

REIDIAN EVIDENCE

PATRICK RYSIEW

University of British Columbia

On the face of it, current discussions of evidence fit less naturally with Reid's views on the topic than do those of some other 17th and 18th Century philosophers. Thus, of course, there is Descartes' saying that we should strive to proportion our judgment to the clarity and distinctness of our ideas (e.g., 1931: *Fourth Meditation*). Also, there is Locke, who, in speaking of probabilistic reasoning, says,

The mind, if it *will proceed rationally*, ought to examine all the grounds of probability, and see how they make more or less for or against any proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it; and, upon a due balancing the whole, reject or receive it, with a more or less firm assent, proportionably to the preponderancy of the greater grounds of probability on one side or the other. (1690/1959: Book IV, Chapter XV; Volume II, p. 366)

And there is even Hume, who – in an uncharacteristically Enlightenment moment, as it were – speaks of reasoning justly from past experience:

A wise man [...] proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full proof of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: he weighs the opposite experiments: he considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call probability. (1777/1975: 'Of Miracles', Part I)

To the contemporary ear, the sentiments expressed in such passages capture some common and current ideas about evidence: since evidence is what bears the

right kind of relation to the truth/falsity of p (as against what gets us *believing* that p), and since our ultimate epistemic end is the truth, our believings ought to be in accord with the evidence. Hence Clifford's famously declaring that 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' (1877: Section I), an idea that has been taken up by subsequent epistemological 'deontologists'. And hence, more recently, the 'evidentialist' account of that in which epistemic justification consists: one's belief is justified just in case what one believes fits one's evidence (e.g., Feldman and Conee 1985).¹

Now, it won't be argued here that Reid would reject these familiar ideas – though what he does say about evidence doesn't obviously fit neatly and in some straightforward way into, say, a deontological or evidentialist package. In fact, I won't be discussing Reid's views on evidence in connection with these ideas at all. Instead, I will be concerned with the prior question of just what Reid's view of evidence *is*; for there are real difficulties in interpreting his view. (Perhaps because they are hard to pin down, Reid's views on evidence have tended to be discussed in passing – in the course of discussions of, e.g., the nature and status of the first principles, and/or Reid's response to the sceptic.) Among the questions which emerge as particularly salient in understanding Reid's views on evidence are the following:

- Is 'evidence' a purely descriptive/psychological notion for Reid, or is it a normative category – as it is, e.g., in Chisholm (Alston 1985, 1989; Van Cleve, 1999)?
- What is Reid's notion of *self*-evidence, such that the first principles can come out as possessing it – something that Alston, for one, takes to be pretty implausible (1985, 1986), and that Van Cleve (1999) too expresses some doubts about?
- Does evidence play any *essential* role in Reid's epistemology, or does the (alleged) nascent reliabilism of his view make the importance of evidence *per se* entirely derivative upon the truth-aptness of our natural belief-forming processes (e.g., Greco 2002, Alston 1985)?²

Here, I'll do my best to sketch what I see as the right way of answering these questions. I should note at the outset that there are many *other* questions raised, both by Reid's views, and by my interpretation of them, which I will not be addressing here at all. Still, I hope that what I say will provide a useful beginning to further discussion of Reid's views on evidence.

I

To begin, as is well known, Reid is a pluralist about evidence. Just as Reid is unequivocal on there being various degrees of belief, 'from the slightest suspicion

to the fullest assurance' (*IP* II 20; *W* 327b³), he says that '[w]e give the name of evidence to whatever is the ground of belief' (*IP* II 20; *W* 328a). And, as it happens, there are different types or sources of evidence: there is the evidence of sense, of memory, of consciousness, of axioms, of reasoning, and so on (*IP* IV 20; *W* 328a), and none of these can be reduced to the other:

They seem to me to agree only in this, that they are all fitted by Nature to produce belief in the human mind, some of them in the highest degree, which we call certainty, others in various degrees according to circumstances. (*Ibid.*; *W* 328b)

Nor does certainty attach only to demonstrative reasoning, according to Reid. Demonstrative and probabilistic reasoning have different subject matters – necessary truths and contingent truths, respectively (*IP* VII 3; *W* 481b).⁴ In fact, therein lies the primary difference between demonstrative evidence and probabilistic – the sort of truths each is evidence of. Probabilistic evidence is *not*, for Reid, an inferior sort of evidence. The 'evidence of sense [e.g.] is no less reasonable than that of reasoning' (*IP* IV 20; *W* 328b). And certainty, the 'highest degree' of belief, can attach just as legitimately to contingent truths. While demonstrative evidence has no degrees, probabilistic evidence ranges 'from the very least to the greatest, which we call certainty' (*ibid.*; *W* 482b).⁵

