

Abstract/Proposal: Reid's Assault on the Theory of Ideas

Thomas Reid considered his chief philosophical contribution to be calling into question the (then enormously popular) Theory of Ideas. In explaining our mental activities, the Theory of Ideas (TI) invokes contentful mental particulars distinct from those activities. Though Reid's assault on the theory has three distinct elements – (1) arguing that TI is false, (2) offering rebuttals to the arguments in favor of TI, and (3) proposing his own direct realist alternative – the only element addressed in this paper is the first: I argue that Reid's refutations of TI fail, but that they are still significant in that they show how (and, more importantly, how not) to articulate TI. Reid's objections thus have historical import (helping to either more charitably interpret Reid's targets or better diagnose the targets' missteps), as well as contemporary philosophical import (given that the same debates are ongoing today, albeit in somewhat different terms). I consider three challenges to TI offered by Reid, paying special attention to the first and third, which have been less frequently discussed.

First, I consider the charge of incoherence, which involves a dilemma between two accounts of indirect-objecthood. Reid correctly maintains that for O to be the indirect object of act A is either for O to be a secondary object of act A itself, or for O to be the only object of some suitably related act B. The main target of Reid's incoherence objection is the former of these accounts. I argue that a true double-object structure is coherent, and observe that Reid's preference for the double-act structure strongly influences his understanding of TI, using considerations from the writings of Reid's particular targets (such as Locke), contemporary work on those targets, as well as general philosophical considerations in responding to the alleged incoherence.

Second, I present Reid's charge that TI leads to objectionable skepticism when applied to perception. I argue that Reid's preference for interpreting indirect objects as direct objects of additional acts rather than as secondary objects of a single act prevents him from considering how a proponent of TI might offer a non-inferential account of our knowledge of the external world. Drawing on work by Jim Van Cleve and Ryan Nichols, I argue that if the objection is broadened to cover non-inferential views, Reid's own view would be equally susceptible to the objection.

Third, I examine Reid's objection that TI is viciously circular when applied to memory. While Reid presents it as an objection to Locke's account, he maintains that it is a general problem for TI. Reid argues that TI accounts of memory require one to perceive a current idea standing in some relation to a past idea, and that such a perception presupposes the remembrance of the past idea. By showing how proponents of TI can avoid this (and how Locke does), I show how this objection arises from the same preference for a double-act understanding of indirect-objecthood.

I conclude by summarizing some historical and contemporary lessons from Reid's attempted refutation of TI.