

THOMAS REID ON THE ROLE OF CONCEPTION AND BELIEF IN PERCEPTION AND MEMORY

Lucas Thorpe

Abstract

Thomas Reid argues that both perception and memory involve a conception of an object and usually cause a corresponding belief. According to defenders of the constitutive interpretation, such as Rebecca Copenhaver, the belief is constitutive of acts of perception and memory. I instead argue for a causal interpretation: although in normal circumstances perceiving and remembering cause a corresponding belief, the belief is not constitutive of perception or memory. Copenhaver's strongest argument for the constitutive interpretation is that perception essentially represents objects as present, while memory essentially represents objects as past; since such tense markers can only occur within the beliefs, the beliefs must be an essential aspect of perception and memory. I argue, in contrast, that temporal markers are contained in our conceptions of objects, so beliefs do not play an essential role in distinguishing between perception and memory. Such a reading presupposes a "thick" interpretation of what Reid means by a conception, according to which a Reidian conception is a mode of presentation of the object apprehended.

Keywords: Thomas Reid, perception, conception, belief, memory.

1. THE CONSTITUTIVE INTERPRETATION VERSUS THE CAUSAL INTERPRETATION.

Thomas Reid offers the following three-part account of what is involved in perception:

If we . . . attend to that act of our mind which we call the perception of an external object of sense, we shall find in it these three things:—

First, some conception or notion of the object perceived. Secondly, a strong and irresistible conviction and belief of its present existence; and Thirdly, that this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning. (EIP II:5, p. 96)

Reid offers a similar account of what is involved in (episodic) memory, arguing that memory involves a conception of the thing remembered and is “always accompanied by belief” (EIP III.1, p. 254). Rebecca Copenhaver (2006) distinguishes between two possible interpretations of Reid’s position, which she names the *constitutive interpretation* and the *accompaniment interpretation*. According to the constitutive interpretation, the perceptual belief is constitutive of the act of perception. According to the accompaniment interpretation, the perceptual belief normally accompanies the act of perception but is not constitutive of it. And a similar story is told about memory.

The constitutive interpretation is currently the dominant interpretation among scholars, and defenders of this interpretation include Copenhaver, William Alston (1989, 36), Todd Buras (2002, 461), Andy Hamilton (2003, 230), and René van Woudenberg (1999, 122). According to the constitutive interpretation, the relationship between perception and belief is a logical one, with perceiving an object *entailing* that one has formed the corresponding belief. In this article, I will defend a version of the accompaniment interpretation, which I call the *causal interpretation*.¹ And I will argue that this account is more plausible both as an interpretation of Reid and as a philosophical position. According to this interpretation, acts of perception and memory normally cause the corresponding beliefs in healthy human adults “as the result of our constitution” (EIP III:2 p. 256), but there is no entailment relationship, as it is possible both to perceive and remember without forming the corresponding belief.

Now, there are some passages in which Reid seems to commit himself to the position that belief plays a constitutive role in both perception and memory. For example, he claims that a person “cannot perceive an object of sense, without believing that it exists. He cannot distinctly remember a past event without believing that it did exist. Belief therefore is an ingredient in consciousness, in perception, and in remembrance” (EIP II.20, p. 228). Passages such as this prompt defenders of the constitutive thesis such as Copenhaver to claim that “according to Reid, all perceptions—original and acquired—have two components: a conception and a belief” (2010, 285). But although Reid seems at times to commit himself to the constitutive thesis, we should be careful to read these remarks in context. For often after making such claims, he is careful to limit their scope. Thus, for example, at the end of the section in which

he introduces his explication of perception quoted at the start of the article, Reid argues that,

What has been said of the irresistible and immediate belief of the existence of objects distinctly perceived, I mean only to affirm with regard to persons so far advanced in understanding as to distinguish objects of mere imagination from things which have a real existence. . . . Whether children, from the time that they begin to use their senses, make a distinction between things which are only conceived or imagined, and things which really exist, may be doubted. Until we are able to make this distinction, we cannot properly be said to believe or to disbelieve the existence of anything. The belief of the existence of anything seems to suppose a notion of existence—a notion too abstract, perhaps, to enter into the mind of an infant. I speak of the power of perception in those that are adult and of a sound mind, who believe that there are some things which do really exist; and that there are many things conceived by themselves, and by others which have non-existence. (*EIP* II.5, p. 100)

Just because infants and nonhuman animals may lack the capacity to form existential perceptual beliefs, Reid does not draw the conclusion that they do not perceive. This is the conclusion he should have drawn if the constitutive interpretation were correct. But Reid is quite explicitly committed to the position that nonhuman animals and infants do perceive. Indeed, he is even committed to the position that animals and young children have acquired perception. Thus, he argues that “not only men, but children, idiots, and brutes, acquire by habit many perceptions which they had not originally” (*IHM*, 171).

