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## **Toward a Cohesive Account of Reid's Scientific and Moral Self-Evident Principles**

Kevin Twain Lowery

The self-evident principles of Thomas Reid's philosophy still generate much discussion today, for they spark an epistemological debate over the foundations of knowledge. On one hand, adhering to these self-evident principles can safeguard one's epistemology from various forms of skepticism, simply due to the fact that they form a basic set of epistemic assumptions. On the other hand, the notion that some principles are "self-evident" seems a bit simplistic and naïve.

Perhaps one step that can be taken to fill out Reid's account is to reconcile the scientific and the moral self-evident principles with one another. It seems that morality is of a different nature than natural science, not bearing much in common with it. If this be the case, then the self-evident principles of morals would be incommensurate with those of science. Reid's account would appear somewhat disjointed, falling short of the level of comprehensiveness that one might desire.

In this paper, I will examine the nature of Reid's self-evident principles by determining the properties that he claims for them in general, alluding to specific references to science and mathematics in the process. Next, the uniqueness of moral self-evident principles will be examined, identifying any obstacles that might preclude a cohesive account. Finally, I will attempt to remove these obstacles by providing a more comprehensive interpretation of moral principles, one that will relate them more closely to scientific principles. This will rely on notions that are implicit, rather than explicit, in Reid's writings.

## The Nature of Self-evident Principles

### Immediate and Intuitive

The nomenclature itself suggests that certain epistemic principles have no supporting evidence other than their own content. “There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another.”<sup>1</sup> Since they are not evidentially based, these principles cannot be deduced through reason. Rather, they are “immediately discerned” through the use of intuition.<sup>2</sup>

For Reid, the use of intuition is most definitive in the faculty of conscience. Whereas the other intellectual faculties utilize both intuition and reason, the conscience operates primarily from “intuitive evidence.” In moral matters, reason lies mainly within the realm of prudence, which builds upon the self-evident principles intuited by conscience.<sup>3</sup> It is thus the normal function of conscience to command and forbid “without the labor of reasoning.”<sup>4</sup>

### Perceived by a Natural Human Faculty

Since he emphasizes the need for conscience to rely upon intuition, Reid asserts that the moral faculty is a part of the human constitution.<sup>5</sup> He likens it to the other natural faculties. In fact, he compares the person without moral perception to the one who is colorblind.<sup>6</sup> In light of the fact that science relies mainly on the natural senses, the comparison of them to conscience

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<sup>1</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. by A. D. Woozley (London: Macmillan, 1941), VI.vi, p. 358.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.ii, p. 429.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>4</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), III.III.vii, p. 251.

<sup>5</sup> *IP*, VII.ii, p. 430.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429.

will yield a crucial connection between science and morality, one which I will make later in the paper.

More generally, self-evident principles are perceived through “common sense,” common because it is accessible to the average person. Reid points out that when an irresolvable dispute arises, the conflicting parties will appeal to common sense, each one inferring that the other is not following this intellectual faculty. However, Reid is also quick to indicate that the operation of common sense should be reducible to self-evident principles, to which “reasonable men should agree.”<sup>7</sup> It is again a natural human faculty, being “a gift of Heaven. And where Heaven has not given it, no education can supply the want.”<sup>8</sup> Since common sense uses intuition to perceive the principles, Reid does not believe that education can be of any help.

The analogy to the senses might seem to diminish the role of cognition. Nevertheless, Reid does not envision this faculty as some type of mystical ability. “On the contrary, in common language sense always implies judgment. A man of sense is a man of judgment. Good sense is good judgment. Nonsense is what is evidently contrary to right judgment. Common sense is that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business.”<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent that Reid is equating “judgment” with the ability to perceive, leaving room for evaluative functions as well. The essential function of common sense is to judge, most especially, to judge things as self-evident.<sup>10</sup> However, by what criteria is it to judge? After all, self-evident principles have no evidential basis; they are immediately intuited. Reid’s first approach to the dilemma remains consistent with these commitments. He asserts that “the

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<sup>7</sup> VI.ii, p. 332.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 330 f.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

province of common sense is more extensive in refutation than in confirmation.”<sup>11</sup> A self-evident principle is able to withstand the test of absurdity, so its perception by the subject is immediate. In contrast, common sense identifies the impostor by *reductio ad absurdum*.

