reid does not explicitly address this issue as such, a good deal of what he does say suggests that he would opt for a view which attempts to capture the Meinongian insight without commitment to ideas. For example, Reid is happy to speak of complex conceptions, which he seems to treat as complex mental activities involving simple conceptions as components. The composition of our complex conceptions will play a role in explaining what they are conceptions of. Which is precisely the sort of story that suggests that internal features of conceptions play a role in determining their objects (at least some of the time).

So, we have good reason to think Reid would accept Meinong's reasoning

up to a point. conclude that Meinong's error was not in reasoning towards the need for an explanation of That is to say, he would still suggest that Meinong was committing an error, but that error merely consists in reifying the features of mental states that explain the differences in the objects of conception. And while Reid himself may not straightforwardly affirm or present us with a theory of the internal features that help determine the objects of a given conception, nothing in his complaints against OTC precludes him from adopting such a view.

## Conclusion

We can now return to the question of what is at stake between Reid and the proponents of OTC. I have argued against a number of possible ways we might think about what is at stake, in terms of explaining intentional contents, inconceivability, ease of repeated conception of complex ideas, and accounting for the difference in intentional objects in conceptions of different non-existent objects. And across the board, I have been suggesting that there is no substantive difference between them. One thing that is crucial to keep in mind is the limited scope of this conclusion. I have been focused, very narrowly, on bare conception, and there is good reason to suspect that investigations into questions about perception or memory could reveal important divergences between Reid, and his opponents who accept ideas. After all, the brunt of Reid's assault on the way of ideas concerns skeptical consequences with respect to perception that are alleged to arise because of commitment to the way of ideas. The stalemate I have suggested we find in investigating conception may well be settled elsewhere.

But for all that, I think it is possible that there is some difference between the way Reid is approaching this issue, and the way that proponents of OTC are. OTC is compatible with a wide variety of accounts of how ideas mediate between thinkers and the objects of thought. Some of those will lend themselves to homuncular thinking, though not all of them do. But Reid's approach, even adopting the Meinongian insight, positively rules out anything of that sort. The defenders of OTC tend towards language that suggests a more direct mental awareness of the ideas than of their objects, but for Reid, there is no suggestion that we would be aware of (or *more* aware of) the features determining our mental states to objects than we are of the objects themselves. I hedge in describing this difference because it strikes me as a difference in the

overall orientation of defenders of the respective views, rather than a formal difference between them. The direct awareness of the mediating features/entities is consistent with either view, as is a denial of that direct awareness. But, nevertheless, there does seem to be something about Reid's position that helps ward us off from thinking of conception in that way, and there does seem to be something about OTC that lends itself to positing a more direct mental awareness of the ideas than of the external objects of conception. And so, at the very least, we can take Reid's characterization of his approach as a solid indication of his distaste for homuncular thinking.<sup>16</sup>

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