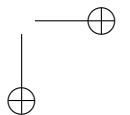
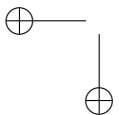


Thomas Reid on Mind, Knowledge, and Value



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Thomas Reid on Mind, Knowledge, and Value

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Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations for Works by Thomas Reid</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Todd Buras and Rebeccaopenhaver</i>	
1. Thomas Reid’s <i>Experimentum Crucis</i>	14
<i>Todd Buras</i>	
2. Thomas Reid on Instinctive Exertions and the Spatial Content of Sensations	35
<i>Chris Lindsay</i>	
3. Perceptual and Imaginative Conception: The Distinction Reid Missed	52
<i>Marina Folescu</i>	
4. Four Questions about Acquired Perception	75
<i>James Van Cleve</i>	
5. Seeing White and Wrong: Reid on the Role of Sensations in Perception, with a Focus on Colour Perception	100
<i>Lucas Thorpe</i>	
6. Thomas Reid on Aesthetic Perception	124
<i>Rebeccaopenhaver</i>	
7. Thomas Reid’s Expressivist Aesthetics	139
<i>Rachel Zuckert</i>	
8. Reid on Aesthetic Response and the Perception of Beauty	161
<i>Laurent Jaffro</i>	
9. Pragmatism and Reid’s “Third Way”	178
<i>Patrick Rysiew</i>	
10. The Defense of the First Principles of Common Sense in Reid’s Epistemology: A New Use for Track-Record Arguments	193
<i>Angélique Thébert</i>	

vi CONTENTS

11. Theism, Coherence, and Justification in Thomas Reid's Epistemology <i>Gregory S. Poore</i>	213
12. Does Reid Have Anything to Say to (the New) Hume? <i>Terence Cuneo</i>	232
13. Reid on Favors, Injuries, and the Natural Virtue of Justice <i>Lewis Powell and Gideon Yaffe</i>	249
<i>Index</i>	267

5

Seeing White and Wrong

Reid on the Role of Sensations in Perception, with a Focus on Colour Perception

Lucas Thorpe

1 What Do We Perceive?

Reid commentators can be divided into those who offer what one could call more or less *liberal* accounts of perception. On the less liberal side of the divide are commentators such as Ryan Nichols, James van Cleve, and, perhaps, Todd Buras. The least liberal position, which I will call the narrow account of perception, is that of Ryan Nichols (2007). According to Nichols, we can only literally be said to perceive physical objects and primary qualities. Although James Van Cleve (2004) denies that what Reid calls ‘acquired perception’ is genuine perception, he recognizes that Reid has a more liberal account of what can be perceived than Nichols, accepting that Reid is committed to the position that we can literally perceive secondary qualities. However, I will argue that Van Cleve’s interpretation of Reid’s theory of perception implicitly commits Reid to the narrow account of perception, as it implies that for Reid we cannot literally perceive secondary qualities such as colours.

On the more liberal side of the divide we find commentators such as Laurent Jaffro, Rebecca Copenhaver, and myself. Jaffro, for example, argues that according to Reid we can literally perceive aesthetic qualities, such as the excellence of a work of art; Copenhaver has argued that what Reid calls ‘acquired perception’ is literally a form of perception.¹ Although the primary focus of this essay is on colour perception, the motivation is broader than this. The central claim that will be defended and explained here is that Reid is committed to the position that direct perception of an object or quality is compatible with an indirect, or what he calls “relative,” conception of the object or quality. This commitment is central to his account of colour perception, for he believes that, although we can directly perceive secondary qualities, our conception of

¹ See, for example, Jaffro, Chapter 8 in this volume and Copenhaver (2010).

these qualities, at least the conception that plays a role in the perceptual act, is relative. In defending such an account of colour perception, I hope to persuade other Reid scholars to adopt a wider or more liberal conception of perception in general. The thought here is that, if we open the door to colour, we are going to have to invite in all of colour's friends too. And given Reid's account of colour perception, colour has a lot of friends that some commentators do not want to invite to the perception party, such as moral qualities. If we accept Reid's account of colour perception and we believe that we can literally perceive colours, then it becomes difficult to provide a principled reason not to adopt an extremely liberal account of perception, an account that I am sympathetic to for ethical reasons, for I believe that we can literally perceive some moral qualities, such as the wrongness of an action and the moral worth of another human being.

Commentators committed to a less liberal interpretation of Reid's account of perception are at least implicitly committed to the position that Reid often uses "perception" or "perceive" in a non-technical, or what Reid might call a "figurative," sense.² And Reid's usage of this word, and perceptual language, is in general far broader than current philosophical usage. For example, Reid often talks of "perceiving" duties and the meaning of words and things such as "the weight of a ship."³ Now, commentators committed to narrow accounts of perception try to read away such usages of the word, and implicitly assume that Reid uses perceptual language either ambiguously or carelessly; and as a general interpretive principle, we should not rest too much of our interpretation on the single use of a particular word in a particular context. Reid's use of the word "perception," however, is far more precise and univocal than some commentators would have. Reid himself repeatedly stresses that philosophers need to be extremely careful in their use of words and even argues that "there is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words" (EIP I i, 17). Given such claims, and his claim that much that is wrong with the philosophy of his day has to do with the tendency of philosophers to use the word 'perception' in an ambiguous way, one should be wary of attributing such ambiguous and loose usage to Reid. Unless we have good reasons to do otherwise, we should take what Reid says at face value. For example, it seems clear to me that when Reid talks of "perceiving" an obligation or duty, Reid is using his words carefully and means what he says.

² As an example of a "figurative" use of a word, Reid explains that "I might say, I perceive that such a person has had the small-pox; but this phrase is figurative, although the figure is so familiar that it is not observed. The meaning of it is that I perceive the pits in his face, which are certain signs of his having had the smallpox" (EIP I i, 23).

³ For example Reid writes that, "[Man] *perceives* it to be his duty to act the worthy and honourable part . . ." (EAP Introduction, 6; emphasis added). Similarly he writes that "It would be very strange indeed, if mankind had always used these words so familiarly, without *perceiving* that they had no meaning" (EAP I i, 13; emphasis added). And in talking about what he calls acquired perception, he argues that "[A] painter *perceives* that this picture is the work of Raphael, that the work of Titian; a jeweler, that this is a true diamond, that a counterfeit; a sailor that this is a ship of 500 ton, that of 600; these different acquired perceptions are produced by the same general principles of the human mind . . ." (IHM VI xxiv, 191–2; emphasis added).

Let us take a closer look at candidates for what can be immediately perceived by Reid. All Reid scholars accept that according to Reid we can immediately perceive:

1. physical objects;⁴
2. primary qualities (such as hardness).

In this essay, I will concentrate on defending the view that, according to Reid, we can also perceive:

3. secondary qualities, such as colours.

In defending this claim, I reject the explicit position of Ryan Nichols and the implicit position of James Van Cleve. I will explain Reid's account of what is involved in the perception of such qualities. I believe, however, that Reid's account of perception is far more liberal than this. For I believe that, given Reid's account of colour perception, if we accept that we can literally perceive colours, which seems to be a plausible common sense position, then, at the least, it makes it easier to argue for the claim that we can literally perceive four more types of thing:

4. moral objects and/or qualities, such as obligations, or the rightness/wrongness of an action;
5. the dispositions, mental states, and perhaps even the powers of other agents, such as embarrassment when someone blushes;
6. aesthetic qualities, such as grandeur and beauty; and,
7. things such as 'the weight of a ship' and 'its being by Picasso.'