The use of absurdity by common sense extends even further. Reid asserts that “the constitution of our nature leads us to believe” the principles of common sense (i.e. the self-evident/first principles). Thus, we are unable “to give a reason for them.” Consequently, “what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, “to reason against any of these kinds of evidence is absurd; nay, to reason for them, is absurd; they are first principles, and such fall not within the province of reason, but of common sense.”<sup>13</sup> In summary, the role of absurdity with regard to common sense is three-fold: 1) denying self-evident principles leads to absurdity, 2) denying the evidence contained within them is absurd, and 3) trying to provide further evidence in support of them is also absurd.

At the surface, this all seems relatively plausible, but it leaves the door open for subjective accounts which cannot be scrutinized on other grounds, according to the terms by which Reid has constructed his account. In other words, could I not claim something as self-evident and simply dismiss any opposing views as absurd? This objection is not too difficult for Reid to answer, for Reid has already imported certain criteria into the process, whether he wants to admit it or not. For example, my proposal that a certain principle is self-evident can be refuted if someone can: 1) show how the principle is reducible to other principles (i.e. supported by an evidential base) or 2) show how the denial of the proposition does not produce an absurdity.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, ed. by Timothy Duggan (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), II.vi, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

Essentially, since Reid contends that the truth of these principles is self-evident, the skeptic must deny either the proposition's truth value or its self-evident nature.

The next problem that Reid must face is the question of whether or not self-evident principles are evident to everyone. Obviously, to make the stronger claim is to seriously sabotage the project, so Reid concedes that everyone will not be able to grasp them. He attempts to differentiate the type of judgment that is able to make the necessary assessments. In doing so, he comes closer to a definitive description of common sense.

Concerning mathematics he states, "The evidence of mathematical axioms is not discerned till men come to a certain degree of maturity of understanding."<sup>14</sup> In reference to morals, "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."<sup>15</sup> Already a pattern is developing. William C. Davis explains that recognizing self-evident principles, according to Reid, requires: 1) practical clarity, 2) freedom from prejudice, and 3) maturity of mind.<sup>16</sup>

The latter criterion indicates the need for judgment to be developed, but the criterion against prejudice shows that it must be developed with an attitude of openness to truth. Evidently, experience plays an important role in the formation of common sense, for Reid seems to think that truth can be perceived on various levels so long as the mind is unhindered. On the other hand, preconditioning the mind to assume the outcome beforehand precludes the judging process itself. The criterion of practical clarity will be addressed later in the discussion on clear conceptions.

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<sup>14</sup> *AP*, V.i, p. 378.

<sup>15</sup> *AP*, III.III.vi, pp. 236 f.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, "Thomas Reid on Moral Epistemology and the Moral Sense," doctoral dissertation, Univ. of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 1992, p. 188.

### Necessary and Contingent

For Reid, self-evident principles can be either necessary or contingent.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, necessary propositions are easier to defend as self-evident. Reid indicates that necessary first principles, for the most part, have been accepted as self-evident.<sup>18</sup> He places them in six basic categories:

- 1) *grammatical* – describing the cognitive processes involved in communication
- 2) *logical* – bound by the nature of truth
- 3) *mathematical* – conceptions of quantity and location
- 4) *taste* – characteristics inherent within human nature
- 5) *moral* – ascribing merit and duty
- 6) *metaphysical* – the operation of mind; existence and causality; intelligence and design<sup>19</sup>

Reid also points out that tautologies are not to be included.<sup>20</sup> They are necessary truths, but only to the extent that the terms have the same meaning. They do not form a relation between separate concepts. For instance, the statement, “All spheres are round,” essentially says nothing, because the property of roundness is contained within the definition of a sphere, at least in Euclidean geometry.

In contrast, self-evidence is not easily demonstrated for contingent propositions. Whereas Reid defines necessary truths as “immutable truths whose contrary is impossible,” he identifies contingent truths as those which are “mutable, depending upon some effect of will and power which had a beginning, and may have an end.”<sup>21</sup> His qualification of “beginning” and “end” most likely stem from his theological commitments, yet the distinction is not diluted. Overall,

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<sup>17</sup> *IP*, VI.v, p. 373.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.vi, p. 391.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 391 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.ii, p. 431.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.v, p. 373.

