

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS REID

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KLUWER ACADEMIC PUBLISHERS

DORDRECHT / BOSTON / LONDON

1989



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## DID REID HOLD COHERENTIST VIEWS?

In a recent paper, Keith Lehrer and John-Christian Smith show that Thomas Reid, while being mainly foundationalist and reliabilist in his conception of knowledge, also pays attention to the dimension of coherence within our system of beliefs.(1) They describe thus a hitherto not much discussed and very interesting feature of Reid's philosophy. As they give simultaneously a fallibilist interpretation of the knowledge claims we may derive - according to Reid - from the exertion of our faculties, the consideration of coherence gains in importance: the less we derive completely certain knowledge directly from the exertion of our faculties, the more coherence among our beliefs could become relevant for the justification of knowledge claims. I shall not discuss the question of Reid's fallibilism here, but restrict my discussion to the possible role of coherence among our beliefs in Reid's philosophy and give some development to Lehrer and Smith's argument.

The evidence which Lehrer and Smith bring in support of their argument concerning the idea of coherence in Reid consists mainly in the following passages.(2) In I, Reid states:

The credit we give to [the testimony of nature and the testimony of men] is at first the effect of instinct only. When we grow up, and begin to reason about them, the credit given to human testimony is restrained and weakened, by the experience we have of deceit. But the credit given to the testimony of our senses, is established and confirmed by the uniformity and constancy of the laws of nature.(3)

This passage is indeed interesting. On the one side, Reid states that one of our first principles, the 'principle of credulity', undergoes a process of correction. It ceases to be compelling. This change is an answer to the lack of influence of the 'principle of veracity' on the actual human testimony. On the other side, we learn that another

principle, concerning the reliability of the senses, receives some confirmation from experience. The framework of our constitutive principles shows thus a kind of flexibility, at least in certain respects. The idea of coherence among our beliefs must play some role here.

A second passage serves as an argument for views about coherence in Reid:

There must, therefore, be some order and consistency in the human faculties.(4)

Here, however, Reid describes the necessary consistency between reason - rightly understood - and common sense, as due to their common Maker. The passage on this reading is not really concerned with coherence among common sense beliefs as such.

In the third of the cited passages, Reid comments on establishing first principles. He does not hold that these have to be proven - we would then be in need of other principles as premises, which we should prove again, etc. - but he maintains that they may be confirmed in various ways.(5) One of the possible confirmations is the ad absurdum proof. Reid argues that if you try to deny a first principle, you will be led to absurd consequences:

There is hardly any proposition, especially in those that may claim the character of first principles, that stands alone and unconnected. It draws many others along with it in a chain that cannot be broken. He that takes it up must bear the burden of all its consequences; and, if that is too heavy for him to bear, he must not pretend to take it up.(6)

This passage sounds strange, coming just after Reid's remark that he can offer no proof of first principles. The analogy with mathematics is possibly misleading. In a mathematical proof, to draw absurd consequences from a premise is to prove the truth of the proposition contradictory to this premise. But the notion of absurdity Reid wants to introduce here cannot be the logical one (the derivation of a definite contradiction). He would then be able to prove the first principle. It is not easy to know what this absurdity is. Elsewhere, Reid defines absurdity 'as something we detect by means of a 'particular emotion' we have when common sense is contradicted. But he would then be arguing in a kind of

circle.(7) Thus, what Reid aims at in this passage does not seem clear enough to me to attribute a large importance to it.

Consequently, I hold the first of these three quotations to be the most interesting in respect to our problem. Now we are to ask what the sense is of Reid's remarks about an a posteriori confirmation of principles first instantiated on an instinctive basis. The case of human testimony I shall discuss later.

In order to answer this question - in a somewhat hypothetical manner, as Reid himself did not explain the 'how' of this confirmation - let us first consider the formulation Reid has given to some of his principles of contingent truths. Let us take first the one Reid evokes in the first quotation above, and which Lehrer and Smith call the 'principle of perceptual reality':(8)

Those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be.(9)

And second let us take this similar principle concerning memory:

Those things did really happen which I distinctly remember.(10)

I am inclined to say that Reid exhibits here a correspondence theory of truth, although neither correspondence nor truth are explicitly mentioned in the quoted phrases. But we may say that they imply that the judgment involved in the operation of perception (or of memory) is true when perception (or memory) is distinct. Here, distinct perception (or memory) guarantees the relation of the judgment with the object perceived (or remembered). Moreover, the core of the doctrine of correspondence is simply the view that a true judgment has this property by its relation to a fact.

What is now the importance of coherence among our beliefs, for someone holding a correspondence theory of truth, while seeking to find a codification of our principles of truth? In order to explain this role, I shall construct a possible line of argument.

We must observe that, if we have stated the right principles of knowledge - the ones guaranteeing the correspondence of our judgments with the facts - we shall also have some order among our judgments, e.g. those made on the basis of distinct perception and of distinct memory. We can express this in the following way:

R: We have the right principles.  
(In Reid's view, the principles govern the activities of our faculties. In that sense, belief acquisition always depends on principles.)