There is good textual evidence to support the claim that Reid is committed to the view that we can literally perceive such objects. There is conflicting textual evidence, however, on Reid's position concerning two other putative objects of perception, namely:

8. other finite minds; and,
9. certain qualities of God, such as his grandeur.

In addition, Reid seems to be committed to the view that we literally perceive:

10. meanings (of, say, written words); and
11. changes.

Now I am not convinced that we, literally, perceive the meaning of words, although a case might be made that we do perceive the significance of things such as smoke

⁴ Although someone like Van Cleve, who believes that perception, strictly understood, requires what Reid calls a 'direct' conception of the object, might have a problem here as Reid is committed to the position that our conception of physical objects is 'indirect' or relative. Thus Reid claims that "*our notion of body is not direct but relative to its qualities. We know that it is something extended, solid, and divisible, and we know no more*" (EAP I i, 10; emphasis added). So Van Cleve is implicitly committed to the position that, according to Reid, we do not really perceive bodies, but only their primary qualities.

and tracks in the snow. In addition, although I agree with Reid that we immediately perceive changes, I think that given his own account of the nature of perception, Reid himself faces problems accounting for the perception of changes, and in particular motion. For Reid himself is explicitly committed to the view that the perception is quite distinct from memory and that, strictly speaking, we can only perceive what is present. Our perception of changes, however, involves not just awareness of something present but also of the past. Reid's inability to account for our perception of change is the biggest failing in Reid's account of perception. It is clear that we can, literally, see changes, and Reid accepts this. But, given the importance Reid places on the distinction between perception, which is necessarily of what is present, and memory, which is necessarily of what is past, Reid faces a problem explaining how the perception of changes is possible. At the very least, it is not obvious how a Reidian is to account for our perception of changes.

Now, although I think Reid's account of what can be perceived is extremely liberal, there are certain important classes of things that Reid believes that we cannot, strictly speaking, be said to perceive. Amongst those things that Reid claims are not objects of perception are:

1. my sensations;
2. my self, and the operations and powers of my mind;
3. the past.

As George Pappas points out, in the *Inquiry* Reid sometimes uses language that suggests that he thinks that sensations can be perceived (Pappas 1989, 158). I think, for once, we should regard these passages as slips of the pen on Reid's part. I am unaware of passages in his later works where Reid makes a similar claim. In his later works he explicitly argues that, strictly speaking, sensations are not perceived, although they can be consciously attended to.⁵ Of course, for Reid conscious attention is structurally very similar to perception, in that it involves a conception of the object and an existential belief, but consciousness is directed inwards whereas perception is directed outwards, and Reid clearly distinguishes consciousness and perception as distinct faculties.

2 The Role of Sense Organs and Sensations in Perception in General

Having briefly enumerated the types of things that Reid thinks can be immediately perceived, I will now turn to his account of the nature of perception. I will begin by examining his account of perception in general, before turning to his account of what is involved in our perception of secondary qualities, and particularly colours.

⁵ Thus Reid claims, in his discussion of the explication of words in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, that "Perception is applied only to external objects not to those that are in the mind itself. When I am pained, I do not say that I perceive pain, but that I feel it, or that I am conscious of it. Thus *perception* is distinguished from *consciousness*" (EIP I i, 22).

One important question has to do with the role of sense organs in perception. Reid is committed to the position that human perception requires the existence and well-functioning of our sense organs.⁶ However, despite arguing that in actual fact our sense organs are necessary for perception, Reid is also committed to the view that neither the existence of sense organs nor felt sensations are a logically necessary condition for the perception of external objects. Thus, for example, in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* he argues that God, and maybe other beings (perhaps he is referring to angels), do not need sense organs in order to perceive, and he argues that we can reasonably hope that after death we will continue to perceive but without bodily sense organs, arguing that “we have reason to believe that, when we put off these bodies and all the organs belonging to them, our perceptive powers shall rather be improved than destroyed or impaired” (EIP II i, 72).⁷ Reid says similar things about sensations.⁸

Reid, then, seems to believe that both sense organs and sensations are *contingently necessary* for the perception of the primary qualities of external objects.⁹ The necessity here is contingent, as God could have created us with the capacity to immediately perceive certain things without the use of sense organs, but given the nature we have

⁶ In the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, Reid argues that “[w]e perceive no external object but by means of certain bodily organs which God has given us for that purpose . . . without the organs of the several senses, we perceive no external object. We cannot see without eyes, nor hear without ears; it is not only necessary that we should have these organs, but they should be in a sound and natural state” (EIP II i, 72). He also makes it clear in the *Inquiry* that he thinks that, for us, in perception “[i]t is necessary that the impression be made upon our organs, but not that it be known. Nature carries on this part of the process of perception without our consciousness or concurrence” (IHM VI xxi, 175).

⁷ It is interesting to note that Kant is committed to a similar view, arguing that we should hope for a change in our form of intuition after death. “Cutting off all further pondering on this is the best remedy, that we can say: another world means only another intuition of the same things, the sensible world thus entirely ceases for us . . . Now it is asked: will the soul exist as pure intelligence [after death]? But it is indeed that when it is not sensible. But one also cannot think how a being that is created should cognize things in themselves. We will thus presumably come only by degrees to a greater perfection of cognitions and have another kind of intuition in the same or in another world. Here no philosophy goes any further” (*Metaphysik Volkmann*, 28, 446). And in his lecture course from 1790–1 he once again repeats the claim that “the human being who is virtuous is in heaven, only he does not intuit it, but he can infer it through reason” (28, 593). He continues by adding that “the transition from the sensible world into the other is merely the intuition of oneself. According to content it is always the same, but according to form it is different . . . One sees at once how limited is our knowledge of the state of the soul after death. This life shows nothing but appearances, another world means nothing other than another intuition, things in themselves are unknown to us here, but whether we will become acquainted with them in another world? We do not know. A pure spirit cannot exist merely as soul in the sensible world. As intelligence it does not appear in space, also not in time” (*Metaphysik* L2 28, 593). See Thorpe (2010).

⁸ “[W]e might perhaps, have been made of such a constitution, as to have our present perceptions connected with other sensations. We might, perhaps, have had the perception of external objects, without either impressions upon the organ of sense, or sensations. Or lastly, the perceptions we have might have been immediately connected with the impressions upon our organs, without any intervention of sensation. This last seems really to be the case in one instance—to wit, in our perception of the visible figure of bodies” (IHM VI xxi, 176). He makes similar claims elsewhere. For example, he claims in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, immediately after the passage quoted in which he claims that for us sense organs are not necessary for perception of external objects, that “[n]o man can show it to be impossible to the Supreme Being to have given us the power of perceiving external objects without [sense] organs . . . we ought not, therefore, to conclude, that such bodily organs are, in their own nature, necessary to perception” (EIP II i, 72).

⁹ It should be noted that there is a debate as to whether Reid thinks that sensations play a role in our perception of visible figure—that is, the apparent shape of objects.

been created with, the existence and well-functioning of our sense organs is necessary for perception. In contemporary terminology we can perhaps think of what I am calling contingent necessity as a form of nomological necessity.

It is interesting that the notion of sensation is not included in Reid's definition of perception. Where a philosopher today might talk of *sense*-perception, Reid talks of our perception of external objects. When speaking strictly, Reid identifies sensations with feelings and insists that the essence of feelings is to be felt. Thus he argues that

Sensation is a name given by Philosophers to an act of mind, which may be distinguished from all others by this, that it hath no object distinct from the act itself. Pain of every kind is an uneasy sensation. When I am pained, I cannot say that the pain I feel is one thing, and that my feeling it, is another thing. They are one and the same thing, and cannot be disjoined, even in imagination. Pain, when it is not felt, has no existence. (EIP I i, 36–7)

Reid also argues that sensations, understood thusly, are transparent to consciousness. This is not to say that we necessarily know the nature of our sensations, for knowledge of the nature of our sensations requires attentive reflection. However, he believes that we have the capacity to know our sensations perfectly.¹⁰ Thus Reid claims that

[I]t is essential to a sensation to be felt, and it can be nothing more than we feel it to be. If we can only acquire the habit of attending to our sensations, we may know them perfectly.