Reid sets down twelve self-evident principles of contingent truths. For the sake of brevity, I will only comment on those which are most pertinent to the discussion at hand.

First, “the existence of everything of which I am conscious” is self-evident. The conviction of this truth

. . . is immediate and intuitive. The existence therefore of those passions and operations of our minds of which we are conscious is a first principle which nature requires us to believe upon her authority.

If I am asked to prove that I cannot be deceived by consciousness – to prove that it is not a fallacious sense – I can find no proof. I cannot find any antecedent truth from which it is deduced or upon which its evidence depends. It seems to disdain any such derived authority and to claim my assent in its own right.<sup>22</sup>

Reid thus denies idealism, believing that such prevents one from being able to reason with others. No form of argumentation is possible without a basis of common principles which both parties accept.<sup>23</sup> This principle demonstrates that Reid’s realism begins with existence.

Second, “the thoughts of which I am conscious are the thoughts of a being which I call myself, my mind, my person.”<sup>24</sup> Here, Reid affirms the *cogito*, yet he does not wish to make this his starting point. “If any man asks a proof of this, I confess I can give none; there is an evidence in the proposition itself which I am unable to resist. Shall I think that thought can stand by itself without a thinking being? Or that ideas can feel pleasure or pain? *My nature dictates to me that it is impossible.*”<sup>25</sup> [italics mine] I don’t believe that Reid is giving what he considers to be a subjective point of view. Instead, he appears to be making normative claims about human nature. He believes that human beings are naturally inclined to accept these principles, affirming their own existence and the existence of others.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 375.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 375 f.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 377.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Third, memory is a valid faculty whereby the existence of the past is confirmed.<sup>26</sup> Fourth, we not only exist, we can be assured that our existence and our identities have continued from our first memories.<sup>27</sup> Fifth, the senses are trustworthy. At this point, Reid takes issue with Berkeley and Hume, contesting what he perceives to be their denial of the material world. He argues that perspectives such as these go against common sense. They are unnatural to human cognition; only those who have been taught such notions actually believe them.<sup>28</sup>

Sixth, the powers to act and to will are self-evident.<sup>29</sup> Seventh, we possess intellectual faculties through which we distinguish truth from error.<sup>30</sup> Just as light reveals both objects and itself, so does reason reveal both truth and itself.<sup>31</sup> In other words, its existence is known through its operation.

Eighth, those with whom we discourse are also intelligent beings. Reid contends that even infants demonstrate this principle, for they respond to those who attempt communication with them.<sup>32</sup> Ninth, our thoughts and dispositions of mind are communicated externally at times.<sup>33</sup> In effect, communication is to be trusted because the mind is able to translate the essential content of ideas into words and gestures, even if such occurs imperfectly.

Tenth, it follows from the previous principle that a measure of reliability can be ascribed to human testimony.<sup>34</sup> Eleventh, acts of human will have a certain degree of probability. Stated otherwise, human will is not exercised at random but is connected to various properties of human

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 380 f.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 385 f.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 386.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 388. I believe that this principle follows from the previous one, although Reid would evidently not agree, since it would no longer be self-evident but would be derived from another.

nature (e.g. self-interest). This enables human beings to understand one another, establish and maintain relationships, and live in societies.<sup>35</sup> Twelfth, we can be sure that time is continuous. Hence, the future is rendered probable from its similarities with the past.<sup>36</sup>

Every one of these principles is driven by epistemic concerns. Consequently, Reid's agenda is to demonstrate the intelligibility of the world, others, and self. It should be understood that these lists are by no means comprehensive. Many self-evident principles exist in the various branches of knowledge. These lists merely describe the principles which apply to all branches of knowledge more generally.

For instance, Reid separates the principles of natural philosophy from those of mathematics, due to the fact that "they have not the same kind of evidence, nor are they necessary truths, as mathematical axioms are. They are such as these: That similar effects proceed from the same or similar causes; That we ought to admit of no other causes of natural effects but such as are true, and sufficient to account for the effects."<sup>37</sup> Reid's categorization of these principles as contingent is probably not attributable to the role of will. He evidently does not consider them to be immutable truths, but general ones.