Similarly, during his discussion of memory, immediately after the quotation discussed above in which Reid claims that memory, perception, and consciousness are “always” accompanied by belief, Reid draws back and limits the scope of his claims. arguing that “perhaps in infancy, or in a disorder of mind, things remembered may be confounded with those which are merely imagined; but in mature years, and in a sound state of mind, every man feels that he must believe what he distinctly remembers” (*EIP* III.1 p. 254). Reid’s suggestion here is that young children and those with disordered minds may not be able to distinguish between remembering and imagining. And, once again, Reid does not conclude, as defenders of the constitutive thesis would expect, that infants or those with disordered minds fail to remember. Rather, the suggestion is that they do remember but are unable to distinguish between remembering and imaging and so do not form the corresponding belief. These passages provide strong textual evidence that Reid is not committed to the position that perception or memory *entail* the corresponding belief.

There are good philosophical motivations, which Reid himself recognizes, for rejecting the constitutive thesis for both perception and memory. It is quite common that we remember something but come to believe that we dreamt or imagined it. Reid himself remarks on this fact on several occasions, pointing out that “even in a sober and sound state of mind, the memory of a thing may be so very weak, that we may be in doubt whether we only dreamed or imagined it” (*EIP*, 298) Now, this possibility raises some problems for defenders of the constitutive interpretation. Let us think about the following case.

Bill went to a rather boisterous party last night and saw Gözde. He woke up this morning and remembered seeing Gözde, which caused him to (1) form the belief that Gözde was at the party last night. His wife, however, tells him that he must have had a vivid dream because Gözde is in Boston and so couldn't have been at the party. Trusting the testimony of his wife over the testimony of his hungover memory, Bill (2) forms the false belief that Gözde was not at the party and (3) the false belief that his act of memory was not an act of memory. Now, on my account, these two new beliefs destroy the original belief (1) that Gözde was at the party. So, on my interpretation, Bill remembers Gözde's having been at the party but doesn't believe she was there. Now, it would be strange to think that falsely believing that an act of memory is not an act of memory stops the act being a memory. I recall something that happened but falsely believe that I am imagining it. Does this mean that I am not recalling it? It is clear that Reid thinks that the identity of a mental operation is not changed by what one falsely believes about it. So I don't think it is plausible to claim in such a case that I no longer remember seeing Gözde.

A defender of the constitutive thesis who thinks that remembering entails believing, however, cannot explain the hungover memory case in these terms and seems to face two rather unattractive options. First, she could accept Bill continues to remember that Gözde was at the party and that doubting that one is remembering doesn't destroy the act of memory. In this case, she would have to say that, despite believing (2) that Gözde *was not* at the party, Bill continues to believe (1) that Gözde *was* at the party, because remembering entails believing. So, in such cases, one holds two contradictory beliefs: *p* and not-*p*. Second, she could claim that, if one believes that an act of memory is not an act of memory and forms a belief inconsistent with the belief the memory would lead one to form, this destroys the memory itself. But this seems implausible, both as an interpretation of Reid and as a philosophical position. In this situation, Bill still vividly recalls seeing Gözde, so there is some operation of the mind occurring and the only plausible way of identifying this operation is as the operation of memory. But it is an act of memory that is not dox-

astically endorsed. If this act of recall is not memory, what is it? Falsely believing that an F is not-F does not stop it being an F. Why should we think that, if someone misidentifies one of their mental operations, this changes the nature of the operation? The fact that you are being gaslighted doesn't mean you no longer remember; you just don't trust your memories. Neither of these options seems attractive. But the defender of the constitutive thesis must choose one of them.²

Reid himself suggests an analogous case concerning perception where "there may be a perception so faint and indistinct, as to leave us in doubt whether we perceive the object or not" (*EIP* II.5 p. 97). In this discussion, which is about the "irresistible conviction and belief" in the existence of the object perceived, the example he gives is of a ship that just begins to appear over the horizon, and he argues that, in such cases, we may be "dubious whether we perceive it or not" (*EIP* II.5 p. 97). I take it that, in such cases, Reid thinks that we do perceive the ship, but because we doubt that we are perceiving, we do not form the corresponding belief. He is clear that, in such cases, there is an act of perception. So it seems that, once again, the only plausible account that a defender of the constitutive interpretation can give is that, in such cases, we both believe there is a ship (because the belief is entailed by the act of perception) and not believe that there is a ship (because I doubt my eyes). But there is no evidence that Reid thinks anything like this. He just seems to suggest that this is a case of perceiving something without forming the corresponding belief. There seem to be good textual and philosophical reasons, then, for rejecting the constitutive interpretation.

