Dissertation Abstract: *Thomas Reid on Singular Thought*

In my dissertation, I offer a new reading of Thomas Reid’s philosophy of mind, in which I bring attention to his so far overlooked view that we can entertain a singular thought about an individual substance – we can think *directly* about a *particular* object. What emerges is a picture of Reid’s theory as psychologically sophisticated, anticipating some very recent and influential views in empirical psychology.

Two of Reid’s works, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), address central issues in philosophy of mind, psychology and vision science. Our ability to have singular thoughts is one of the recurring themes throughout his investigation. Whereas for Hume we do not have notions of individual substances, but only of bundles of qualities, for Reid the human mind is able to think in an immediate manner about individual bodies populating the external world. This is a very broad claim, since ‘thinking’ is a catch-all term for Reid, designed to refer to every operation of the mind: conceiving, perceiving, remembering, and imagining are all ways of thinking about external objects. I discuss the way in which singular thoughts occur in each of these faculties and explain how this singularity is brought about in some seemingly difficult cases.

Reid does not use the terminology of “singular thought”, which became widespread in the twentieth-century, once the lessons from Russell and Quine had been fully appreciated. In Chapter 1, however, I show that his interest in our ability to think about individual substances in the world places him squarely within this tradition. After surveying recent work on singular thought, starting with Russell and ending with work by Bach, Recanati, and Jeshion, I argue that Reid’s way of distinguishing between singular and general thoughts is interestingly different from theirs.

Reid holds the surprising, but natural view that the nature of the *objects* of singular thoughts is what makes those thoughts singular: if we think about individuals, we think singularly; if we think about universals, we think generally. His position is important not only because it offers a new starting point for the examination of the connection between the mind and the world, but also because it draws attention to an overlooked solution to a long-standing problem. Some philosophers argue that in order to entertain a singular thought about an object, we have to think about it bare, without any of its properties. Since attributes are general, they seem to somehow taint the singularity of the thought. At the end of Chapter 1, I show that this issue disappears if we think, as Reid did, that the attributes of a certain object are themselves particulars, and if we have the right view about the relation between conceiving those attributes and conceiving their bearer.

For Reid, all types of singular thought, whether formed in perception, memory, or imagination, have conception as an ingredient, and for this reason, conception must be discussed before all those other faculties. That is why in Chapter 2 I present Reid’s general theory of conception. I first clarify his distinctions between individual (what we now call “singular”) and general conceptions, and between direct and relative ones. I argue that they are not coextensive, and that, contrary to the secondary literature, singular conceptions can be either direct or relative. Singular conceptions are not equivalent to the *ideas* of the other British Empiricists; they are mental *acts* about particular objects, not mental *entities* with representational content. Apart from this contrast with the tradition, the most important consequence of this chapter is that for Reid singular conceptions do not essentially involve concepts, as a post-Kantian reader might think.

Each kind of singular thought comes with its own set of problems: having a singular thought in perception is different from having such a thought in memory, or in imagination. Consequently,
in the next four chapters I deal with each faculty in turn.

According to Reid, perception gives us immediate knowledge of the external world, namely that type of knowledge that the skeptic denies we can have. Scholars are divided concerning the issue of what can be originally and immediately perceived: Lehrer & Smith (1985), Nichols (2007), and Buras (2009) think that the only candidates are primary qualities of bodies. On their view we cannot have perceptual singular thoughts about material objects. Others, e.g. Van Cleve (2004) and Copenhaver (2010), argue that some secondary qualities can be perceived, but they are silent on the perception of bodies. In Chapter 3, I argue that bodies, together with their qualities, are, in Reid's terminology, immediate objects of original perception, but that the perception of bodies cannot happen in the absence of our having sensations of their qualities first.

This, however, does not entail that perception of bodies cannot be singular: according to Reid, one does not use a description of the qualities of bodies, in order to perceive those bodies. Still, I argue, this is compatible with his view that perception of bodies is a two-stage process. The first stage involves the perception of qualities, while the second stage involves the perception of the body having those qualities. These stages are not inferential in nature, and they do not make perception of bodies indirect.

After I present Reid’s views about the mechanism of perception in Chapter 4, I discuss some contemporary psychological research, to show how Reid’s theory could be developed. In particular, I present the feature-integration theory of attention, which discusses the different stages of human visual perception and the formation of object files (e.g. Treisman et al. (1977), Wolfe (2003), and Chan & Hayward (2009)). Of course, Reid did not have access to the findings of these psychologists, so I don’t claim to find their theory in his work. However, I argue that their theory embodies a model which is anticipated in his writings, and that he would have taken their experiments as supporting his theory.

In Chapter 5 I discuss the way in which individual conceptions enable memory to supply us with singular thoughts about the objects of the past. Following Van Woudenberg (1999) and Copenhaver (2006), I begin by presenting the extent to which Reid anticipated some of the distinctions made by contemporary psychologists and philosophers of mind working on memory (e.g. Tulving (1983) and Burge (2003)). But there is a difficulty that has not been noticed by Reid scholars: given his overall theory of memory and perception, he should have restricted the domain of memory to objects and tropes. However, surprisingly, Reid claims that we also have episodic memories of events. This is impossible according to his overall theory, because, on his understanding of perception of motion and change, we cannot perceive events, and episodic memory is grounded in the previous perception of its objects.

However, one of the most striking consequences of Reid’s theory of singular thought comes in his theory of imagination. According to Evans’ influential view, by definition a singular thought is such that it is guaranteed to be about an existent thing. In contrast, Reid’s theory, as I reconstruct it in Chapter 6, entails that we can imagine nonexistent particulars, in a singular way. The reason is that imagination differs from both perception and memory: it does not involve any belief of the existence of its subject matter, and it can be successful even when its subject matter does not exist.

My dissertation enriches our understanding of the connection between the mind and individual objects in the world, by contextualizing this issue in the entirety of Reid’s philosophy of mind. I expect this research to play an important role in shaping future debates in Reid scholarship and in the history of modern philosophy, more broadly.