That there is such a city as Rome, I am as certain as of any proposition in Euclid; ... the evidence is not demonstrative, but of that kind which philosophers call probable. Yet in common language it would sound oddly to say, it is probable that there is such a city as Rome, because it would imply some degree of doubt or uncertainty. (*Ibid.*)⁶

As noted above, Reid says, 'We give the name of evidence to whatever is the ground of belief'. Very well, but if we're to understand Reid's notion of evidence, we need now to understand 'ground'. Specifically, we can ask, either of 'evidence' or of 'ground', whether it is intended to be a merely descriptive notion – such that whatever it is that causes us to believe something constitutes the evidence in its favor; or, whether 'evidence'/'ground' is supposed to have some normative force – such that 'evidence' is on the former side of the reasons/causes distinction.

Well, first, it is not clear that Reid has a *purely* normative notion of evidence. There are, of course, places where he might seem to be expressing such a view, freely admixing talk of evidence with terms such as 'just', 'good', and 'reasonable':

All men of common understanding agree, that each [kind] of evidence may afford just ground of belief. (*IP* II, 20; *W* 328a)

I shall take it for granted that the evidence of sense, when the proper circumstances concur, is good evidence, and a just ground of belief. (*Ibid.*; 328b)

All good evidence is commonly called reasonable evidence, and very justly, because it ought to govern our belief as reasonable creatures. (*Ibid.*)

In light of passages such as these, it is natural to say that for Reid evidence is simply 'what makes us justified in our beliefs' (Lehrer 1989: 114).⁷

But matters are complicated when we notice, with Alston, that there are also many places where Reid seems to be giving a purely '*psychological* characterization of evidence' (Alston 1985: 438, italics added). One such passage, according to Alston, is Reid's characterizing evidence, as above, as the grounds of belief. And here is another passage Alston cites in support of this interpretation (we encountered it before as well):

[The different kinds of evidence] seem to me to agree only in this, that they are all fitted by nature to produce belief in the human mind; some of them in the highest degree, which we call certainty, others in various degrees according to circumstances. (*IP* II 20; *W* 328b)

'So', Alston says, 'to say that sense, memory and so on are sources of evidence is simply to say that we are so constituted that they produce beliefs in us. Hence the fact that they are sources of evidence is not of crucial epistemological significance' (1985: 438).

I disagree. Or, more cautiously, I disagree on one important reading of this claim. Alston (1985), and later Van Cleve (1999), is concerned with the question of whether the first principles of common sense are merely 'reliability' principles, or whether they give some central place to normative notions such as evidence, reasonable belief, and so forth. (As Van Cleve puts it, the question is whether the epistemological first principles 'are principles of *truth* or principles of *evidence*' (1999: 3).) This, in turn, is why Alston is interested in the question of whether evidence itself is a psychological or normative notion; if the latter, then the way is blocked for a reliabilist reading of Reid. Whereas, as Alston sees it, for Reid, 'the basic question' is 'whether beliefs *that are formed in a certain way* can be relied on to *give us the truth*, rather than whether beliefs *that satisfy certain conditions* thereby satisfy *certain normative standards of rationality* or whatever' (1985: 437, italics added; Greco 2002: 562).

Now, there is no doubt that, among the (contingent⁸) first principles which have obvious epistemological content or obvious epistemological implications, that content and those implications have much to do first and foremost with the reliability of 'our natural faculties' – they speak to the reliability of consciousness (#1), memory (#3), perception (#5), and human testimony (#10); and, of course,

there is principle #7, which explicitly states what these others imply, viz., 'that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious'. Those who read Reid as some sort of proto-reliabilist, then, are hardly without justification for doing so (see, esp., Alston 1985: 437). He seems *at least* to take as central the question of whether beliefs *that are formed in a certain way* can be relied on to *give us the truth*. What I want to suggest, however, is that *this* doesn't mean that Reid *isn't* equally interested in, and *doesn't* see as intimately related, the second question Alston describes – viz., whether beliefs *that satisfy certain conditions* thereby satisfy *certain normative standards of rationality*, etc. It may well be that, at the end of the day, Reid's views on evidence don't bear a strong resemblance to, say, Chisholm's internalistic view, wherein evidence is at center stage, but is to be understood in terms of reasonableness, etc., but *not* 'logically tied to reliability' *per se* (Alston 1985: 437-8; Van Cleve 1999: 18). And it may be that, among the first principles which have obvious epistemological content, that content most concerns the reliability of our faculties, saying very little indeed about evidence. However, it is one thing to say that Reid isn't a Chisholmian about evidence, or that the first principles aren't explicitly concerned with evidence, and quite another to say that 'evidence is not of crucial epistemological significance' (1985: 438) for Reid.