Copenhaver provides a philosophical argument in favor of the constitutive interpretation. Her argument is that, in perception, I represent something *as present*, whereas, in memory, I represent something *as past*. And this difference can only be explained in terms of a difference in the contents of the beliefs involved. Therefore, insofar as perception represents its object as present and memory represents its object as past, belief must be an essential element of both perception and memory. In the following section, I will examine and reject her argument, contending that tense markers can be included in our conception of objects, so we do not need a belief to represent something as present or past. This discussion suggests that the fundamental disagreement between my position and Copenhaver's has to do with our differing understanding of what we understand by "conception" and "belief" in Reid. And so the final section of this article will offer an interpretation of what Reid means by these terms, an interpretation I believe Copenhaver would reject. I will suggest that what pushes her, and other defenders of the constitutive interpretation, into this position is commitment to a "thin" as opposed to a "thick" notion of what is involved in a Reidian conception.

2. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND MEMORY

In support of her constitutive interpretation, Copenhaver notes that any plausible account of the nature of memory needs to provide an account of the distinction between perception, memory, and imagination. She convincingly shows that Reid himself uses this criterion to dismiss the theories of memory of the Peripatetics, Locke, and Hume. And she plausibly claims that an essential difference between these operations of the mind is that, in the perception of an event, we represent the event as present, while, in memory, we represent the event as past. She argues the only way of capturing this essential difference in representational content is in terms of a difference of belief. Therefore, she concludes that the belief must be constitutive of memory and perception and that

The constitutive interpretation is preferable to the accompaniment interpretation because by it, Reid fulfils a constraint on any adequate theory of memory; namely, it explains why memory represents events as having the special quality of being in the past. The attendance interpretation explains why we believe that the events we remember are in the past. But it cannot explain why memory represents these events as past because it does not regard the belief that event occurred as constitutive of memory. . . . The pastness of the event apprehended is not part of the content of the past apprehension. However, if a belief that the event presented in the past apprehension happened is partly constitutive of memory, memory represents not merely past events, but past events as having occurred. The belief that is ingredient in memory is tensed. (Copenhaver 2006, 184)

Copenhaver, then, argues the constitutive interpretation is preferable to the accompaniment interpretation because it is essential to memory that memory represents events as being past rather than present. And the only way to explain this is in terms of the tensing of the memory belief.

But this argument only works if we exclude the possibility of the temporal marking being included within our *conception* of objects perceived and remembered. On this alternative interpretation, the presentness of the object of perception is included within our conception of the object perceived. So, for example, I may see the cat sitting on the mat, and my conception is *that-(the-cat's-sitting-on-the-mat-now)*³ Similarly, the pastness of the remembered state of affairs will be marked in the conception of the state of affairs. So, in remembering the cat sitting on the mat, my conception may be *that-(the-cat's-sitting-on-the-mat-yesterday)*. So corresponding beliefs are not required to distinguish the temporal contents of memory and perception.

There is some textual evidence that Reid does not regard the difference in the accompanying beliefs as essential to distinguish perception

and memory. Thus, comparing the perception, memory, and imagination of the smell of a rose, Reid argues,

But though the object of my sensation, memory, and imagination, be in this case the same, yet these acts or operations of the mind are as different, and as easily distinguishable, as smell, taste, and sound. I am conscious of a difference in kind between sensation and memory, and between both and imagination. I find also, that the sensation compels my belief of the present existence of the smell, and memory my belief of its past existence. . . . Sensation and memory therefore are simple, original, and perfectly distinct operations of the mind, and both of them are original principles of belief. Imagination is distinct from both, but is no principle of belief. (*IHM*, 28–29)