(IHM VI xxi, 175–6)

It is clear that he thinks that sensations normally play a causal role in perception. It is also clear that he thinks that it is only contingent that they play such a role, for God could have created us otherwise. If this is the only role sensations play in perception, this would seem to imply what Mark Johnston has called the 'Wallpaper View' of sensation (Johnston 2006). According to such a view, sensations are understood of as "*mere accompaniments of immediate perceptual judgments*" and "the deliverances of sensory awareness may be compared to the wallpaper or to the background music during a dinner" and it makes "sensory awareness a curious sideshow, a mere provider of sensation alongside the epistemically interesting perceptual act" (260–1). Of course, Reid thinks that sensations are more than "mere accompaniments" of our perceptual judgments, as he thinks that they actually do play a causal role in our perceptual judgments, and that it is the existence of the sensation that "suggests" the judgment. But Johnston wants to classify all views according to which sensations do not play an *essential* role in our perceptual judgments as versions of the Wallpaper View. And it is clear that he classifies theories that only allow sensations a causal role in the genesis of perceptual judgments as in the same ballpark as Wallpaper Theories,

¹⁰ Reid is thus committed to the position that sensations are what Timothy Williamson calls 'luminous.' Williamson defines luminosity in the following terms: "A condition C is defined to be luminous if and only if [the following condition] holds: For every case α , if in α C obtains, then in α one is in a position to know that C obtains" (Williamson 2000, 95).

because such theories are just “more general denial[s] of the epistemic significance of ‘sensations.’”¹¹

Johnston suggests that one alternative to Wallpaper and merely causal theories is to insist that “qualia partly individuate certain concepts figuring in immediate perceptual judgment” (265). According to such a theory, “wholly subjective qualia might partly individuate concepts of the objective qualities of external things—concepts of their real external colours, shapes, sounds, smells, etc” (265). Now I believe that Reid advocates something like this position, but only with regard to our concepts of secondary qualities. When it comes to primary qualities, however, Reid believes that our sensations are Wallpapery.¹²

For Reid, then, when it comes to our perception of secondary qualities, sensation plays a much more important role. For, although sensations do play only a causal, not a constitutive, role in our *perception* of secondary qualities, they do play an essential role in our *conception* of such qualities, in the sense that our actual conception of a particular secondary quality is partly determined by the sensation.¹³ To understand what this might mean we need to have a closer look at (a) Reid’s account of our perception of secondary qualities and (b) his account of the type of conception that is required for perception. But before turning to this topic I will briefly discuss Reid’s explication of perception in general.

3 Reid’s ‘Explication’ of Perception

Reid believes that there are many terms (including “to perceive,” “to remember,” “to be conscious of,” and “to conceive”) that cannot be *strictly* or *logically* defined, but

¹¹ His comments on Davidson make this clear. Davidson famously argues that “[T]he relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical since the sensations are not beliefs of other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer I think is obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified” (Davidson 1986, 311). Johnston comments that “There is no reason to suppose that Davidson thinks of the having of sensations as the enjoying of qualia. But, even so, he envisages no positive epistemic role for ‘sensations’ to play” (Johnston 2006, 262).

¹² Although it should be pointed out that Reid believes that sensations, as feelings, are the locus of pleasure and pain. Now, Johnston suggests that according to the Wallpaper View, sensations are like “*Tafelmusic*” in the sense that they do not play an essential role in “a diner’s ingestion of food” (261). On the Reidian view, however, the sensations can provide the main course, although not epistemically. For example, one might think that in the case of visual perception it is the reflective attentiveness to the sensation that is the main course in the case of our pleasure in the experience of beauty. And, although Reid does not make this point, we might have a similar view about sexual pleasure, especially if we have a view of sexual pleasure as involving reflective attentiveness to the sensation of touch. The motivational role of sensations might play an important role in a Reidian account of moral perception. If such perception is a type of sense perception, as Reid believes it is, the fact that the sensations can and do play a motivational role is not insignificant. For these reasons it seems a mistake to suggest that a position like Reid’s that downplays the epistemic role of sensations necessarily downplays the role of sensation in our lives.

¹³ The sensation does not play an essential role in the sense that we would be unable to conceive of the particular quality perceived without the particular sensation. There might be more than one way to conceive a particular quality. God could have created us in such a way that we conceived of colours (as objective qualities) with tactile sensations.

which can be “explicated.”¹⁴ Thus, although he thinks a proper logical definition of “perception,” in terms of its genus and species, is impossible, it is possible to offer an “explication” of its meaning, and given the way in which the use of the word has been perverted by philosophers committed to the way of ideas, such an explication is needed.¹⁵ Reid’s official explication has three elements. Thus in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, Reid explains that

If 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 v, 96)

This passage has received a lot of analysis by Reid scholars. And most of this essay will focus on what sort of conception is required for perception. It is important to note that here, and elsewhere, Reid restricts perception to *external* objects, and it is an important part of my interpretation that Reid does not identify the *external* with the *physical*, for Reid believes that there are objects that are external to my mind that are non-physical—for example, God, other minds, and the dispositions of other minds. We could say that by the *external* Reid means something like what Fichte, who was clearly influenced by Reid, calls the not-I. Thus, the mere fact that perception, properly understood, is limited to *external* objects does not imply that we can only properly be said to perceive physical objects. Indeed, Reid himself frequently uses the language of perception when talking of our cognitive relationship to non-physical objects and qualities.¹⁶

Although it is fairly clear what Reid denies, it is not as obvious what his positive account of the relationship between perception and sensation actually is. Reid thinks that perception necessarily involves what he calls a conception or notion of the object perceived, and in order to fully appreciate Reid’s position it is important to distinguish between the role of sensation in our *conception* of the perceived object or quality and its role in the perception of the object.

One of the main claims I will argue for in this essay is that, for Reid, what is required for perception is a *distinct* but not necessarily a *direct*, conception of the object or quality perceived. Just because Reid believes that *perception* is, in some sense, direct, he

¹⁴ “A logical definition—that is, a strict and proper definition—must express the kind of the thing defined and the specific difference by which the species defined is distinguished from every other species belonging to that kind” (EIP I i, 18).

¹⁵ “To perceive, to remember, to be conscious and to conceive or imagine, are words common to philosophers, and to the vulgar. They signify different operations of the mind, which are distinguished in all languages, and by all men that think . . . and I think they are hardly capable of strict definition” (EIP I i, 22).

¹⁶ Todd Buras sometimes writes in such a way that suggests that he believes that Reid restricts perception, understood literally, to perception of *physical* objects and properties (see Buras 2009). Buras’ position, however, is closer to the view suggested here than it appears, for although he believes that one is unable to perceive unless one perceives something material, given the power of acquired perception this restriction does not rule out the perception of non-material things.

is not committed to the view that our *conception* of the perceived object or quality must itself be a direct conception. We should not confuse the notion of the directness of perception with the directness of conception, for Reid believes that direct perception is compatible with indirect, or what he calls “relative” conception. The main focus of this essay will be defending this claim both as an interpretation of Reid and as a coherent philosophical position.