To begin to see this, note that the passages Alston takes as illustrating a psychological account of evidence are actually not so straightforwardly interpreted. For instance, Reid's saying, 'We give the name of evidence to whatever is the ground of belief' (*IP* II 20; *W* 328a), is *immediately* followed by the following *Cliffordian* claim that '[t]o believe without evidence is a weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid' (*ibid.*). But how could it be a *weakness* to believe without evidence – indeed, how is it even *possible* to believe without evidence – if evidence is simply what prompts belief? Further, as Van Cleve notes, if Reid is taken to be reducing evidence to 'a purely psychological matter of what we must believe,' the following passage is all but impossible to make sense of:

... such is the constitution of the human mind, that evidence discerned by us, forces a corresponding degree of assent. And a man who perfectly understood a just syllogism, without believing that the conclusion follows from the premises, would be a greater monster than a man born without hands or feet. (*IP* VI 5; *W* 448a)⁹

But if such a monster is a logical possibility, it *can't* be that evidence is defined simply as what compels assent (Van Cleve 1999: 18). And if 'evidence' is 'whatever is the ground of belief,' it *can't* be that *ground* is a purely psychological notion. However, as we've already seen, it's implausible too to think that 'ground' is a strictly normative notion. What to say?

As Alston later saw in a later paper (1989: 41), one obvious way out of this impasse is to not choose between the psychological and normative readings of ‘ground’ (and hence of ‘evidence’). And, in fact, there is precedence for understanding ‘ground’ in this way. For instance, having claimed that probability applies where we have no certainty, only inducements to take something as true, Locke says: ‘The grounds of it are as follows ...’; and he goes on to describe, not mere ‘inducements’ to (causes of) believing something, but the *proper* grounds of probabilistic reasoning – how ‘the mind, if it will proceed rationally’ ought to proceed (1690/1959: Vol. II, pp. 365-6). (In addition, it’s not irrelevant that the entry for ‘ground’ [n.] in the OED describes *solid* bases, foundations, etc.) Thus, there is some reason, both within Reid and without, for taking his ‘ground’ to be both descriptive and normative; but how are we to think of this, exactly?

II

It’s rather natural, and certainly within the philosophical tradition, to think of ‘evidence’ in what could be called *argumentational* terms: evidence is that which bears the right kind of logical or probabilistic relation to some claim/belief (cf. Greco 2002: 562; Alston 1989: 41); this view goes along with thinking of evidence in sentential or propositional terms, since only such entities as these have the right kind of structure to serve, as it were, as premises in an argument for the claim/belief in question.

But this isn’t the only truth-linked notion of evidence that’s available. For instance, we might adopt the following sort of *reliabilist* notion of evidence (cf. Greco 2002: 562; Alston 1985 437): if a given belief forming process is reliable, then beliefs produced thereby are *ipso facto* justified, and have as their ‘evidential’ basis the fact that they are so produced.

However, there is still another way of thinking of evidence – one which, like the previous two, preserves the connection between evidence and truth. Here, instead of beginning with the abstract noun (‘evidence’), we take as the root notion that of *evidentness*, or *that which makes* something manifest or evident. (This too is given by the OED under ‘evidence’.) Just as light makes manifest visible objects, evidence is the voucher for all truth (*IP VI 5; W 448a*). As against the argumentational view (but like the reliabilist view) there is no restricting evidence to sentence-like entities. And as against the reliabilist view, it is not the *fact* of reliability that defines evidence. The connection with truth, rather, is secured via the notion of evidentness: to take something as evident or manifest is to take it to be (at least) true; when I say, ‘It’s obvious [evident, manifest] that *p*’, or, ‘*X* makes it manifest [evident, obvious] that *p*’, I am committing myself as to *p*. Of course, the fact that something seems (*is made*) evident to me doesn’t entail that it *is* true. Even so, the important point is that evidentness can’t be defined independently of truth.