Here Reid seems to suggest clearly that the differences in kind among sensation, memory, and imagination do not depend on the difference between the associated beliefs.⁴ The claim that the difference between sense perception and memory is analogous to the differences among smell, taste, and sound suggests that Reid thinks there is a qualitative phenomenological difference between the experiences of remembering and perceiving. I take it that his thought here is that there is a qualitative aspect to something being present to us in perception that differs from the way in which the object of memory is available to us, and my suggestion is that this qualitative feeling of pastness is involved in our conception of past events in memory. Perhaps it is this “phenomenological presence” of the object of perception that is the basis of the phenomenological difference between the experiences of perception and memory. Following Mohan Matthen (2010), we may say that perception involves a “feeling of presence,” whereas (episodic) memory involves a “feeling of pastness.” This felt temporal aspect of (episodic) memory is independent of the temporality of the belief judgment. Such epistemic feelings do not merely accompany the cognitive activity but are partially constitutive of it. They are constitutive of remembering and perceiving because they are built into the conceptions of things when we perceive and remember them. In perception, we conceive of the object as present; in memory, we conceive of the object as past. Our conceptions, which are modes of presentation of objects and events, can contain felt elements. Thus, Reid thinks that our conceptions of secondary qualities such as color or heat involve a felt element. For example, our conception of a particular colour may be *that-(the-cause-of-this-sensation)*.⁵ So, there is no reason to think that the felt pastness of a remembered event is not incorporated into our conception of the event in the same way that our sensations are incorporated into our conceptions of secondary qualities. In perception, an object is apprehended as present. In memory, an object is apprehended as past. And the felt presentness and pastness are part of the way in which the object or

event is given to me in perception and memory and so should be thought of as part of the conception of the object.

Copenhaver might object that, even if there are felt differences among perception, memory, and imagination, this does explain the difference in representational content, and, on any plausible account, there must be a difference in the (temporal) representational content. These are feelings that may accompany memory and perception but are not part of the content. But this is precisely what I am denying. Why can't a feeling be incorporated into a conception? On the account I have just offered, Reid can provide some explanation of the difference in the phenomenal content between perception and memory, and it is not clear why such a response would not be sufficient for answering Copenhaver's worry.

Copenhaver's argument assumes that the conception of the event remembered does not change over time and does not—perhaps cannot—contain a tense marker. I think that her reason for this is that she thinks that, for Reid, perceptual conceptions are extremely “thin,” being perhaps something akin to bare demonstratives. So the only way that the tensing could be marked is in the belief, not in the conception involved in the act of apprehension. If conceptions are taken to be thin in this way, then the mark of pastness can only be contained in the belief as there just isn't any room in the conception. On Copenhaver's account, it seems that, as my perception turns into a memory, my conception of the object must remain the same, as we cannot have two distinct conceptions of the same object. But why should we think that the conception of a perceived event cannot be distinct from the conception we have when we remember the same event? Why does Copenhaver think that Reid does not incorporate temporal markers into our conception of objects? Reid himself seems to explicitly affirm that temporal information is included in our conception of a past object in memory, claiming that “we cannot conceive a thing to be past, without conceiving some duration, more or less, between it and the present” (*EIP* III.3, p. 258–59). Here it is our conception of duration doing the work, not a feature of the belief. So Reid's position here seems to be that a difference in the content of the belief presupposes a difference in conception. Unless there is a temporal difference in the conceptions, then there can be no difference in the temporal content of the beliefs.⁶

I believe that, ultimately, Copenhaver denies this possibility because, like many commentators, she is committed to a very thin interpretation of the nature of the “conceptions” involved in perception and memory, such that one cannot have two distinct conceptions of the same object. In contrast on my reading of Reid conceptions are modes of presentation of objects, so one can have more than one conception of the same object or event. On such a reading, I can see no principled reason to think

that our conceptions of objects cannot include temporal markers.⁷ Thus, yesterday my conception of an object may have been *as present*; today my conception of the same object is *as past*. In defense of my causal interpretation of the relationship between perception and belief, I need to defend a relatively “thick” account of perceptual and memory conceptions, the topic of the final section of this article.

3. CONCEPTIONS AND BELIEFS

For Reid, we can literally perceive all sorts of things including shapes, colors, spheres, and, with the right type of expertise, the weight of a ship. The first two examples are (in the case of vision) examples of what he calls original perception, the latter acquired perception.⁸ And Reid believes that, with the right experience and practice, we can learn to directly perceive all sorts of objects. It is important to note that, here and throughout, I use the expression *object* of perception to refer to whatever it is that is perceived, be it a property, physical object, or state of affairs.

To perceive an object one needs to (1) stand in a perceptual relation to the object and (2) have a *conception* of the object perceived. This conception does not need to adequately represent the object perceived but plays a role in distinguishing the object perceived from other objects in the vicinity. Perceiving an object usually causes a corresponding existential *belief*, with the belief being the result of a *judgment* that the world is as so conceived. Following Kant and Frege, I take it that the best way to think of such judgments is in terms of a second-order judgment that the conception is instantiated; a perceptual judgment/belief is an attitude toward a conception. In perception, we can distinguish between the *object* of perception and the *content* of perception. The object of perception is an object, property, or state of affairs in the external world. The content of perception is given by the conception and has to do with *how* the object is perceived. And the best way to make sense of this account the content of perception is in adverbial terms because, to make sense of this account, we need to distinguish between *what* we perceive and *how* we perceive it. Our *conception* of an object in perception, then, is *how* we apprehend it; it is the mode of presentation of an object. Although the conception of an object is an adverbial aspect of the act of perception, the conception can itself become the *object* of an act of judgment. And this is what happens in perceptual judgment and belief, which are attitudes toward conceptions; in perceptual belief, one endorses that things are as conceived.⁹ Perceptual judgments and beliefs, then, are metacognitive attitudes toward conceptions.