Although, for Reid, sensation plays a merely causal role in our perception of primary qualities, in our perception of secondary qualities, the sensation plays a dual role. When it comes to our perception of primary qualities, I attribute to Reid what George Pappas has called a “double-tier” as opposed to a “single-tier” theory of perception.¹⁷ The essential difference between such theories is whether sensations are literally an *ingredient* in perception or whether they are merely an *accompaniment* of perception, or play a merely *causal* rather than a *constitutive* role in perception. As Pappas points out, there are texts from Reid that can be used to support either interpretation, and Pappas and some other commentators, such as P. Cummins, think that it is most plausible to attribute a single-tier theory to Reid, according to which sensations play a constitutive role in perception.¹⁸ I think that they are wrong when it comes to Reid’s account of our perception of primary qualities, for here I think it is clear that sensations have a purely causal rather than constitutive role in the perceptual act, but due to considerations of space, I will not engage in this debate here. Instead, I would like to focus on the role of sensation in Reid’s account of our perception of secondary qualities, for here Reid’s account is, I believe, more complicated. And it is worth noting that Pappas’ main argument for his single-tier interpretation of Reid’s theory of perception *in general* is based on examples of the perception of secondary qualities, namely the brownness of a chair and the smell of a rose (Pappas 1989, 164–5).

In the case of colours, although what we immediately perceive is a quality of an object, our conception of the quality is indirect, or relative, and logically involves the sensation. When I *perceive* the redness of a rose I am immediately perceiving a quality of the object in front of me. As we have seen, Reid believes that this act of perception requires a conception of the quality and the belief (or judgment) that the quality exists.¹⁹ In the case of our perception of a secondary quality, the sensation plays two roles. On the one hand, the sensation plays a causal role, being the cause of our

¹⁷ See Pappas (1989). Pappas explains the distinction between what he calls double- and single-tier theories of perception on pages 160–7. In this paper, Pappas defends a version of the single-tier theory which “takes the complex event consisting of the sensation and the belief about an external object which it causes to be the event of perception” (163).

¹⁸ See Cummins (1974, 327; 1990). See also Pappas’ reply to Cummins (Pappas 1990).

¹⁹ Although the standard reading is that both the conception of the object and the existential belief are constitutive of the act of perception, I think that Reid’s considered opinion is that the belief is not a constitute element of the act of perception. Thus, for example, Reid believes that it is possible that young babies are capable of perception, but not capable of forming existential beliefs, as they have not yet developed the concept of existence. This would suggest that Reid’s position is that, in human adults, acts of perception generally cause corresponding beliefs, but such beliefs are not necessary for perception.

perceptual belief. The sensation is the occasion of the judgment that the rose has a certain quality, and Reid thinks that this perceptual judgment/belief does not logically require the existence of any particular sensation, although as we are so constituted the sensation does necessarily play a causal role, being the cause of my belief that the rose has a certain quality. My *conception* of the redness of the rose, however, does logically involve the sensation, for my conception of the redness is of the cause of the particular sensation I am having. The *content* of the conception in veridical perception is an objective quality in the world, and the conception has a demonstrative element. We conceive of the rose as having *this* quality as opposed to *that* quality. The sensation plays an ineliminable role in fixing the reference of the demonstrative. We fix the reference of the belief by conceiving of the perceived secondary quality as “the purported cause of the particular sensation I am now having.” Our conception of, say redness, then, can be thought of in terms of a definite description that contains reference to a particular sensation.²⁰ This is, I believe, the point Reid is trying to make when he claims, for example, that

The sensations of heat and cold are perfectly known; for they neither are, nor can be, anything else than what we feel them to be; but the qualities in bodies which we call *heat* and *cold*, are unknown. They are only conceived by us, as unknown causes or occasions of the sensations to which we give the same names. (IHM V i, 54)

In this passage, in which he is discussing our perception of the secondary quality of heat, Reid distinguishes between three things: (a) the felt sensation, (b) the quality perceived and (c) the conception of the quality perceived, and he makes it clear that sensation plays an essential role in our conception of the quality perceived. Now, we can think of the conception involved in our perception of secondary qualities as analogous to a definite description. And Reid’s thought seems to be that in perceptual judgments/beliefs the description is functioning as a singular term. We can say that in our perception of a secondary quality our perceptual belief contains something like a definite description that contains the sensation as a proper part, but that, to use Donnellan’s terminology, in the belief this description is being used referentially not attributively, so that the belief is not really in any way a belief about the sensation (Donnellan 1966). This is what Reid means when he claims that secondary qualities “are conceived only as the unknown causes or occasions of certain sensations with which we are well acquainted” (EIP II xvii, 202). In our perception of secondary qualities, then, the role of the sensation is something more than causal but less than constitutive. The sensation is not a constituent of the belief, for the content of the belief is basically: “that quality exists.” Understood in these terms, the belief is not about the

²⁰ Now, although as far as I’m aware Reid himself does not make a distinction between original and acquired conception, I think that making such a distinction is the best way of developing Reid’s position. My original conception of the redness of the rose is of “the cause of this sensation,” the conception I have now is something like “the cause of sensations like this sensation” and obviously this conception is going to involve memory in some way.

sensation. From one perspective, then, the sensation is not contained in the content of the perceptual belief.²¹ However, insofar as we reflectively ask, “what quality?” the only answer we can give is “the quality that is causing this sensation.” As Reid himself makes clear, any reflective attention towards the perceptual belief forces us to attend to the sensation, but this does not make the sensation in any sense the object of the perceptual act.²² Having sketched the position I will try to defend in this essay, let us now turn to some of the details.

4 Secondary Qualities—The Case of Colours

In his recent book Ryan Nichols has argued that, according to Reid, we only perceive mind-independent bodies and primary qualities. Thus he claims that “Reid **defines** Perception to be an operation of the mind that takes mind-independent bodies and primary qualities as its intentional objects” (Nichols 2007, 27; emphasis added) and he argues that “Reid’s primary/secondary quality distinction implies that we cannot directly perceive secondary qualities” (162). And in the following chapter he claims that “Reid is up front that secondary qualities are not perceived directly. When perceiving secondary qualities the immediate object of mental awareness is a sensation and not its physical base, i.e., not the Reidian secondary quality” (187).

I believe that Nichols’ account is mistaken. Reid is clearly committed to the view that we immediately perceive secondary qualities, and I believe that Nichols confuses the question of whether our *conception* of something is direct with the question of whether our *perception* of it is so. And that, perhaps as a consequence of this, he mistakenly thinks that, for Reid, the difference between our perception of primary and secondary qualities is that they essentially involve “different process.”²³ I shall argue that the essential difference for Reid has to do with whether our conception of the quality is direct or relative, and that this is a logical distinction, having to do with the *content* of the conception, rather than essentially having to do with the process of origin.

²¹ Todd Buras makes a similar point in Buras (2008). In discussing our perception of a white page, he argues that “no objects of thought other than the page enter as necessary conditions into Reid’s account of the epistemology, reference, or descriptive content of the belief you form about the page in perception” (609) but this does not imply that sensations, for example, cannot play a role in the way in which these objects are described, nor that these sensations cannot themselves become objects of reflection. On the account of colour perception offered here, no object of thought other than the objective quality of redness (whatever this is) enters into the descriptive content of the perceptual belief formed about the redness of the rose. But this does not mean that sensation cannot be contained in the way in which the object of reference is described.

²² Thus Reid claims that in the case of a secondary quality “[w]e conceive of it only as that which occasions such a sensation, and therefore cannot reflect upon it without thinking on the sensation which it occasions” (EIP II xvii, 204).