### *Foundational to Other Truths*

Self-evident truths are not independent of other truths. Rather, self-evident truths serve as a foundation for other truths, the latter being derived from them through reason.<sup>38</sup> Remember, one of the chief characteristics of self-evident principles is their inability to be derived from any other principles or evidence. The same holds true for morals.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 388 f.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 389.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., I.ii, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., VII.ii, p. 429.

This is to demand a reason for what does not exist. The first principles of morals are not deductions. They are self-evident; and their truth, like that of other axioms, is perceived without reasoning or deduction. And moral truths that are not self-evident, are deduced, not from relations quite different from them, but from the first principles of morals.<sup>39</sup>

This is Reid's basis for epistemology. If the first principles of knowledge be denied, the entire heuristic framework collapses. Nevertheless, if they can be held as self-evident, then other truths can be constructed from them. This construction is accomplished through reason, which: 1) judges certain principles to be self-evident and 2) draws conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are.<sup>40</sup> This seems to contradict the position which was expounded earlier, namely, that self-evident principles are immediately intuited, not derivable through the use of reason.

Resolving this apparent contradiction requires three moves. First, reason must function differently in self-evident principles than it does in others. If reason can be both immediate and progressive, then it can be associated with both types of principles, but in different aspects. Second, Reid's assertion concerning self-evident principles must be understood to preclude reason as a process, not to preclude it altogether. Third, intuition must then be understood as the immediate exercise of reason. Therefore, when Reid asserts that self-evident principles are immediately intuited and not derived from reason, intuition can be understood to indicate the immediate exercise of reason, disallowing reason as a process.

The following quotation will briefly summarize this section and serve as a bridge from it to the remainder of the paper.

The same degree of understanding which makes a man capable of acting with common prudence in the conduct of life makes him capable of discovering what is

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<sup>39</sup> *AP*, V.vii, p. 482.

<sup>40</sup> *IP*, VI.ii, p. 339.

true and what is false in matters that are self-evident, and which he distinctly apprehends.

All knowledge and all science must be built upon principles that are self-evident, and of such principles every man who has common sense is a competent judge when he conceives them distinctly.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Uniqueness of Moral Self-evident Principles**

#### “Is” Versus “Ought”

Reid claims that “moral reasoning” is “distinct from all others.”<sup>42</sup> In the first place, this difference can be attributed to the uniqueness of morality in general. Ethics comprehends more than facts alone, it also includes a sense of approval and disapproval. The ascription of these concomitant feelings stems from the value that we place upon certain objects or upon the acts that affect them. “There is therefore a principle in man, which, when he acts according to it, gives him a consciousness of worth, and when he acts contrary to it, a sense of demerit.”<sup>43</sup>

Many of these feelings are derived from the experiences we have as the recipients of action. When the actions of other people affect us, we judge the actions according to the effects themselves. If we find an experience pleasurable, we deem the action as good. The inverse is true as well. Hence, we tend to approve certain actions and traits in others and disapprove other actions and traits. As a result, we feel we ought to do what we approve in others and not do what we condemn.<sup>44</sup> This feeling is driven by a desire for equity, bringing us to act toward others according to our approval/disapproval of their actions.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>42</sup> *AP*, III.III.v, p. 239.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>44</sup> *IP*, VII.ii, p. 430.

<sup>45</sup> *AP*, V.i, pp. 375 f.

The feeling of ought develops into feelings of obligation and duty, especially as it pertains to actions that are routine or habitual. Thus, they are solidified into general rules of duty, which Reid believes are self-evident.<sup>46</sup> However, these duties and obligations cannot be evaluated independently, for they each describe a “relation” between the subject and the action which ought to be done.<sup>47</sup>

Just as Reid qualifies his notion of common sense, so are duty and obligation qualified.

The person obliged must have understanding and will, and some degree of active power. He must not only have the natural faculty of understanding, but the means of knowing his obligation. An invincible ignorance of this destroys all moral obligation . . . These qualifications of the action and of the agent, in moral obligation, are self-evident; and the agreement of all men in them shows that all men have the same notion and a distinct notion of moral obligation.<sup>48</sup>

Knud Haakonssen points out that “Reid occasionally confuses the subjective and objective concepts, though mostly using ‘obligation’ either for the subjective state of the person who has a duty or for obligations undertaken, e.g., by contract.”<sup>49</sup> The subjective account of obligation is what brings Reid to these qualifications as he attempts to objectify his account in some way.