There are two distinctive features that Reid frequently stresses about “conceptions.” First, unlike judgments or beliefs, conceptions

are not truth-apt. Second, although a judgment or belief can only be expressed by using a full sentence, we can refer to conceptions by using terms and not complete sentences. We should think of conceptions as term-like, rather than sentence-like. Now, Reid thinks that all mental operations, including perception, memory, willing, desiring, and loving, involve some conception. I suggest that a conception can be thought of as combining both a demonstrative and something like a descriptive aspect. We can indicate a particular conception using an expression of the form *that-(such)*, using a hyphen to indicate that the demonstrative and descriptive elements are aspects of a single act and cannot come apart.¹⁰ In claiming that the perceptions that are involved in perception and memory have a descriptive in addition to a demonstrative aspect, I am defending a relatively “thick” interpretation of what Reid means by a conception. Here I disagree with many Reid scholars, who argue that, though the conceptions involved in thinking and imagination (bare-conceptions) may have something like a descriptive element, conceptions involved in perception and memory should be thought of in purely nondescriptive terms.¹¹ Thus, James Van Cleve, a prominent defender of a thin interpretation of perceptual conceptions, argues that, whereas linguistically mediated conceptions may be akin to what Russell calls knowledge by description, “if an object is present to my senses, I need no such description in order to conceive of it; I need only mentally point it out. This mode of conception is similar to what Russell called knowledge by acquaintance, and it is more akin to Kantian intuition than to Kantian conceptualization” (2004, 108). To defend a thin interpretation of what Reid means by the conception of an object in perception and memory means that the conception of an object is a bare relation to the object. Having such a conception is a binary matter: one either has a conception of the object, or one fails to have such a conception. According to the thin interpretation, there cannot be distinct conceptions of a single object. This rules out the possibility of first having a conception of an object *as present*, later *as past*. Among those who subscribe to a thin understanding of conception (at least in terms of our conceptions in memory and perception), as involving something like a bare Russellian acquaintance relation are Alston (1989), Copenhaver (2006, 2010), Folescu (2015, 2018), and Van Cleve (2004).¹²

I am assuming, in contrast, that Reid uses the word “conception” univocally and thinks that a conception that can play a role in perception can also play a role in a “bare-conception.” I think the burden of proof in such cases is to provide convincing textural evidence that Reid is not using the word univocally. Reid is very careful about his use of words and surely would have made it clear that he wanted to use this key term in radically different senses.

Conceptions, given their demonstrative aspect, function like nondescriptive modes of presentation of objects. However, they also have a descriptive aspect that plays at least three roles: (1) it allows us to individuate conceptions in a fine grained way, (2) it partially explains the phenomenal character of perceptual experience and (3) explains the content of the perceptual beliefs. Let me illustrate these three roles of the descriptive aspect of conceptions. I may look at a cloud while taking LSD. After some time, I see the clouds as a face and really believe there is a face in front of me. My conception changes from *that-(cloud)* to *that-(face)*, and this difference in the descriptive aspect underlies the difference in phenomenology.¹³ I go from believing that there is a cloud in front of me to believing that there is a face. The change in the descriptive aspect of the conception explains the change in belief. Throughout this experience, however, the object of perception remains the cloud. The change in conception does not change the object. Throughout this experience, the object of the experience is the cloud, but, after the LSD takes effect, the phenomenal content of this experience is *as* of a face. This perceptual content (the conception) becomes the *object* judgment. I begin by judging “there is (*a cloud*)” but later judge “there is (*a face*).” The difference in the descriptive aspect of the conceptions explains the change in the content of belief, but this change of belief does not change the object of perception. On such an account, *how* the world is perceived does not determine *what* is perceived.