Further, though, as the notion of something’s being evident *to* someone makes

clear, 'evidence' on the present view – evidentness, making manifest – is also pretty obviously a (partly) *psychological* notion – that something is evident to me is a psychological fact about me; it means that I see it as evident, and take it to be true. But whereas the reliability *per se* of a belief's source need not be something to which the subject has access, evidence (evidentness) *does* disclose itself: when something is evident to me, it is *evident* (to me) that it is evident to me; 'evidence, which is the voucher for all truth, vouches for itself at the same time' (*IP* VI 5; *W* 448a).

But, besides these truth-linked and psychological aspects, there is, further still, some *normative* content to the notion of evidentness/manifestness. For saying that something is evident, like saying that it's obvious, is to imply that it's something that *others ought* to recognize/accept it as well. – What would we say, e.g., to someone who was standing outside in a downpour, but who failed to believe that it was raining? Surely we'd want to say that their inability to *see* this obvious fact showed that there was something wrong with them, though this failing would be a case of improper functioning, rather than of epistemic irresponsibility.

Now, it's important to emphasize once again that thinking of evidence in terms of this 'mixed' notion of evidentness (/that which makes evident) is not an alternative to taking evidence to be an inherently truth-linked notion. The difference is not that this way of thinking about evidence severs the semantic connection with truth, but that it *also* makes clear the connection to the psychological notion of believing, to evidence's *disclosing* itself to the subject, and to some normative notion of what one ought to believe.

This mixed view, of course, has the virtue of making sense of the textual ambiguity we've been exploring – the fact that Reid sometimes speaks of evidence in purely normative terms, sometimes in purely psychological ones. And there are other passages, I think, where the view I'm attributing to Reid is pretty much right on the surface. Thus, in speaking of probable evidence, he says

... in most cases, we measure the degrees of evidence by the effect they have upon a *sound* understanding, when comprehended clearly and without prejudice. (*IP* VII 3; *W* 482b, italics added)

And I would suggest that this same restriction to persons of *sound* minds is implicit in the passage that Alston (1985), as we saw above, takes as evidence for a purely psychological notion of evidence in Reid: When Reid says that the different kinds of evidence 'are all fitted by nature to produce belief in the human mind' (*IP* II 20; *W* 328b), I take it he means the *sound*, 'healthy', human mind.¹⁰

Recalling Van Cleve's point about the logical possibility of 'monsters' for Reid, on the present reading, it is indeed a contingent matter that our assent follows upon and covaries with evidence (evidentness) – it is contingent upon our being properly constituted. We might say that Reid thinks of evidence as what compels assent, to

varying degrees, in *normal* (non-‘monstrous’) humans, where ‘normal’ is itself a normatively loaded notion.¹¹ Given our constitution, though – given that we ourselves are not ‘monsters’ –, it is a contingent *necessity*. For, as Reid is constantly reminding us, we *cannot help* trusting our natural faculties.¹²

But what, exactly, is the normative import of ‘normal’ here? What is it that makes a monster monstrous? Well, I take it that Reid’s answer is that we don’t have, and shouldn’t expect, any standard of non-monstrousness which is completely independent of our most deeply held beliefs and our most fundamental cognitive-epistemic practices. At minimum, what we have, and what the monster lacks, is common sense – that degree of judgment ‘which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business’ (*IP* VI 2; *W* 421b), ‘which makes a man capable of acting with common prudence in the conduct of life, [and ...] of discovering what is true and what is false in matters that are self-evident, and which he distinctly apprehends’ (*ibid.*; *W* 422b).

III

‘Matters that are self-evident’, of course, brings us back to Reid’s First Principles of Contingent Truths. Being contingent, these principles are not capable of demonstration, but they are no less certain for that. Nor does our being certain about them mean that it is wrong to speak of them as having *evidence* in their favor;¹³ it is just that they wear their own evidence (evidentness) on their sleeve:

[They] 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. 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. (*IP* VI 4; *W* 434a)

Now, in discussing Reid’s views, Alston has said that it’s hard to see in what sense the First Principles of Contingent Truths which Reid lists *are* self-evident. On this point, Van Cleve is inclined to concur. He writes:

[I]s it immediately evident that everything distinctly perceived is true, or that everything distinctly remembered is true? Is it even immediately evident that perception and memory yield truth most of the time? I find myself reluctant to say yes. One possible ground for such reluctance would be that no proposition that is both *general* and *contingent* can be self-evident. There are, of course, general propositions that are self-evident (e.g., all triangles have three angles), and there are also contingent propositions that are self-evident (e.g., I am now conscious). But are there any self-

evident propositions that are both general and contingent in the way that reliability principles are? It would seem not. (1999: 16–17)

And here is what Alston himself says:

[H]ow can it seriously be claimed that principles [such as, *Sense experience is a reliable source of perceptual beliefs*] are self-evident? Can we really see them to be true just by understanding their content? If so, how can we explain the tortured history of the epistemology of perception? (1985: 439)

Any tendency to suppose [such a principle] to be self-evident can be put down to a confusion between self-evidence and being strongly inclined to believe the proposition without question. (1986: 4)

[E]ven if [this principle] were self-evident, as Reid understands that term, that would not suffice as a defence of the principle against its detractors ... [For t]o say that [a principle] is self-evident in this sense is just to say that we are so constituted that considering the principle will lead us to believe it. And this will cut no ice with the skeptic like Hume of the *Treatise*, who is casting doubt on the veracity of our natural principles of belief. (1985: 441)

How might Reid respond to this? Is Reid committed to saying, as in the first quote here, that the first principles are such that we can see them to be true just by understanding their content (cf. Van Cleve 2002: 17)? Yes and no: we do not, of course, see that they *must* be true, as we do (e.g.) in the cases of propositions '[whose] subject is plainly included in the predicate' (*IP* II 20; *W* 330a), or *cogito* thoughts that must be true whenever we think them. And, for the same reason, there is no guarantee that they *are* true. – Of the idea that our sensations suggest something external, for example, Reid writes: 'The belief of it, and the very conception of it, are equally parts of our constitution. If we are deceived in it, we are deceived by Him that made us, and there is no remedy' (*IHM* V.VII; *W* 130b); 'we must [trust the testimony of our faculties] implicitly, until God gives us new faculties to sit in judgment upon the old' (*IP* VI 5; *W* 447b; cf. *IP* VII 4; *W* 488b & 486a).

The beginnings¹⁴ of an answer to the question of how contingent first principles could be self-evident, however, is suggested by asking after the force of the 'must' in the claim, 'we must trust the testimony of our faculties'. Obviously, this is partly a psychological matter – we simply, Reid thinks, can't help believing that our faculties are generally reliable. But it's not *just* that we are all stuck with this belief – something that Hume, e.g., never denied. I have argued elsewhere (Rysiew 2002) that Reid regards the first principles of as *constitutive* principles, in the sense that accepting them is a condition (for us, given our nature¹⁵) of cognizing at all. A

failure to accept the first principles of common sense is, as Reid is constantly reminding us, just plain and literal lunacy. The first principles are, for us, and in our view, the 'fixed point' upon which the business of cognizing rests (cf. *IP* VI 4; *W* 435a). The distinction Alston draws between self-evidence and being strongly inclined to believe a proposition without question is easy enough to draw at the level of non-basic propositions, especially where we find people disagreeing as to whether a given proposition is evident. (Think, e.g., of people disagreeing over whether interest rates will rise, or whether there will be a labor strike next year.) What's not clear, however, is whether this distinction can get much of a grip with respect to the first principles themselves. Because the first principles are *first* principles – because they are, as it were,¹⁶ the premises on which all of our other beliefs and actions are founded – we should perhaps expect, instead, that at the end of the day their being self-evident and our all being strongly inclined to believe them is a distinction without a difference.¹⁷ And so too, I take it Reid would say, for our accepting the first principles and our being justified in accepting them: because they are presupposed in any of our cognizing, we not only must but *ought* to abide by them. They typify, even define, what (self-)evidentness is for us, given our constitution.

In fact, we could try to push this point a bit further. For it's not clear that the matter is so different in the case of necessary or analytic truths. To see this, note that, strictly speaking, it is not their necessity or analyticity *per se* which leads me to accept these things as true. After all, there are many analyticities which I've never even considered, and many (other) necessary truths which I don't recognize as such. What gets me accepting such truths is my '*seeing*' (by my lights) that they can't be false, my inability to understand how things could turn out such that they are not true. Reid, like Descartes, allows that even simple mathematical judgments are not impervious to error. Further, Reid thinks that we *can conceive* of impossible things – our ability to use *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, e.g., crucially depends upon it (*IP* IV 3; *W* 379a). Thus, while the ordinary usage of 'conceivable' disguises the distinction (*ibid.*; *W* 377a), even for analyticities, it is not the (literal) *inconceivability* but the *de facto unbelievability* of their negations which accounts for our thinking them true (*ibid.*; *W* 375a–379b, esp. 378a). It is for this reason that Reid says, 'the rules of demonstrative sciences ... have no authority but that of human judgment' (*IP* VII 4; *W* 486a).