C: The system of our beliefs - our 'doxastic system'(11) - presents some order.

W: The world is made in such a way that true judgments about it do not lead to contradictions.

W is a very general metaphysical assumption which Reid would certainly admit. He even states a much stronger assumption since among his principles of contingent truths, he maintains "Nature is governed by fixed laws".(12)

We can now observe that the conjunction of W and R implies C:

[ W & R ] - C

In other terms, the ordered character of our doxastic system is implied by the conjunction of the right codification of our principles and of the ordered character of the world. Let us write the truth table of this implication:

	<u>W</u>	&	<u>R</u>	-	<u>C</u>
1.	1	1	1	1	1
2.	1	1	1	0	0
3.	1	0	0	1	1
4.	1	0	0	1	0
5.	0	0	1	1	1
6.	0	0	1	1	0
7.	0	0	0	1	1
8.	0	0	0	1	0

Lines 1 and 3 to 8 - in which we take W, R and C as statements of possible 'facts' - characterize logically

possible universes. Let me comment briefly on the whole series:

1. The universe which Reid believes he lives in.
2. This universe is logically ruled out. It cannot be the case that we have an ordered world, correct principles and yet no order among our beliefs.
3. We have bad principles, but they happen to produce only beliefs showing some order.
4. Bad principles and no order among our beliefs.
5. The world is not ordered, but we have right principles which happen to give us an ordered set of beliefs.
6. No ordered world and no order among our beliefs.
7. Bad principles and a world without order happen to give us an ordered doxastic system.
8. Complete confusion.

Provided that we encounter occasions of belief acquisition in respect to a wide range of facts and order our knowledge claims under a variety of principles, we can assume the following statement: If we have an ordered doxastic system, it is plausible that W and R are true, because the universes 3, 5 and 7, though logically possible, suppose very strange contexts. A sufficient exertion of our faculties makes universe 3 implausible, unless we admit some 'good spirit', a being having the opposite properties of Descartes's 'evil spirit', cutting out all occasions of acquiring beliefs not fitting in with our doxastic system though subsumed under our bad principles. A similar remark applies to universe 5. Here, the 'good spirit' is to cut out all the facts of the unordered world we could encounter, preserving thus the order of the doxastic system. Universe 7 is even more extraordinary. Our beliefs, subsumed under bad principles and concerning (more or less) a world in disorder, keep some order. This means almost double work for the 'good spirit'.

As a consequence of the implausibility of universes 3, 5 and 7, universe 1 is made plausible if our doxastic system is an ordered one. That means that the codification of principles to which our beliefs correspond is 'established

and confirmed'.(13) We may observe that besides R, W receives indirect confirmation in another context:

Indeed, if we believe that there is a wise and good Author of nature, we may see a good reason why he should continue the same laws of nature, and the same connections of things, for a long time: because, if he did otherwise, we could learn nothing from what is past, and all our experience would be of no use to us. But, though this consideration, when we come to the use of reason, may confirm our belief of the continuance of the present course of nature, it is certain that it did not give rise to this belief.(14)

Thus, metaphysical or religious views may allow rational support of the 'inductive principle', and of W as well.

The account I have given of confirmation, based on the idea of coherence, of our codification of principles, shows that this consideration can have another sense than it has in contemporary theories of belief justification through the evaluation of coherence within a doxastic system. In Reid's stated views, coherence is no way of justifying current beliefs at the level of common sense. We may ask if we could ascribe a kind of 'rule coherentism', combining coherence - for philosophical discussion of the principles, with foundations - for particular beliefs.(15) What speaks against this line of interpretation is that it implies a kind of freedom in matters of first principles. Coherence as such leaves a multiplicity of decisions concerning the principles possible. But, in Reid's view, there is no such choice in matters of principles, because they express the necessities of our nature. The consideration of coherence can be only one secondary point of view among several 'reasonings' concerning the first principles. As is indicated by the term 'instinct' which Reid uses sometimes, and by the argument about the temporal priority of beliefs corresponding intimately to first principles in respect to other later beliefs, we simply admit them.(16) Then, if we are philosophers, we can test them in various ways and observe that their adoption leads to the coherence of our doxastic system. We can make it plausible that the coherence occurs as a consequence of the appropriate codification of principles we have succeeded in giving. Thus, coherence seems to play only a fringe role in Reid's philosophy.