For example, our conception of a person may be *that-(Max)*, our conception of a color may be *that-(the-cause-of-this-sensation)*, or of a state of affairs *that-(the-cat-is-sitting-on-the-mat)*. Our conception of an object, then, can be thought of as a fine-grained mode of presentation of the object perceived. As such, we could have a number of distinct conceptions of the same object, and our conception of an object may change over time. Although we can individuate some conceptions using language, some of the conceptions involved in perception may be too rich to characterize linguistically. For example, they may be in an analogue rather than digital format and be more fine-grained than can be captured in public language. When we perceive colors, for example, our conception of the property conceived is something like *that-(the-cause-of-this-sensation)*. Assuming that the space of color sensations is continuous, then there will be a continuum of such conceptions, so the space of conceptions would be much richer than the space of things that can be named in language. In saying that conceptions have a descriptive element, I am not claiming that this descriptive element could be adequately expressed by language.

Now, despite the fact that a conception contains a descriptive element, Reid is not a descriptivist who think that the descriptive content of the conception determines its referent; *how* we conceive of an object does not determine *what* it is that we see. The conception of the object

perceived does not have to accurately present to us the nature of the object perceived; all it has to do is to allow us to latch on to a particular object in the local environment and distinguish it from others. Thus, a conception can *fail to represent* anything about the nature of the object conceived, or it can *misrepresent* the object conceived. For example, Reid thinks that colors are mind-independent physical qualities; however, our (original) conception of a particular patch of color is of the form *that-(the-cause-of-this-sensation)*, and although such a conception allows us to distinguish one physical quality from another, it tells us nothing about the nature of the properties so distinguished. Similarly, our conception of an object may allow us to distinguish an object from the other objects around it but misrepresent the object picked out. For just as I may successfully think about the man drinking water from a martini glass at a party as *that-(the-man-drinking-the-martini)*, I may see the Trompe-l'œil painting of a five-pound note as *that-(five-pound-note)*. In such a case, the object of perception is not a five-pound note, but I am seeing it *as* a real five-pound note. Thus, although, for Reid, all seeing is seeing *as*, this claim is a claim about *how* things are seen not, *what* is seen. If I see a painting *as* a real five-pound note, what is seen is a painting, and I just misconceive what is seen *as* a five-pound note. So the claim that all seeing is seeing-as is perfectly compatible with Reid's direct realism. Seeing things directly doesn't entail that the world is given to us transparently. Perception allows us to distinguish one thing from another, but it doesn't always tell us what things are. If we want to find out about the nature of the objects of perception, we have to go out into the world and engage in hard scientific work; merely reflecting on the nature of our perceptual experience will not help.

However, although the conception of the object perceived does not *determine* the object perceived, it does play a role in allowing us to direct our mind to the object that we do perceive by sculpting our process of perceptual attention. So, for example, I may try to find my keys in my pocket. I move my fingers around feeling certain things until I find my keys and pull them out. Here I am engaging in a certain exploratory activity that has a certain structure and involves a certain strategy: I feel around until I find something roughly the right shape and pull them out. The keys are the objects grasped, and we can think of the structure of the exploratory strategy as analogous to the conception of the object. There are various distinct explanatory strategies I could use to find my keys, and, in a context like my pocket, they are all adequate ways of finding my keys. The strategy just has to be good enough for distinguishing keys from not-keys in my pocket. We can think of the descriptive aspect of a conception as having a similar role in fixing the object of a perceptual act as the search strategy does in finding the key.

The conception just has to be good enough to distinguish the object conceived from the background. And this does not require an accurate representation of the object. But the nature of the conception involved will place some limits on the possible object of a perceptual act.

Let us now turn to Reid's understanding of belief. For Reid, a belief is the result of a judgment that things are as conceived. Thus, Reid claims that a judgment is "an act of mind, whereby one thing is affirmed or denied of another" (*EIP* VI.1 p. 406). And he argues that the notion of belief is among those that "ought to be referred to the faculty of judgment at their source" (*EIP* VI, p. 408). So, according to Reid, in perception we conceive of the world in a certain way, and this normally causes us to form the judgment that things are as we conceive them to be. This *act* of judgment causes the standing belief that things are as so conceived. The judgment should be thought of as an attitude toward the content of the conception, namely, that the conception is instantiated. Therefore, judgments, and the beliefs they lead to, should be thought of as metacognitive attitudes toward conceptions. Reid argues that, "although conception may be without any degree of belief, even the smallest belief cannot be without conception" (*EIP* IV.1, p. 293). Beliefs are to be thought of as the results of judgments that things are as conceived and so can be true or false. Thus, Reid claims that "in bare conception there can be neither truth nor falsehood. . . . The qualities of true and false, in their proper sense, can belong to nothing but to judgments, or to propositions that express judgements. In the bare conception of the things there is no judgement, opinion or belief included, and therefore it cannot be either true or false" (*EIP* IV.1, p. 296). Now, Reid claims that the belief caused by perception is "a belief in the present existence" of the object perceived (*EIP*. II.5, p. 96). We should think of this belief as a belief in the existence of the object *as conceived*; as such, it should be thought of as a judgment to the effect that the conception is instantiated. So, whereas the perceptual system conceives of the world in certain ways, the belief system essentially forms judgments toward the conceptions—normally judging that the conceptions are instantiated. Seeing a cat (as a cat) involves standing in a perceptual relation with a cat and having a conception *that-(a-cat)*. This act of perception usually causes the corresponding belief that is a judgement that the conception (*a-cat*) is instantiated. So the belief is an attitude toward the descriptive rather than the demonstrative aspect of the conception.