But, in this regard, things are no different with respect to the contingent first principles: because (for us, given our constitution) the first principles create the very possibility of cognizing at all, there is a real sense in which we literally cannot imagine thoroughgoing 'monsters' – creatures for whom those principles are nothing; creatures who *don't* take their truth-oriented faculties to be reliable on the whole; who *don't* see life and intelligence in each other; who *don't* think that the things which they clearly and distinctly perceive really exist; and so on. It is, of course, easy to *speak* of such creatures – I have just done so; and philosophers of

course speak of Hume's (in the *Treatise*) 'casting doubt on the veracity of our natural principles of belief' (Alston 1985: 441), or Descartes' (in the *First Meditation*) doubting the reliability of pretty much *all* of our natural faculties. But it is significant that, when actually confronted by a human being who seems to approximate the creatures just described, we find ourselves unable to share, even imaginatively, their 'perspective' on the world. How, we wonder, could they even get around in the world if they didn't trust their senses (etc.)?¹⁸ And, for the same reason, and unsurprisingly, we cannot imagine (cognize) what our own cognition would be like if these principles were false. Whether it concerns contingent or non-contingent truths, then, in the end the (self-)evidentness or simple (by our lights) manifestness of certain things, the bruteness of certain such judgments, might be the final court of appeal. If this is so, then it's wrong to say that 'the fact that [sense, memory and so on] are sources of evidence is not of crucial epistemological significance' (Alston 1985: 438).¹⁹

We can now see why the choice that Alston and Van Cleve present us with – like that between reasons and causes, between seeing evidence in psychological *or* normative terms – might be a false dichotomy as far as understanding Reid goes. For them, 'the basic question' is 'whether beliefs that are formed in a certain way can be relied on to give us the truth', or 'whether beliefs that satisfy certain conditions thereby satisfy certain *normative* standards of rationality or whatever' (Alston 1985: 437) – whether the first principles are 'principles of *truth* or principles of *evidence*' (Van Cleve 1999: 3). On the present interpretation, however, evidence (evidentness) straddles the boundary between the psychological and the normative, and *self-evident* propositions mark the limits of this boundary for us, as the epistemic subjects that we are. In the same way, given that Reid thinks that the reliability of our natural faculties is something we must take for granted, there is a presumption in favor of the truth of beliefs that are the output of these faculties. But as we have just seen these same outputs enjoy some further, positive epistemic status. For example, in the absence of special reasons for thinking that one's belief is false, or one's perception unreliable, 'the evidence of sense' 'is good evidence, and a just ground of belief' (*IP* IV 20; *W* 328b).²⁰

IV

But how, given all this, are we to explain the tortured history of the epistemology of perception, for example? And how do we explain 'the skeptic like Hume of the *Treatise*, who is casting doubt on the veracity of our natural principles of belief?' Isn't it harder than ever to see what all the fuss could be about, and how it might arise? Well, this is not the place for a discussion of Reid's response to scepticism and his account of the thinking that might give rise to it; a decent treatment of this topic deserves more space than I could possibly give it here.²¹ So let me just close by noting that there is ample material in Reid for fashioning a response to these

questions – for instance, that much of this ‘tortured history’ has taken place against the background of ‘the ideal theory’, a false analogy between mind and body, and, *apropos* of the subject of the present paper, an assumption that the evidence of sense can and should be reduced to, or exhibit all the same features as, the evidence of reason and/or consciousness (e.g., *IP* II 20; *W* 328a–330b).²²