Morality is also distinct in its tendency to be teleological. “Ought” is often, if not always, understood in relation to some purpose or goal. Reid’s moral system falls into this category. The end of morality is determined by conscience and its means are determined by prudence.<sup>50</sup> However, this end will only be pursued in the presence of a motive. This is part of the relation that Reid sees between the subject and the action. Somehow, the action must be related to the

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<sup>46</sup> *IP*, VII.ii, p. 430.

<sup>47</sup> *AP*, III.III.v, p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 235 f.

<sup>49</sup> Reid, *Practical Ethics: Being Lectures and Papers on Natural Religion, Self-Government, Natural Jurisprudence, and the Law of Nations*, ed. by Haakonssen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), p. 57, n. 55.

<sup>50</sup> *IP*, VII.ii, p. 430.

subject's interests, even if they are not clearly self-interest, as they might not be in the case of extreme sacrifice. Therefore, it is not extraordinary for Reid to claim that moral judgments are accompanied by affections and feelings.<sup>51</sup>

Once again, another aspect of subjectivity enters Reid's account of morality. Thus, when he says, "This inward light or sense is given by heaven to different persons in different degrees," he implies a variance not only in intellectual abilities, but in emotional capacities as well.<sup>52</sup>

### The Moral Sense

"Men of rank call it *honor* . . . The vulgar call it *honesty, probity, virtue, conscience*. Philosophers have given it the names of *the moral sense, the moral faculty, rectitude*."<sup>53</sup> [italics his] It has already been established that "sense" is essentially a faculty of judgment, yet the nature of morality gives the moral sense a strong emotive element, too. Haakonssen classifies Reid as a " 'moral sense cognitivist' and a 'moral realist,' who saw the moral sense as a cognitive faculty perceiving moral qualities."<sup>54</sup>

The cognitive nature of the moral sense places it in need of education and training. It begins as "an imperceptible seed, planted by our Creator."<sup>55</sup> Then, it must be "duly cultivated and properly exercised."<sup>56</sup> As it develops, it progresses from "infancy" to "maturity by insensible degrees."<sup>57</sup> It is conceivable that a child's moral sense may be educated improperly. For example, children who are taught to be violent may be so without any guilt, but when they are

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<sup>51</sup> *AP*, III.III.vii, pp. 244 f.

<sup>52</sup> *IP*, VI.ii, p. 331.

<sup>53</sup> *AP*, III.III.v, p. 230.

<sup>54</sup> *PE*, p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> *AP*, V.i, p. 378.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, III.III.viii, p. 254.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

exposed to charitable virtues, they will see them as more noble and overcome the illegitimate passions.<sup>58</sup> Reid is optimistic that virtue will be chosen over vice.

The belief structure in Reid's morality never becomes too complex, because the propositions are not cumulative. "A system of morals is not like a system of geometry, where subsequent parts derive their evidence from the preceding."<sup>59</sup> Each moral proposition remains closely linked to the self-evident principles. For this reason, moral reasoning remains highly intuitive.

### **Toward a Synthesis**

In spite of the peculiarities of morality, I believe that a common basis exists between Reid's moral self-evident principles and his scientific ones. First, I believe that the analogy of sense brings morality and science together. Reid asserts that the first principles of science are perceived by the natural senses, and the first principles of morals are perceived by the moral sense.<sup>60</sup> His epistemic concerns apply to both faculties. Therefore, just as the natural senses are to be believed, so is the conscience.<sup>61</sup>

Albeit, this trust in the senses, both natural and moral, is more than mere necessity, for they all testify to the same data, each one yielding its own testimony, according to its function. "The testimony of our moral faculty, like that of the external senses, is the testimony of nature, and we have the same reason to rely on it."<sup>62</sup> Reid is thus able to speak of the moral sense alongside the natural senses. "We judge of colors by the eye; of sounds by the ear; of beauty and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., V.ii, p. 384.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., III.III.vi., pp. 241 f.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 242 f.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., III.III.vi, p. 238.

deformity by taste; of right and wrong in conduct, by our moral sense or conscience.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, all of the senses are partners in the epistemic process.