For Reid, then, perpetual belief is like an endorsement: taking the world to be as it is presented to be by the conception. And although we normally do endorse the deliverances of perception and memory, this endorsement can sometimes be withheld. The fact that these beliefs

are existential leads Reid to suggest that young infants and nonhuman animals that are capable of perceiving and remembering are not capable of forming the corresponding beliefs. If we understand existential judgments, in Kant-Frege terms only creatures that are capable of making higher-order judgments will be capable of forming such beliefs. The capacity to deploy second-order concepts is a quite sophisticated capacity that some animals and young infants who are capable of perception have not developed. Such creatures are able to perceive and remember but are not able to form the higher-order attitudes toward these operations required for existential beliefs. The possibility of such creatures means that perceiving cannot *entail* believing.

It is worth reflecting here on the different roles played by the perceptual system and the belief system. Perception is an act that involves a conceptual grasp of a situation; such perceptual acts can play a role in the immediate guidance of action. Reid clearly thinks that simple animals that cannot form existential beliefs are able to engage in perceptually guided action. Belief, in contrast, is a more complex mental state that plays a role in offline planning and deliberation, as well as being connected to our language capacity. Thus, we can think of two distinct systems: the perceptual recognition system that involves deploying conceptions in the service of (often skilled) action and the belief system that plays a role in deliberation and planning. Normally, in healthy human adults, perception causes the corresponding beliefs to be formed; these beliefs can then play a role in guiding deliberation and planning and allow us to tell others about what we can perceive. But, in both evolutionary and developmental terms, it is likely that the perceptual system develops prior to the capacity to form beliefs; thus, there are animals capable of perceptually guided action (and, hence, perceptual recognition) without the capacity for planning (which would involve forming the corresponding beliefs).

Finally, Reid is normally understood to defend a form of direct realism about perception and memory, and it is worth noting that denying the constitutive interpretation entails that the directness of perception and memory cannot be explained (purely) in epistemic terms. Paul Snowdon (1992) distinguishes between an epistemic and a nonepistemic account of what is meant by direct perception. According to the epistemic account, “direct” means “uninferred.” According to the nonepistemic account that Snowdon prefers, “what we directly perceive is what we can, in the course of and in virtue of our perceptual experience, demonstratively pick out” (1992, 56). Now, Reid clearly claims that the conviction and belief in the existence of the object of perception are uninferred as they are “immediate, and not the effect of reasoning” (*EIP*, II.5, p. 96). If one accepts the constitutive interpretation, and thinks the perceptual belief is a constituent of the perceptual act, then this would allow one to argue

that, for Reid, perception is only direct in the epistemic sense. And some defenders of the constitutive interpretation, such as Hamilton (2003), are attracted to a purely epistemic account of the directness of perception. However, because on my causal interpretation the belief is not constitutive of the perceptual act, what makes perception itself direct can't be explained in terms of the uninferred nature of the perceptual belief, so one must attribute a nonepistemic understanding of directness to Reid, perhaps along the lines of the position defended by Snowdon.

In perception, the direct object of perception is a present quality, individual, or situation. In memory, the direct object of memory is a past quality, individual, or situation. And the directness here is to be understood in nonepistemic terms. Some commentators are wary about the claim that we could have some sort of demonstrative access to an event that is past and, hence, no longer exists. Thus, Andy Hamilton claims that "Sir William Hamilton comments in one of the many intrusive footnotes in his Reid edition that 'An immediate knowledge of a past thing is a contradiction' [Reid 1967, 339 (*EIP* III.i)]. But it is 'immediate awareness' that is the contradiction" (2003, 232). And this lies behind his adoption of an epistemic interpretation of "directness." However, I can see no reason why we should think that our minds cannot presently be directed toward past objects. This is not, as Copenhaver suggests, to attribute to Reid "the implausible view that past events and objects become present by the act of memory" (2006, 181). The fact that we are able to direct our mind to an event in the past is no more mysterious than the fact that we can successfully refer to Thomas Reid. We can clearly refer to past objects, and it seems clearly a part of common sense that our minds are directed toward past objects in episodic memory. Thus, Reid, describing the memory of the rose argues that "it appears evident, that the very thing I saw yesterday, and the fragrance I smelled, are now the immediate objects of my mind when I remember it" (*IHM*, 28) The claim about directness here, and in many other passages, is clearly not a claim about the noninferential nature of memory beliefs.¹⁴

