Research Statement

My current and planned research is in the history of British Modern Philosophy of mind. The first research project encompasses my dissertation on Reid’s theory of singular thought, while each of the others extends my research in different directions, expanding my engagement with the history of modern philosophy. After I publish the various pieces of my dissertation, three of which are either accepted for publication or under review, I will focus on developing other projects, including the following three.

Consciousness and Immunity to Error Through Misidentification in British Modern Philosophy

So far I was interested in the ways we interact with the external world and how these are developed by Reid, in opposition to his predecessors. Next, I would like to study how introspection (which Reid calls “consciousness”), as an original operation of our minds, provides knowledge of the self. Reid develops his theory of consciousness partly in response to Locke’s, and I believe that a comparative study of the two theories will shed light on issues that are still part of current debates in philosophy of mind and language, like immunity to error through misidentification (“IEM” henceforth), *de se* thoughts, and personal identity. Both Locke and Reid believe that introspection provides one with some kind of IEM. Locke thinks that if the same awareness could be felt in connection with a certain event, that mental event could be attributed to a self that is also presently existent. Reid argues that this is misguided: introspection, much like perception, functions in the present time, and cannot be “felt” about events that happened in the past. He uses the sensation of pain to exemplify that, by two of the first principles of contingent truths, we know that any pain that is felt to exist, does exist (the First Principle) and also that any pain that is felt to exist belongs to a being that “I call myself, my mind, my person” (the Second Principle). Reid also claims that what he says about pain can be extended to our fears, desires, doubts, and “thoughts of every kind”, which presumably includes beliefs, memories, and imaginings. There is a glitch here, that he’s unaware of: beliefs, especially, and some other types of thoughts do not have the same type of IEM as pains have. Pains are special: they do not have objects; they are not *about* anything else. But beliefs, memories, and imaginings, even those about myself, are about objects. And, structurally speaking, although somebody cannot be mistaken that it is his belief, imagining, or memory, he can be mistaken that the object of such states is himself. In other words, these states do not have IEM, in the same way as sensations of pain do. Without an explanation of the fact that states like these have IEM only in some special cases, Reid’s theory of consciousness and memory might not be able to withstand the force of the objection he raises against Locke.

Concept Acquisition in British Modern Philosophy: John Locke, Richard Price and Thomas Reid

The acquisition of general concepts constitutes one of the major problems of British Empiricism. Reid had his own take on the issue, and I plan to investigate it, and its connections both to the tradition that preceded him and to Kant.

Locke famously defended the view that all our ideas are derived by sensation or reflection. Hume took this further and argued that we cannot know anything that is not an impression or derived somehow from an impression. Both Locke and Hume opposed any kind of innate knowledge. However, they have difficulties explaining how we are able to acquire general concepts, since in our day-to-day lives we only interact with individual qualities. Locke’s answer is that abstraction
helps us acquire the concept *red*, for instance, after we see many instances of red. But he does not explain how we come to recognize what different shades of red have in common.

Richard Price talks about this problem in his *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1757), pointing out that no matter how many experiments we conduct in order to learn that bodies are solid, we can never draw, with certainty, the general conclusion that no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. He argues that the idea of solidity is derived by our use of reason, not by sensation or reflection.

Reid is influenced by Price’s views on the origins of our ideas of solidity, extension, motion, and figure. Just like Price, Reid does not think that these concepts can be derived solely by sensation, and offers a thought experiment to show that this is so. In what is known as the *experimentum crucis*, Reid argues that since sensations do not convey any spatial information, they cannot alone be the source of the concept of extension, for instance. Does that mean that our concept of extension is innate? Some scholars think so, and they argue that Reid is in fact a Rationalist. Others think that we do not have innate knowledge of extension, or of motion, etc., but they do not offer a detailed picture of the mechanism by which we get them. The view that I will develop and attribute to Reid is that the concept of extension itself is not innate; but our capacity to have a conception of extension on the occasion of sensing extended objects is innate. This just means that we are hardwired in a certain way: whenever we interact with an extended object, we will conceive of that object as extended.

This opens up further problems. For instance, we note that the concept *color* is at a higher level of abstraction than the concept *red*. The question is whether our capacity to have both concepts is innate, or whether we need only one of them to get the faculty of abstraction started, and if we do, which one.

*I have started thinking about the relations between our emotions and the actions we perform by investigating the role of sympathy in the work of Adam Smith and Reid. Smith thinks that to sympathize with somebody else just means to imagine how we would feel if we were in his circumstances. Thus, we feel something like pleasure if that person is pleased, and we can be close to tears if we are moved by that person’s sadness. Smith builds on Hume’s idea that sympathizing with another human being is determined by my recognition that that person is undergoing certain experiences or is passionate about something. Both Smith and Hume are descriptive in their accounts of sympathy.*

*Reid, however, takes a normative stance. Like them, he argues that, by our constitution, we are inclined to sympathize with our fellow human beings. But, in addition, he thinks that we can speak of the *virtue* of sympathy when we determine our will to act in accordance to the rule of sympathy (the Golden Rule) when the right occasion arises. To be virtuous, for him, means that we recognize that there is a certain rule we could follow and that by following it, we succeed in performing virtuous acts.*

*This view is not restricted to sympathy; he extends it to other affections or emotions (e.g. benevolence). I would like to develop this project by investigating whether there is a principled way to distinguish those affections that can be developed into virtues, according to Reid, and whether Hume’s distinction between natural and artificial virtues (e.g. justice) can be traced back to his interpretation of the human emotions.*