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NOTES

- ¹ There is a fourth idea about evidence that still enjoys some currency – i.e., that it must take a specifically propositional form, such that (e.g.) experience doesn't itself constitute evidence. The idea here is that experiences don't have the right kind of logical 'shape', as it were, to serve as reasons, or premises in an argument. This idea, to which I'll return below, seems to be the view of, e.g., Bonjour 1980 and Chisholm 1964.
- ² Of course, there may be some overlap between these questions and issues. E.g., if Reid is a Chisholmian about evidence, he's obviously not a pure reliabilist about it. But Chisholm's is not the only kind of non-psychological notion of evidence, and it's not clear that the reliabilist must have a purely psychological conception of evidence. The point of listing these questions as separate, in the way that I've done, is to avoid closing off some real possibilities.
- ³ References to Reid will be given by the Chapter/Essay and Section numbers in Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind (IHM)*, his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers (IP)*, or his *Essays on the Active Powers (AP)*. These will be followed by 'W' and the corresponding page numbers in Hamilton (8th edition, 1895), with 'a' referring to the right-hand side of the page and 'b' to the left-hand side.
- ⁴ A slight complication is that Reid allows that there can be probabilistic evidence of necessary truths (*ibid.*). Also, in terms of the latter, Reid clearly at times has in mind analytic truths – e.g., *IP* II 20; *W* 330a.
- ⁵ Reid also says that probable evidence itself has different *kinds* (*IP* VII 3; *W* 482b).
- ⁶ Compare Reid with Locke here: Locke says that probabilistic reasoning serves 'to supply the defect of our knowledge, and to guide us where that fails'; it is 'always conversant about propositions whereof we have no certainty, but only some inducements to receive them as true' (1690/1959: Volume II, p. 365). Locke is forced to such a view, of course, because he has defined knowledge as the perception of agreement or disagreement among ideas; and contingent propositions are always such that their truth involves more than merely such a relation. That definition aside, however, Locke also allows that 'the evidence of sense' for the existence of particular material things 'puts us past doubting' (*ibid.*: 185–6), an assurance that 'deserves the name of knowledge' (*ibid.*: 327).
- ⁷ It is not clear whether Lehrer does intend a purely non-psychological reading of evidence in Reid, as against the sort of 'mixed' reading I discuss below. He says, e.g., 'Evidence is not simply the cause of my belief, it is what assures me of the truth of my belief' (*ibid.*). Cf. Van Cleve (1999), who says that Lehrer (1989) gives a 'reliabilist' reading of evidence, but in his (Lehrer's) 1990 paper regards the first principles as principles of evidence. Part of the point of the present paper is to make it clear how these views of Lehrer's can be part of a single, coherent interpretation of Reid.
- ⁸ Henceforth, this qualification will be taken for granted; in this paper I will not be discussing first principles of necessary truths.
- ⁹ An anonymous referee has suggested that Reid's claim here shouldn't be taken too literally – that Reid is surely being hyperbolic in comparing such an agent to 'a man born without hands or feet'. This is not obvious to me, however. For one thing, if we read this passage as hyperbolic, parity of reasoning would suggest that we should read in the same way the many passages in which Reid compares true and total scepticism (as opposed to professed or partial scepticism) to madness; whereas it seems to me that Reid *does* mean precisely what he says in those places.
- ¹⁰ This is the default way to read Reid, I think: unless he makes it clear otherwise, one should take him to be talking about persons of sound minds (persons with 'common sense'). But won't such a restriction be needed even if we adopt a purely psychological notion of evidence? Surely the proponent of such a view needn't say that evidence is

what causes belief in *all* humans, including those with various mental impairments. (This was suggested by an anonymous referee.) It is not clear, though, whether this sort of restriction can be imposed while keeping the view purely psychological. For we'd need a way of specifying what is to count as a mental impairment which does not rely upon any ideas about what *should* cause belief. Putting it another way, if the proponent of such a view says that evidence is what causes belief in normal persons, he will need to provide some purely descriptive cashing-out of 'normal' itself, and it is not clear that a purely statistical notion of normalcy, say, would suffice, since many of our actual belief-formings are influenced by one or another kind of 'prejudice' (e.g., *IP* II 22; *W* 334*aff.*) and '[w]e are liable to error in the use of [all of our faculties]' (*ibid.*; *W* 339a).