However, coherence, or at least consistency, plays a very important role in the case of human testimony. Here, lack of consistency proves to be the reason to defeat a first principle, or at least its most rigid interpretation. Thus, are we not to think that the notion of coherence in Reid's philosophy is of central importance? A possible move would be to divide first principles into a group of non-defeasible ones, like the 'principle of perceptual reality', and a group of 'second class', defeasible principles like the 'principle of credulity'. Reid goes so far in that direction, in respect to the latter principle, that he even treats it as a kind of prejudice, an *idola tribus* in the sense of Francis Bacon. In other words, a principle of contingent truths appears here as a possible source of errors.(17) Reid would probably not admit this of all his principles. However, we may observe that other principles may present a kind of defeasibility. I give some examples without commenting on them at length:

There is life and intelligence in our fellow-men with whom we converse.(18)

Certain features of the countenance, sounds of the voice, and gestures of the body, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of mind.(19)

In connection with this latter principle, the possibility of escaping from the strict and natural correspondence of the external features with the inner dispositions is explicitly discussed by Reid in I, in terms reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's critique of culture and education.(20)

Further:

We have some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will.(21)

There are many events depending upon the will of man, in which there is a self-evident probability, greater or less, according to circumstances.(22)

In the two latter cases, the defeasibility is almost built-in to the formulation of the principles, as is shown by the expressions 'some' and 'greater or less'. This is even more striking in the 'principle of credulity' as stated in IP:

There is a certain regard due to human testimony in

matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion.(23)

Elsewhere, Reid also remarks that we should adopt a different tactic towards the 'inductive principle' than towards the 'principle of credulity'.(24) The inequality of treatment here is clear. The inductive principle holds stronger than the instances, leading possibly to its rejection or to its restrained interpretation. It is the contrary move which we should make concerning the principle of credulity.

On the whole, the principles of contingent truths which we may state in respect to our knowledge of other minds seem particularly liable to be defeated - though not abandoned. As a result, we would thus have, within our doxastic system, a sub-system A including the beliefs corresponding to the 'hard' principles, and another sub-system B containing beliefs corresponding to the 'soft', defeasible principles. The beliefs belonging to sub-system B would have undergone a critical control of their consistency with the first sub-system, A. Before, and even after this control, they would only be admitted conditionally in the doxastic system. Nevertheless, the 'soft' sub-system B depends still on its own first principles, which remain basic and irreducible to other principles. The knowledge we get by the means they describe is not to be drawn from other sources.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the situation here resembles universe 5 above. We are facing an unordered part of the world, partly of a verbal nature. In certain cases (e.g. lies), contradiction is already present as such (in contrast to what is stated in assumption W) in that part of the world. But this time, in order to preserve our doxastic system from incoherence, we are to do the critical work of the 'good spirit' ourselves.

All of this shows that the consideration of coherence is not without interest, even if one is basically, like Reid, a correspondence theorist in respect to truth and a foundationalist in respect to the justification of our beliefs. In that sense, Lehrer and Smith's attempt to make sense of some hitherto almost unnoticed phrases in Reid's writings presents much interest. However, I would maintain that Reid is no 'coherentist' in the modern, strong sense. The modern coherentist epistemology is based on the view that we have no incorrigible beliefs about facts (e.g. about immediate perceptual experience) and that the justified

acceptance of a belief depends on its coherence with our doxastic system or some alternative to it. If we have 'hard' principles as Reid maintains we do, for instance in relation to original perceptions and to consciousness, we have also incorrigible beliefs, including beliefs about material bodies and their basic properties and beliefs about our mind and its operations. On another level, Reid's praise of the inductive method and his rejection of the method of hypotheses suggests that the purely theoretical views cannot belong to the process of the acquisition of scientific knowledge. This means that, according to him, theories should not be introduced as evidence for our beliefs. In my view, these elements are sufficient to rebut the characterization of Reid's epistemology as 'coherentist'.

## NOTES

(1) Lehrer and Smith (1985, MS version p. 26). I wish to express my gratitude to the authors for providing me with the manuscript version of their article and for their very valuable commentaries on the present paper. I am also grateful to Timothy Oakley for very useful advice. This research has been supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

(2) Lehrer and Smith (1985, MS version pp. 7 and 23).

(3) I VI, xx (Works, p. 184).

(4) I V, vii (Works, p. 127).

(5) IP VI, iv (Works, p. 438).

(6) IP VI, iv (Works, p. 439).

(7) IP VI, iv (Works, p. 438). See also Schulthess (1983, pp. 88-90).

(8) Lehrer and Smith (1985, MS version p. 12).

(9) IP VI, v (Works, p. 445).

(10) IP VI, v (Works, p. 444).

(11) Cf. Lehrer (1974, pp. 189ff.).

(12) IP VI, v (Works, p. 451).

(13) A reflection of this nature became a leading thought in William Whewell's philosophy of science: "A coincidence of untried facts with speculative assertions cannot be the work of chance, but implies some large portions of truth in the principles on which the reasoning is founded." Whewell (1840, Vol. II, p. 229).

(14) I VI, xxiv (Works, p. 198).

(15) See Lehrer (1983, p. 182).

(16) IP VI, iv (Works, p. 441).

(17) IP VI, vii (Works, p. 469).

(18) IP VI, v (Works, p. 448).

(19) IP VI, v (Works, p. 449).

(20) I IV, ii (Works, pp. 117-9).

(21) IP VI, v (Works, p. 446).

(22) IP VI, v (Works, p. 451).

(23) IP VI, v (Works, p. 450).

(24) I VI, xxiv (Works, p. 199).