²³ “Reid describes the process through which we perceive qualities of bodies in two different ways, depending upon whether the quality perceived is primary or secondary” (Nichols 2007, 161).

Reid fully accepts a distinction between primary and secondary qualities but obviously rejects the Lockean account of the distinction in terms of whether or not our idea of the quality resembles the quality. For Reid thinks that in the case of both primary and secondary qualities there is no resemblance between the sensation that occasions the perception and the quality perceived. For example, the sensations of touch do not, Reid thinks, resemble the quality of hardness. As a result he needs to give his own account of the essential difference between these two types of quality. He argues that the essential distinction is that our conception (or notion) of primary qualities is direct and distinct whereas our original notion of secondary qualities is relative and (comparatively) obscure.²⁴ This is not to say, of course, that our notions of such qualities must remain relative and obscure. One of the main goals of natural philosophy (what today we would call the natural sciences) is to achieve direct and clear conceptions of such qualities.

According to Reid, then, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is epistemic rather than metaphysical.²⁵ Thus Reid argues that,

There appears to me to be a real foundation for the distinction; and it is this—that our senses give us a *direct* and a *distinct* notion of the primary qualities, and inform us what they are in themselves. But of the secondary qualities, our senses give us only a *relative* and *obscure* notion. They inform us only that there are qualities that affect us in a certain manner—that is, produce in us a certain sensation; but as to what they are in themselves, our senses leave us in the dark.

(EIP II xvii, 201)

Our conception of a secondary quality is relative in the sense already explained. But what does Reid mean by a notion being obscure? Obscurity is normally contrasted with clarity or being a clear notion, and Reid explains that something is clear if “the thing itself is understood perfectly.” In claiming that our notions of secondary qualities are obscure, he is making the point that we do not know the nature or essence of the property itself. So the obscurity of a conception is a logical consequence of its relativity.

Although our conception of secondary qualities is relative and obscure, Reid insists that our perception of them is immediate. Thus he begins the next chapter of the same work by claiming that “besides primary and secondary qualities of bodies, there are many other immediate objects of perception” (EIP II xviii, 211).²⁶ Our original

²⁴ On my reading Reid uses ‘notion’ and ‘conception’ interchangeably. Nichols glosses “notion” here as “the means by which we become aware of qualities” (165). This seems to give notions some sort of causal or instrumental role. I am not sure that this is Reid’s position. I think that a notion or conception is, perhaps, better thought of as actually *being* our awareness of qualities; it is perhaps something like the mode of presentation of the quality or object.

²⁵ For a recent defence of the claim that Reid’s account of the primary/secondary quality distinction is epistemic rather than metaphysical, see McKittrick (2002); McKittrick argues that, for Reid, “[t]he difference between primary and secondary qualities is a matter of a difference in human epistemic access to these qualities. We have substantial, direct knowledge of primary qualities. We only have limited, indirect knowledge of secondary qualities.” This view is also defended in Borge (2007).

²⁶ And a little later he explains that “we say that we *feel* the toothache, not that we perceive it. On the other hand, we say that we *perceive* the colour of a body, not that we feel it” (EIP II xviii, 212; Reid’s italics). Indeed,

conceptions of colours in perception are obscure because, although they allow us to distinguish between different colours, we have no understanding of what colours are—though it is possible that we may discover what colours are through natural science, and in so doing develop a clear and direct conception of colours. However, even if through developments in colour science we did develop such a direct conception of the nature of colours, it is not clear that it would become the conception of the colour terms that would play a role in colour perception.

It is clear, then, that Reid is committed to the view that we immediately perceive secondary qualities of objects, even though our conception of them is relative and indirect. The question, then, seems to be whether this position is coherent and plausible. Reid himself suggests that there might be something paradoxical about his position when he asks, “does it not appear a contradiction, to say that we know that the fire is hot, but we know not what the heat is?” (EIP II xvii, 204). I believe that this paradox is easy to resolve, especially if we remember that in addition to perceiving what things are, we are also capable of perceiving distinctions, and in the case of secondary qualities what we possess is a capacity to distinguish between things that have distinct qualities, without knowing the true nature of these qualities. The true nature of these differences we can perceive is a topic of scientific enquiry, not immediate perception. So Reid’s position is that, although our conception of secondary qualities does not allow us to immediately perceive the nature of the thing perceived, it does allow us to immediately distinguish between things and it is this distinctness that is known immediately about colours by perception. Thus, in the *Inquiry*, Reid, borrowing the language of Locke, distinguishes between what he calls “the idea” or “appearance” of colour, which he suggests can refer either to the impression on the sense organ or to the sensation, and what he calls “the colour itself,” and explains that

[t]hat idea which we have called *the appearance of colour*, suggests the conception and belief of some unknown quality in the body which occasions the idea; and it is to this quality and not to the idea that we give the name colour. **The various colours, although in their nature equally unknown, are easily distinguished when we think or speak of them, by being associated with the ideas which they excite . . .** Colour is not a sensation, but a secondary quality of bodies, in the sense we have already explained; that it is a certain power or virtue in bodies, that in fair daylight exhibits to the eye an appearance which is very familiar to us, although it has no name. (IHM VI iv, 87; bold added)

Reid thinks that part of what we immediately perceive when we open our eyes is the colour of bodies, and what is central in Reid’s account is that, although we have no immediate conception of the nature or essence of colour, we can immediately perceive

in the *Inquiry*, Reid claims that our perception of colours is an original rather than an acquired perception, arguing that, “in all our senses, the acquired perceptions are many more than the original, especially in sight. By this sense we perceive originally the visible figure and colour of bodies only, and their visible place” (IHM VI xx, 171). There is abundant textual evidence that Reid is strongly committed to the position that we immediately perceive secondary qualities.

differences in colour. I immediately perceive that this book has a different colour from that one. Although I do not know in what this difference really consists, apart from the fact that the two books have the power to affect me in different ways, I am immediately aware of a real objective difference and it is this difference that I immediately perceive. And it is the fact that I am naturally constituted to originally perceive such differences in colour which allows me over time to acquire other perceptions. *What* we perceive in veridical colour perception, then, are real differences in the world. But we conceive of these differences in a way that essentially involves our felt sensations. Thus, in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* Reid explains that

We may see why the sensations belonging to secondary qualities are an object of our attention, while those which belong to the primary are not.

The first are not only signs of the object perceived, but they bear a capital part of the notion we form of it. We conceive it only as that which occasions such a sensation, and therefore cannot reflect upon it without thinking of the sensation which it occasions: we have no other mark whereby to distinguish it. The thought of a secondary quality, therefore, always carries us back to the sensation which it produces. (EIP II xvii, 204)

I have suggested that our notion of a secondary quality can be thought of in terms of a definite description, perhaps of the form “the cause of this sensation.” In the act of perception this description functions referentially to pick out the quality perceived, by allowing us to distinguish it from other distinct qualities. In the perceptual act, then, the definite description functions referentially not attributively. Now, in the perceptual act what we are thinking of is not the sensation but the objective quality that is the cause or occasion of the sensation. This is the object of thought in perception. However, in the case of my perception of secondary qualities, if I reflectively attend to what I perceive, I cannot but attend to the sensation because the sensation is part of my conception of what is perceived. I believe that we can get clearer on Reid’s account here if we have a clearer conception of what Reid means by distinctness.

5 What is it to have a Distinct Conception?

In order to perceive an object, we need a conception of it. And Reid insists that what is required for perception is that our conception is “more or less distinct.” But, what does this mean? Reid’s understanding of the notion of distinctness can be traced back to Locke. And to understand his position it is important to understand how he rejects the definition of distinctness found in Descartes and Leibniz.