- ¹¹ Alston notes the possibility of Reid's having some kind of "ideal subject" conception of evidence, but says he is unaware 'that this suggestion was ever developed by Reid' (1985: 438). The present account can be seen, after a fashion, as the elaboration of such a view – although talk of 'ideal' subjects might get us thinking, erroneously, that the standard is *merely* ideal, whereas *we* (normal, non-monstrous humans) set the standard for Reid. The present account can also be seen as an exploration of the sort of 'naturalistic' reading of Reid which Van Cleve mentions, but does not take up, in his 1999 (see p. 3, and p. 25, n. 7).
- ¹² Here I should note a possible disagreement with Van Cleve. In arguing that it is particular propositions (e.g., there is a table in front of me) are more plausible candidates for self-evidence (hence, for being first principles) than the general ones which Reid lists – a matter of which I remain uncommitted here –, Van Cleve suggests that Descartes, after all, doubted these general propositions (1999: 9). But Reid would disagree, and point out that the fact that Descartes didn't doubt these things is what enabled him to carry on with composing his *Meditations*.
- ¹³ Just as we might be uncomfortable with saying that it is probable that there is such a city as Rome, we might be uncomfortable with saying that we have *evidence* that such-and-such, when we in fact have no doubt about it. – Cf. Austin's response to Wisdom's looking in the larder and finding 'signs' of bread when he sees the loaf, touches it, tastes it, and so on; talk of signs, Austin thinks, makes sense only where there is some doubt about whether it *is* bread we're eating, as there manifestly isn't is the case Wisdom describes (Austin 1946/1979: 106*ff.*)
- ¹⁴ I say 'beginnings' because there are elements in Alston's discussion, as well as in Van Cleve's (2002) which I cannot take up here – including the issue of whether it is general propositions or particular ones which are more plausibly seen as candidates for self-evidence, and thus for the status of first principles (cf. n. 12, above)
- ¹⁵ As Wolterstorff has recently noted (2001: 231), among the things which separate Reid from Kant is the former's recognition of the contingency of the first principles and hence of our view of what is essential to cognition as such.
- ¹⁶ The 'as it were' is very important: Reid insists that our beliefs and actions presuppose trust in the first principles; but he nowhere takes this to be equivalent to our reasoning from them in any kind of explicit way, much less to our needing to do so in order for the resultant beliefs and actions to be justified.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Reid's 'marks' of first principles, after all: we are trying to get at the 'axioms' underlying all of our belief and action; if they were all supposed to be analytic or otherwise necessary – if they *had* to be true simply in virtue of their content – there would be no need for adverting to the 'marks' of first principles which Reid describes.
- ¹⁸ Hence our tendency to say, with Reid, that one who professes not to believe the first principles, but who acts as though they in fact do 'either acts the hypocrite, or imposes upon himself' (*IHM* VI 20; *W* 184a). This is an important part of Reid's response to the sceptic, and not just an *ad hominem*: he regards belief as 'the main spring in the life of a

man' (*IP* IV 20; *W* 328a). That is why he took indispensability in practice to be a mark of a genuine first principle.

¹⁹ Greco has suggested that Reid may plausibly be read as a reliabilist about evidence, and that 'once we are reliabilists about evidence, *evidence* is not so special any more' (2002: 562) – that is, it is not important that we have evidence which bears some necessary relation (either logical or probabilistic) to the beliefs that it makes evident. I see no reason why Reid would object to the latter claim. But as Greco notes (*ibid.*), Reid rejects this narrow, rationalistic conception of evidence; evidence, in the sense of evidentness, *does* play a crucial role in his epistemology.

²⁰ Having noted the various ways in which commentators have/might characterize the first principles – as (a) principles of truth, (b) of evidence, of (c) reliability, or (d) as quasi-Kantian conditions on cognition as such – de Bary suggests that none can serve as 'helpful signposts towards a description of the status of Reid's first principles', since 'they ultimately overlap if they do not actually coincide from the start' (2002: 34–35). De Bary's alternative is to regard the first principles as the outcome of Reid's applying the inductive method to our belief-forming activities in an attempt to arrive at the most general principles ('laws') needed to account for them (*ibid.*: 35–37). E.g., 'Reid can lay down, as well-confirmed laws of our constitution, that for all *X*, if *X* is a healthy, unprejudiced adult, *X* will have irresistible and immediate beliefs in his own personal identity, the existence of other minds than his own, the reliability of his perceptual systems and his memory, and much else' (*ibid.*: 36–37). However, while it may be true that no one of (a)–(d) above is privileged, that does not show that a 'mixed' view of the first principles is not correct. Further, while there is much to be said in favor of DeBary's preferred way of clarifying the status of the first principles, it's not clear that it constitutes an *alternative* to the sort of mixed view being defended here – after all, the general psychological laws de Bary describes speak to what *causes* irresistible and immediate belief in '*healthy, unprejudiced adults*'.

²¹ I have discussed it at greater length in my 2002.

²² A previous version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the Reid Society (American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division Meeting; Pasadena, March 2004). My thanks to those who attended the session, and to an anonymous referee for this *Journal*, for many helpful comments.

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