Second, morality is related to science to the extent that morals point toward a natural order. William J. Ellos notes that there is agreement between Reid’s first principles of rational philosophy and his first principles of natural philosophy.<sup>64</sup> Not only do they often function in the same way, they also deal with the same subject matter. Ellos indicates that for Reid, “The sensation is a natural sign which suggests the existence of the quality in the thing.”<sup>65</sup> Even the moral sense perceives something about the object (i.e. subject, action, recipient of the action) that reflects a quality or property that the object possesses. This determination of qualities is likewise a significant part of the scientific process.

Obviously, morality is in part determined by the properties of the objects. Its teleological nature leads to the conclusion that morals are in part determined by a comparison between the true state of an object (as it really exists) and the ideal state of the object (as it should exist). This is why Reid compares conscience to the eye, stating that it “naturally looks forward, though its attention may be turned back to the past.”<sup>66</sup> It is gathering information about the world, which must be processed in order for morality to take shape.

Reid does believe in some type of natural order, one that coincides with the moral faculties. He claims that there can be no opposition between duty and a regard to our happiness.<sup>67</sup> This is why he believes that virtue will be chosen over vice, granted that they are both perceived clearly. He continues with an even stronger claim, asserting that prudence (even acting in one’s

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<sup>63</sup> *IP*, VI.ii, p. 331.

<sup>64</sup> Ellos, *Thomas Reid’s Newtonian Realism* (Washington, D.C.: Univ. Press of America, 1981), p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> *AP*, III.III.viii, p. 260.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

own best interest) still leads us to keep our duty.<sup>68</sup> This derivation of duty is then generalized to the larger society. Our duties to society are thus produced from the duties we encounter in smaller social circles.<sup>69</sup>

Haakonssen reminds us, “The ultimate foundation of morality is divine law, and we can thus appreciate why Reid generally respected the traditional distinction between duty and obligation. Morality is a matter of duties imposed, not of obligations undertaken.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, morality is not subjectively contrived; it is imposed by the objective reality of the natural order (which is one particular aspect of divine law). The objective reality is then applied subjectively to the individual. “The life of a moral agent cannot be according to his nature, unless it be virtuous. That conscience, which is in every man’s breast, is the law of God written in his heart, which he cannot disobey without acting unnaturally, and being self-condemned.”<sup>71</sup> Through the scientific study of the world and human nature, we gain greater insight into the natural order which shapes morality.

Third, all self-evident principles, both scientific and moral, command agreement. In science, we have axioms (i.e. first principles, principles of common sense, common notions, self-evident truths) “which are no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of nature and the result of our original powers.”<sup>72</sup>

The process is almost automatic. “It is not in our power to judge as we will. The judgment is carried along necessarily by the evidence, real or seeming, which appears to us at the

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, V.i, p. 372.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>70</sup> *PE*, p. 57.

<sup>71</sup> *AP*, V.i, p. 374.

<sup>72</sup> *IP*, VI.iv, p. 358.

time.”<sup>73</sup> In fact, “the power of judging self-evident propositions, which are clearly understood, may be compared to the power of swallowing food.”<sup>74</sup> This immediacy of apprehension is consistent with common sense’s ability to declare as both false and absurd opinions which contradict first principles.<sup>75</sup>

Reid does point out that in spite of the immediacy of their apprehension, some first principles do not yield conclusions of absolute certainty. They only possess varying degrees of probability.<sup>76</sup> However, this does not undercut their epistemic worth. The probability of such propositions can be increased through repeated success, in experiment or in general experience.<sup>77</sup>

The degrees of probability do allow the possibility that people “who really love truth, and are open to conviction, may differ about first principles.”<sup>78</sup> This is another reason that Reid qualifies the type of common sense that will apprehend truth. “To judge of first principles requires no more than a sound mind free from prejudice and a distinct conception of the question.”<sup>79</sup> Davis indicates that “the key to understanding Reid on self-evidence is his notion of clear and distinct conceptions.”<sup>80</sup> Basically, if the intellectual conditions are favorable, then a clear conception of a self-evident principle will produce its acceptance. This is accomplished through common sense, which “is not a separate ‘faculty’; rather, it is a ‘degree’ of the rational faculties as a whole.”<sup>81</sup>