Descartes famously distinguishes between clearness and distinctness. An awareness is *clear* if it is “present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.” Our awareness is *distinct* if it is both clear and “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (*Principles* I, 45; *CSM* I, 207–8).

Locke rejects Descartes' account of the distinction between clearness and distinctness, explaining that a "*clear Idea* is that whereof the Mind has such a full and evident perception, as it does receive from an outward Object operating duly on a well-disposed Organ," and a "*distinct Idea* is that wherein the Mind perceives a difference from all other" (Locke 1690/1975, II xxix, 4). This Lockean definition of distinctness needs to be sharply distinguished from Leibniz's. For what Locke here calls distinctness, Leibniz calls clearness. Thus in his *New Essays*, Leibniz quite explicitly rejects Locke's definition of distinctness, arguing that

According to this notion you [Locke] give of a *distinct* idea, I do not see any way of distinguishing it from a *clear* idea. That is why I have been in the habit here of following the language of M. Descartes, according to whom an idea can be clear and confused at the same time, as are the ideas of sensible qualities . . . like those of color and warmth. They are clear, because we recognize them and easily tell them from one another; but they are not distinct, because we cannot distinguish their contents. . . . Thus, although according to us [Descartes and I] distinct ideas do distinguish one object from another, so also do ideas which are clear though in themselves confused; so we do not call *distinct* all the ideas that are well distinguishing i.e. that distinguish objects, but [only] those which are well distinguished, that is, which are in themselves distinct and which distinguish in the object the marks which make it known. . . . Ideas which are not like this we call 'confused.' (Leibniz 1982, 255)

For Leibniz, then, an idea is *clear* if we can recognize its object and distinguish its object from other things. Clear ideas can be either distinct or confused. A clear idea is *distinct* if it allows one to state the distinguishing marks of the object, otherwise the idea is *confused*. According to Leibniz, then, if we have a distinct idea of something, we have some grasp of the nature of the things that allows us to understand what it is that makes it different from other things. One way of doing this is by being able to give a definition. Thus Leibniz claims that our ideas of sensible qualities "are clear, because we recognize them and easily tell them from one another; but they are not distinct, because we cannot distinguish their contents" (255–6).

Reid clearly sides with Locke against Leibniz in this dispute over the proper use of terms, for Reid makes it clear that the notion of distinctness essentially involves the capacity to distinguish between two or more things. For Reid, our conception of an object or quality needs to be 'more or less distinct' for us to be able to perceive it. What is meant by this is that our capacity to distinguish one thing from another is essential to our capacity to perceive a thing. If we can distinguish one object from another, we have a distinct conception of something, or at least a conception that is somewhat distinct; the more objects we can distinguish from the one conceived, the more distinct the conception is. And, in order to distinguish one object or quality from another, we do not need to know anything about the true nature or essence of the object or quality.

To modify one of Leibniz's favorite examples, imagine sitting on the beach listening to someone play the guitar and hearing the sound of the sea in the background. We cannot distinguish between, and so do not have a distinct conception of, the sound of the individual waves, and so Reid, in opposition to Leibniz, would have to

claim that we do not perceive the sounds of the individual waves. We can, however, distinguish between the sound of the sea and the sound of the music, and so have distinct conceptions of the sound of the sea and the sound of the guitar, and so we can rightfully be said to perceive the sound of the guitar and to perceive the sound of the sea. To change our example, according to Reid's account, if we are listening to a symphony, we can only properly be said to perceive the (sound of the) second violin if we can distinguish this sound from others. An interesting implication of Reid's insistence that in perception we need a distinct conception of the quality perceived is that it entails a rejection of Leibniz's notion of *petites perceptions*.²⁷

Now, Reid argues that in order for us to have a distinct conception of something does not imply that this conception needs to be what he calls "direct." Thus, Reid makes a distinction between "things of which we have a direct, and others of which we have only a relative conception." And he explains this distinction in the following terms:

Of some things, we know what they are in themselves: our conception of such things I call *direct*. Of other things, we know not what they are in themselves, but only that they have certain properties or attributes, or certain relations to other things: of these our conception is only *relative*. (EAP I ii, 9)²⁸

Reid attempts to clarify this distinction by his discussion of the chiliagon, arguing that our direct conception is indistinct, whereas our relative conception can be distinct. Thus he argues that when thinking of a chiliagon directly,

I find it so indistinct that it has the same appearance to my eye, or to my direct conception, as a polygon of a thousand and one, or of 999 sides. But when I form a relative conception of it, by attending to the relation it bears to polygons of a greater or lesser number of sides, my notion becomes distinct and scientific. . . . Our relative conceptions of things are not always less distinct, nor less fit materials for accurate reasoning than those that are direct, and . . . the contrary may happen in a remarkable degree. (EAP I i, 11)

Reid's point here seems to be that, although the conception of the chiliagon we have in perception is fairly indistinct as we are unable to distinguish immediately between a figure with 999 sides and a chiliagon through sight, we are capable of forming a

²⁷ For example, in a letter to Wolff, Leibniz explains: "I hold that in our confused thoughts there are many things of which we are not conscious, since a confused thought consists of innumerable small perceptions, which, on account of their vast number, it is not possible to distinguish, even if we are aware of their result" (Leibniz 1963, 32). Similarly, in a letter to Remond he explains that "I grant to the Cartesians that the soul actually always thinks, but I do not grant that it apperceives all these thoughts. For our large perceptions and our appetites, which we apperceive, are composed of an infinity of small perceptions [*petites perceptions*] and small inclinations which we cannot apperceive. And it is in the insensible perceptions that the reason is found for what occurs in us; as the reason for what takes place in sensible bodies consists in insensible movements" (Leibniz 1875–90, III 657). Reid rejects this Leibnizian notion of indistinguishable perceptions.

²⁸ And he argues that "[p]ower belongs to the latter class" (EAP I i, 9). Later in the same text he repeats that "the weakness of human understanding . . . gives us only an indirect and relative conception of power" (EAP I v, 28). However although our conception of power is indirect and relative, it is distinct. Thus Reid explains that "we have a distinct notion of power, and may reason about it with understanding, though we can give no logical definition of it" (EAP I i, 12).

distinct conception of chiliagons, and it is this distinct conception that we used in mathematical reasoning.²⁹ It would seem, however, that although we are capable of forming a distinct conception of a chiliagon, we do not seem able to use such a conception in perception. Although I possess a distinct conception of a chiliagon, I am not able to immediately recognize chiliagons as such.

Reid is careful to point out that a conception's being indirect and relative is compatible with its being distinct, and it is clear that Reid thinks that what is required for perception is merely a "more or less" *distinct* conception of the perceived object. This seems to be a coherent and plausible position.

In saying this I disagree with Van Cleve's reading. Van Cleve distinguishes between "a merely conceptual apprehension of an object" and "some sort of apprehension or acquaintance" and argues that the "conception involved in Reidian perception" must be of the latter kind (Van Cleve 2004, 108). Van Cleve concludes that "[a]n experience does not qualify as perception unless it involves conception of the acquaintance variety" (127) and suggests that it follows from this that "most cases of acquired perception probably do not count as perception by this standard" (128). Van Cleve's account, then, entails that we cannot literally perceive secondary qualities, for in the case of secondary qualities we have no "acquaintance" with the nature or essence of the quality, but are only able to individuate the quality in terms of its sensory effect. Now, given that Reid includes both acquired perception and the perception of secondary qualities as genuine cases of perception, it is clear that Van Cleve is offering an unnecessarily revisionary reading of Reid.