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NOTES

1. Another defender of such an interpretation is Cummins (1974, 326).
2. Timothy Williamson faces an analogous problem. He is committed to the claims that (1) remembering is a way of knowing and (2) knowing entails believing. So either he needs to claim that Bill no longer remembers or that Bill

believes both p and not- p . In personal correspondence, Williamson has suggested that, in such cases, one simultaneously believes both p and not- p .

3. For a defense of the claim we can have simple conceptions of states of affairs, see Thorpe (2021a).

4. I believe that, in the *Inquiry*, Reid was not sufficiently careful to distinguish between sensation and sense perception and, in this passage, is using “sensation” to mean “sense perception.” Evidence of this is that he talks of the “object of sensation.” But he thinks sensations, understood strictly, do not have object.

5. For a defense of this, see Thorpe (2015).

6. Here I agree with Marina Folescu who argues that “the difference must occur on the conception side, since the belief of existence is just that: a mental affirmation that perception and memory find their marks when they do” (2018, 215). Shrock (2017) also defends the claim that we can have multiple conceptions of a single object.

7. Including temporal markers into terms rather than sentences may seem unnatural to English speakers and speakers of other Indo-European languages. But this feeling of unnaturalness is due to a contingent fact about Indo-European grammars and should not be given any philosophical weight. See Thorpe (2021b).

8. Reid thinks that, in the case of vision, our perception of objects as three dimensional is a form of acquired perception rather than original perception.

9. Just as we can attend to how we are doing something, for example, attending to how quickly I am breathing, so we can form a judgment about how something is appearing to us. There is no good reason to think that an adverbial aspect of one mental operation cannot be the object of another mental operation. Although we are conscious of the adverbial aspect of the perceptual act, normally we do not attend to this aspect of perception as our attention is normally drawn to the object of attention. Reid seems to think that the formation of a perceptual belief, which is a higher order judgment directed toward the adverbial aspect of the perceptual act, does not require any attention to this adverbial aspect, but it occurs automatically without the need for attention.

10. I borrow such a locution from Sellars (2002, 33–39).

11. Thus, Folescu argues that a perceptual conception “helps a perceiver acquire a mental grasp on the object of perception, without the use of descriptive imagery, talk, etc.” (2018, 215). On her interpretation, the conceptions involved in perception are completely nonconceptual and nondescriptive, and the conceptions involved in memory are “proto-conceptual.” The benefit of my interpretation is that I offer a univocal interpretation of “conception.”

12. “With regard to perceptual conception, I subscribe to the view that it is akin to Russellian acquaintance, as William Alston and Van Cleve have argued. . . . [P]erceptual conception does not have any kind of conceptual content; its role is to present the bare object to the mind of the perceiver, without focusing the attention on what kind of object that is” (Folescu 2015, 29).

13. Reid himself wavers between attributing such perceptual errors to perception or to judgment. That he allows for such deceptions of sense is made clear by his discussion of the phantom limb (*EIP* II.22, 251). In the *Inquiry*, he discusses the example of mistaking a seagull in the distance for a man (*IHM* 6:22, p.183) and suggests that it is not clear whether to attribute such errors to perception or to judgment. I think the most philosophically plausible Reidian position is to attribute such errors to perception, not merely to judgment.

14. Support for work on this article was provided by Boğaziçi University Research Fund Grant Number 15681. I would like to thank Martin Sticker, Ville Paukkonen, Sun Demirli, René van Woudenberg, Patric Rysiew, Stephan Regh, Ryan Nichols, Hannes Ole Matthiessen, Chris Lindsay, Rebecca Copenhaver, Todd Buras, Ruth Boeker, Jim O'Shea, James Camien McGuiggan, Corinna Mieth, Bill Wringe, Timothy Williamson, Ken Westphal, Jack Woods, Sandrine Berges, Inan Ilhan, Erdiñç Boyacı, Ece Şenbaş, Gözde Yıldırım, Merve Rumeysa Tapınc, Stephen Voss, István Aranyosi, Taylan Susam, Berke Can and Zübeyde Karadağ Thorpe for comments on previous version of this paper. And Ali Can Thorpe for his existence!

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