The appeal to “clear conceptions” appears to be a safety valve in Reid’s system, for it is not apparent that the self-evident principles command agreement to the extent that Reid would

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 368.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 361 ff.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Davis, p. 181.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

like to claim. Obviously, the notion stems from Reid's optimism regarding the nature of truth, which he believes to ultimately triumph over error. Perhaps the best construal of clear conceptions would consider them to be part of a motivational device. In other words, even though truth is not recognized at times, it becomes apparent through clear conceptions. Therefore, the lover of truth can press forward with optimism. In this regard, Reid's polemical concerns fall mainly to his arguments on absurdity, in which the self-evident principles must be upheld to avoid it.

Finally, both scientific and moral first principles are necessary for knowledge. Hence, their self-evident character is the basis for Reid's epistemology. He asserts,

. . . all moral reasonings rest upon one or more first principles of morals, whose truth is immediately perceived without reasoning, by all men come to years of understanding.

And this indeed is common to every branch of human knowledge that derives the name of science. There must be principles proper to that science, by which the whole superstructure is supported.<sup>82</sup>

For Reid, "all knowledge consists in perceiving the agreements and disagreements of ideas." Consequently, there can be no knowledge without ideas.<sup>83</sup> "And as ideas are immutable, so their agreements and disagreements, and all their relations and attributes, are immutable."<sup>84</sup> In a similar fashion for both science and morality, the certainty of the common principles lends the certainty of the conclusions.<sup>85</sup>

Conversely, the denial of the self-evident first principles undermines the complete epistemic structure, rendering reasoning and discourse impossible.

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<sup>82</sup> *AP*, III.III.vi, p. 241.

<sup>83</sup> *IP*, VI.iii, p. 352.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, I.ii, p. 22.

If any man could say with sincerity that he is conscious of no obligation to consult his own present and future happiness, to be faithful to his engagements, to obey his Maker, to injure no man, I know not what reasoning, either probable or demonstrative, I could use to convince him of any moral duty. As you cannot reason in mathematics with a man who denies the axioms, as little you can reason with a man in morals who denies the first principles of morals.<sup>86</sup>

### Conclusion

In his discussion of the various types of self-evident principles defined by Reid, Davis touches upon the two issues which I believe join science and morality in Reid's schema: natural order and epistemology. Regarding moral principles, Davis states that "this relation for Reid is another natural kind, and it is the way the world is, including the way humans are designed to function in it, that is the standard." In contrast, grammatical and mathematical principles reflect the way the mind operates (i.e. logic).<sup>87</sup>

Even though the first principles do not have proof, they can still be reasoned apart from false ones in three ways:

- 1) If a rejected first principle "stands upon the same footing" as one that is accepted, then the rejected principle must also be accepted.
- 2) If rejecting a first principle leads to an absurdity, then the principle must be embraced.
- 3) Self-evident principles should be judged in light of historical, traditional thought, which holds much weight against the false notions of a few.<sup>88</sup>

Both scientific and moral first principles tend toward epistemic certainty and should not be regarded as incompatible.

Additionally, the self-evident principles in science and morality both point toward a natural order which is intelligible through both the natural and the moral senses. Reid gives the

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.ii, p. 429.

<sup>87</sup> Davis, pp. 185 ff.

<sup>88</sup> *IP*, VI.iv, pp. 368 f.

matter a theological appeal. “The Supreme Being, who has given us eyes to discern what may be useful and what [may be] hurtful to our natural life, hath also given us this light within to direct our moral conduct.”<sup>89</sup>

The natural and the moral faculties converge upon a natural order, which Reid attributes to a Creator. Reid acknowledges that the scientist who denies the possibility of any natural order will be hard pressed to derive any moral principles which possess any degree of objectivity. On the other hand, as long as one can believe that the universe reflects a certain order, purpose, or design, the quests for scientific and moral knowledge can be seen as dimensions of a much broader journey: life.

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<sup>89</sup> *AP*, III.III.vii, p. 251.

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