One of Van Cleve's main arguments here is that, whereas "the conception involved in perception can be *more or less distinct*," our "merely conceptual apprehension of an object" cannot be subject to this sort of variation.³⁰ And, apparently assuming that a conception must be either "merely conceptual" or "some sort of acquaintance," he concludes from this that the conception involved in perception must be some sort of acquaintance (presumably with the nature of the object or quality perceived). Laying behind Van Cleve's argument is the thought that "Reidian conception carries information in analogue form, whereas conceptualization, judgment, and belief carry information in digital form" (130).³¹

²⁹ Although Reid does not make this clear, I assume that his position would be that our conception of a chiliagon in perception is only fairly indistinct. We are able to use it to perceptually distinguish between, say, chiliagons and triangles.

³⁰ Thus, Van Cleve argues that "the conception involved in perception can be *more or less distinct*. We see an object more distinctly at a small than a great distance, and more distinctly on a clear than a foggy day. Can the merely conceptual apprehension of an object be subject to this sort of variation? . . . I do not think that greater distinctness of conception is to be *analyzed* as greater conceptual determinacy. Rather, it is the former that makes the latter possible" (108).

³¹ Van Cleve's argument here is inspired by Dretske's account of the way in which conceptualization involves the digitalization of analogue information (see Dretske 1981). It is not clear, however, that Van Cleve is using the term "digitalization" in the same sense as Dretske.

Now, it seems to me that Van Cleve is setting up a false dichotomy here. On my reading, our conception of a quality can be (in some sense) non-conceptual but not involve acquaintance with the quality in the way in which Van Cleve suggests is necessary. This, as we shall see, seems to be the case in Reid's analysis of our conception of secondary qualities. In the case of our perception of primary qualities, Reid believes that we have what he calls a "direct" conception of the quality, and this type of conception might be something like what Van Cleve calls acquaintance. Even this is not clear, however, as Reid thinks that the essential difference between direct and indirect conception is that direct conception involves knowledge of the *essence* or *nature* of the thing perceived whereas indirect conception does not. In explaining what is involved in direct conception, Reid does not use anything like the language of acquaintance.

In the case of secondary qualities, however, Reid believes that although our perception is direct, our conception is indirect, or "relative." Our conception of secondary qualities, for example, will be something like "the cause of this feeling/sensation" (or perhaps "the cause of feelings like this"). In the case of our perception of secondary qualities, the conception involved does not involve any grasp of their nature or essence. Now, what is important in the current context is that Reid thinks that in such cases, our conception is relativized to something that is not a concept and of which we are immediately conscious (or perhaps, to use Van Cleve's language, of something with which we are acquainted). The suggestion, then, is that a Reidian conception of a secondary quality is a non-digitalized conception, but that this does not involve anything like acquaintance with the thing (the quality) conceived. Many philosophers today want to make a radical distinction between feelings and concepts. And one way of expressing this distinction might be to say that feelings have a rich analogue phenomenal content whereas concepts do not; they are in a sense digital.³² Reid is not thinking of a "conception" as a "concept" in this sense. Our conceptions of secondary qualities are in no way phenomenally less rich than sensations, because the feeling (the sensation) is in a sense *part* of the conception. So our conception of secondary qualities, required for perception, is neither "merely conceptual" nor does it involve any "acquaintance" with the essence of the quality perceived.³³

³² This is not, I think, how Dretske uses the notion of digitalization. He does not claim that the process of digitalization involves the transformation of an analogue representation to a digital one. For Dretske, digitalization merely implies the loss of information.

³³ Such an account "bypasses the need for digitalization" in a way analogous to a proposal recently made by Jesse Prinz. Prinz argues that Dretske's account of digitalization "entails that we can epistemically see forks only if we have representations that abstract away from forky appearances. This strikes me as terribly implausible. I think we can visually recognize forks . . . by means of fork images: representations that encode features of forky appearances" (2006, 437). Later he argues that his "alternative to the digitalization story" involves the idea that "we directly perceive abstract things by means of directly perceiving concrete things," in the sense that "our images of concrete things constitute our perceptions of abstract things; they are not merely instrumental causes of these perceptions" (449). Now, if we equate what Prinz calls an 'image' with what Reid calls a 'sensation,' we can see how the Reidian can offer a similar, and I believe more plausible, account of the way in which our conception of secondary qualities bypasses digitalization. From the Reidian

Before looking at the implications of Reid's account of colour perception for our perception of other qualities, I will briefly contrast his account with some recent discussions.

Firstly, it is worth noting that Reid rejects what Mark Johnson has called *Revelation*—the view, also defended by Colin McGinn, Janet Levin, and others—that the intrinsic nature of colour is “wholly” or “fully” revealed in standard perception.³⁴ Reid not only rejects Revelation but defends what could be called *Occultation*, the view that the intrinsic nature of colour is hidden and not revealed *at all* in standard perception.³⁵ Johnson thinks that revelation is a part of our common sense understanding of colour. While rejecting revelation, a Reidian might be able to explain Johnson's intuition, for Reid believes that our names of secondary qualities are systematically ambiguous and may refer either to the sensation which suggests them or to the quality perceived.³⁶ He does think that the sensation, if not actually fully revealed in the perceptual act, is fully knowable if the sensation is made the object of attentive reflection. So he would accept that there is a sense in which ‘red’ is fully revealed. However, this cannot be the full story. If revelation were correct, then it would be difficult to understand the meaningfulness of questions about the real nature of colours. But we can clearly ask about, and scientifically study, the nature of colours.

Secondly, in claiming that all I know of the colour difference between two objects is that “they have the power to affect me in different ways,” I am not at all suggesting that Reid is committed to a dispositional account of the ontology of colour. According to the dispositionalist about colours, “the colours of objects *are* dispositions of their surfaces to produce perceptions of certain sorts, under standard conditions in normal perceivers” (Levin 2000, 151). Reid is perhaps committed to a dispositional account of our original *conception* of colours. But colours themselves are, Reid believes, non-dispositional. Red and blue are, for Reid, non-dispositional properties of objects, we conceive of these qualities, and the difference between red and blue, in terms of their capacity to affect us in different ways. But, how we conceive of colours, and what they really are, are two distinct things.

perspective, Prinz's account is confused and unclear firstly because he does not adequately distinguish between the perceptual act and the conception of the perceived object in the act of perception, and secondly because he seems to identify the concept with the image rather than ‘the cause of the image.’ However, the idea of building the image, or sensation, into our conception of the object as a way of bypassing digitalization is similar to my interpretation of the way in which according to Reid the (analog) sensation plays a role in our conception of secondary qualities. See Prinz (2006).

³⁴ See Johnston (1992, 223); McGinn (1996, 11); Levin (2000, 152–3).

³⁵ I am using “Occultation” here not in the sense that one object is hidden by another object that passes between it and the observer, but in a sense closer to the one in which Shi'a Muslims talk of the “Occultation” of the last imam. I think the notion of occultation is particularly apt to refer to Reid's position as he does talk of ‘occult qualities.’

³⁶ However, it should be pointed out that Reid explicitly excludes colour terms from the scope of this claim, arguing that “colour differs from other secondary qualities in this, that whereas the name of the quality is sometimes given to the sensation which indicates it, and is occasioned by it, we never, as far as I can judge, give the name of colour to the sensation, but to the quality only” (IHM VI iv, 87).

Reid then believes that, although our perception of colour is direct, immediate, and original, our conception of colour is indirect; we are able to pick out and distinguish particular qualities, but we do not know the nature of the qualities themselves—although perhaps we will be able to discover the nature of these qualities through scientific investigation. Thus Reid argues that “when we think or speak” of any particular colour our notion of it is

really in some sort compounded. It involves an unknown cause and a known effect. The name of colour belongs indeed to the cause only, and not to the effect. But as the cause is unknown,³⁷ we can form no distinct conception of it but by relation to the known effect . . . When I would conceive those colours of bodies which we call *scarlet* and *blue*—if I conceived them only as unknown qualities, I could perceive no distinction between the one and the other. I must therefore for the sake of distinction, join to each of them, in my imagination, some effect or some relation that is peculiar; and the most obvious distinction is, the appearance which one and the other makes to the eye (IHM VI iv, 86–7).

This should make it clear that, although Reid does in a sense hold a dispositional account of our *conception* of colours, he does not think this settles anything when it comes to the ontology of colours and he rejects a dispositional account of the nature of colours. Now, Reid himself thinks that it is the task of science to discover the true nature of colours; however, he seems to believe that science had or would show that colours are properties of the surfaces of physical objects. Unfortunately, developments in colour science strongly suggest that such an account of the ontology of colour is untenable.³⁸

Reid himself did seem to tie his colour realism to the view that colours are properties of surfaces of objects; however, there is no reason why a contemporary Reidian cannot take account of the advances in colour science since Reid’s time. Given these advances, I believe that the most plausible position for a Reidian to take on the ontology of colours is that at present we really do not know what colours are, but perhaps at some point in the future colour science will develop to a point where we have a good understanding of what colours are. Perhaps a reductive account of colours in terms of other properties is not possible for beings like us, but there is no good reason to assume that such a reductive account is impossible.³⁹

Thirdly, it should also be noted that, although Reid is a realist about colours, this does not imply that he must reject a relational account of the ontology of colour. According to Jonathan Cohen’s account of the distinction between relational and

³⁷ And here Reid must mean that the essence or nature of the cause is unknown, rather than the existence of the cause.

³⁸ See Hardin (2003, 191–202) for a convincing refutation of the claim that colours should be identified with surface spectral reflectances.

³⁹ So, I think there is no reason why a Reidian could not advocate what Alex Byrne and David Hilbert have called realist colour primitivism. But I think that there is also no reason to assume that a realist reductive account of colour is impossible. And so a Reidian should be ontologically agnostic. See Byrne and Hilbert (2007).

non-relational accounts of the nature of colour, it would seem that colour realists like Reid are necessarily committed to a non-relational account of colour.⁴⁰ Thus Cohen explains that

On the nonrelational side of the distinction are those who understand colours as objective and mind- or perceiver independent; in particular, they insist that colours are not constituted in terms of relations to subjects or minds. A typical account of this sort is one that takes colours to be physical properties—usually some kind of reflectance property of surfaces, transmittance property of transparent surfaces and volumes, emittance property of luminous sources, or some combination of these . . . On the other side, there are views according to which colours are constituted in terms of relations between objects and subjects (and possible other parameters, such as viewing conditions). (Cohen 2004, 453)

The suggestion that there is a dichotomy between subjective relational and objective non-relational accounts of colour perception is inadequate. For although Reid would reject any account of the nature of colours according to which colours are constituted in terms of relations between objects and subjects or perceivers, there is no principled reason for a Reidian to reject a view according to which colours are constituted in terms of the relations between, say, surfaces, context (which might include viewing conditions), and bodily sense organs. There is no reason for a Reidian colour realist to rule out a priori a non-subjectivist relationalism. There is no reason why a relationalist account of the metaphysics of colour has to think that one of the relata has to be some sort of mental state. Indeed, Reid himself seems to offer such an objective but relational account of the ontology of the visible figure (or perspectival or apparent shape) of an object. The visible figure of a body, which is the object of our conception of the apparent shape of a body, is relational as it depends upon the relationship between the object and the eyeball. Thus Reid claims that “as the real figure of a body consists in the situation of its several parts with regard to one another, so its visible figure consists in the position of its several parts with regard to the eye” (IHM VI vii, 96).⁴¹ Both the body perceived and the eye are real physical things and so the relations between them are as well. Visible figure is both relational and objective and real. There is no reason why one cannot tell a similar story about colours. Reid himself thought that colours were probably a feature of the surface structure of objects, and so were not to be understood relationally. Modern colour science has shown that such an understanding of colour is untenable as a scientific account.⁴² However, the fact that colour science has shown that colours are not to be identified with surface spectral reflectances does not mean that we have to reject colour realism, for this does not rule out the possibility

⁴⁰ See, for example, Cohen (2009, 2004).

⁴¹ For a good discussion of this, see Yaffe (2002).

⁴² See Hardin (2003). Hardin seems to assume that a realist about colours is committed to the position that colours are to be identified with surface spectral reflectances. But there is no good reason to make this assumption. Colours may be objective and real, but extremely complex, relational qualities involving, say, the relations between surfaces, light and eyeballs, and the surrounding surfaces.

that colours are complicated relational qualities. But discovering the nature of colours is a task for scientists, not philosophers. Given the current state of colour science, we really do not know what colours are, but perhaps we will find out one day. This is a plausible, and Reidian, position to take.

Up to now, I have described Reid's account of our capacity to perceive white, but what about our capacity to perceive wrong? Reid himself is quite explicit about the similarities between (external) sense perception and what one could call *moral perception*. Thus, in a section of the *Essays on the Active Powers* called "On the Sense of Duty" he argues that "[B]y an original power of the mind, when we come to years of understanding and reflection, we not only have the notions of right and wrong in conduct, but perceive certain things to be right and others to be wrong" (EAP III vi, 175). And he points out that the notion of a moral *sense* is a common notion. The ancients had the idea of a *sensus recti et honesti* and we often speak of our sense of duty which, Reid argues, defending common sense and common usage, no doubt "got this name from some analogy which it is conceived to bear to the external senses." And he argues that "if we have just notions of the office of the external senses, the analogy is very evident." Indeed, after giving a brief account of what is involved in (external) sense perception,⁴³ he argues that if his account is correct, "our moral faculty may, I think, without impropriety, be called the *Moral Sense*" (EAP III vi, 176). And he also claims that "to reason about justice with a man who sees nothing to be just and unjust . . . is like reasoning with a blind man about colour, or with a deaf man about sound" (EAP III vi, 178). I believe that a plausible account of our perception of the rightness and wrongness of action can be modeled on Reid's account of colour perception, with moral feelings playing the role of sensations, and moral theory playing the role of scientific enquiry into the nature of colours.

If we model our perception of moral qualities on our perception of secondary qualities, then this suggests an important task for moral philosophy. Just as a goal of colour science is to discover the true nature of colours and in so doing provide us with a direct conception of a quality that we originally only conceive distinctly, one task of moral philosophy is to provide us with a direct conception of moral qualities, qualities that we are capable of recognizing and distinguishing but of which we do not originally have a direct conception. But developing this suggestion will have to wait until another essay.

⁴³ These passages are quite interesting, especially given the question of whether Reid believes that we perceive secondary qualities, and so are worth quoting in some detail: "By my eyes I not only have the ideas of a square and a circle, But I perceive this surface to be a square, that to be a circle.

By my ear I not only have the idea of sounds loud and soft, acute and grave, but I immediately perceive and judge this sound to be loud, that to be soft, this to be acute, that to be grave . . . These are judgments of the senses. They have always been called and accounted thus by those whose minds are not tinctured by philosophical theories. They are the immediate testimony of nature by our senses; and we are so constituted by nature that we must receive their testimony, for no other reason but because it is given by the senses" (EAP III vi, 176).

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