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Common sense in Thomas Reid

John Greco[a]
[a] Department of Philosophy, Saint Louis University, 3800 Lindell Blvd, Adorjan Hall 306, Saint Louis, MO 63108

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EPISTEMOLOGY

Common sense in Thomas Reid

John Greco

Department of Philosophy, Saint Louis University, 3800 Lindell Blvd, Adorjan Hall 306, Saint Louis, MO 63108

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This paper explains the nature and role of common sense in Reid and uses the exposition to answer some of Reid's critics. The key to defending Reid is to distinguish between two kinds of priority that common sense beliefs are supposed to enjoy. Common sense beliefs enjoy epistemological priority in that they constitute a foundation for knowledge; i.e. they have evidential status without being grounded in further evidence themselves. Common sense beliefs enjoy methodological priority in that they constrain philosophical theory: they serve as pre-theoretical commitments that philosophical theories ought to respect in the absence of good reasons for rejecting them.

Keywords: Thomas Reid; common sense; first principles; skepticism; epistemology

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Thomas Reid's views on common sense have been criticized by friends and foes alike. For example, in a famous passage from the *Prolegomena*, Kant equates Reid's references to common sense with 'an appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed.' Wolterstorff (2001) is sympathetic toward Reid in general, but nevertheless finds fault with Reid's views on common sense, arguing that on this particular issue Reid was confused.[1]

In this paper I explain the nature and role of common sense in Reid and use the exposition to answer Reid's critics. The key to defending Reid is to distinguish between two kinds of priority that common sense is supposed to enjoy in Reid's philosophy: epistemological and methodological. In brief, common sense beliefs enjoy an epistemological priority in that they constitute a foundation for knowledge: such beliefs enjoy the kind of evidential status required for knowledge, even without being grounded in further evidence themselves. Common sense beliefs enjoy a methodological priority in that they constrain philosophical theory: such beliefs serve as pre-theoretical commitments that philosophical theories ought to respect, at least in the absence of good reasons for rejecting them.

With this distinction in hand, it is easy to show that Kant's complaint against Reid is misdirected. We can also show that Reid is not, as Wolterstorff has it,

Email: jgreco2@slu.edu

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'confused between two understandings' of first principles. Finally, a number of Reid's commentators take him to defend an 'innocent until proven guilty' approach to justified belief. That is, they attribute to Reid the position that all beliefs enjoy a kind of default epistemic justification; we are justified in believing unless we have good reasons to doubt. Our distinction between epistemological and methodological priority allows us to see that this is a misinterpretation.

Section 1 explains what Reid means by 'common sense' and 'the principles of common sense.' Section 2 distinguishes between two kinds of priority that Reid supposes the principles of common sense to have. Section 3 considers Reid's views regarding the sources of epistemological and methodological priority; i.e. why Reid thinks that first principles have the kinds of priority that they do. Section 4 uses the results of previous sections to answer Reid's critics. Section 5 addresses a more general issue. Davidson (1992) and Rorty (1979) (among others) have leveled a now familiar objection to foundationalism; that we are trapped in 'the circle of belief,' and therefore cannot hope to ground knowledge or justification elsewhere. I argue that a distinction between epistemological and methodological priority allows us to dissolve this objection as well.

1. What does Reid mean by 'common sense'?

The first task for interpreting what Reid means by 'common sense' is to resolve an ambiguity. Namely, Reid sometimes writes as if common sense is a faculty for making judgments. But sometimes he writes as if common sense is made up of the judgments themselves, or perhaps the contents of those judgments. Here are some representative passages.

a. . . . in common language, sense always implies judgment. A man of sense is a man of judgment. Good sense is good judgment. Nonsense is what is evidently contrary to right judgment. Common sense is that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business. (*Essays* VI, II, 421)
b. We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province, of common sense; and, therefore, it coincides with reason in its whole extent, and is only another name for one branch or one degree of reason. (*Essays* VI, II, 425)
c. Such original and natural judgments are, therefore, a part of that furniture which nature hath given to the human understanding . . . They serve to direct us in the common affairs of life, where our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark. They are a part of our constitution; and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them. They make up what is called *the common sense of mankind*; and, what is manifestly contrary to any of those first principles, is what we call *absurd*. The strength of them is *good sense*, which is often found in those who are not acute in

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reasoning. A remarkable deviation from them, arising from a disorder in the constitution, is what we call *lunacy*; as when a man believes that he is made of glass. (*Inquiry*, 209, Reid's emphases)

d. If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd. (*Inquiry*, 108)

In these passages, 'common sense' is identified with 'common judgment' and 'common principles.' But here we have a three-way ambiguity among:

'judgment' as *faculty of judgment*; a disposition to judge (a, b);

'judgment' as *act of judgment*; the products of the faculty; the manifestation of the disposition (c);

'judgment' as *content of judgment*; the content expressed; the proposition affirmed (d).

The last notion is more naturally expressed with the word 'principle,' as in 'first principle' and 'principle of common sense.' But a principle can also be a disposition, and in passage c. Reid uses 'principle' as synonymous with 'judgment.'

So is common sense to be understood as a common faculty, a set of common judgments, or a set of common contents (or propositions)? I suggest that the ambiguity is to be resolved this way: 'common sense' proper is a faculty of judgment (or perhaps a collection of faculties of judgment). 'The principles of common sense' and 'first principles' refer both to the judgments that issue from the faculty and the contents of these.[2] As we will see, these judgments and their contents are not in fact 'common,' in the sense of 'shared' or 'held in common.'[3] What makes them principles of common sense, rather, is that they issue from common sense *qua* faculty, a faculty (or set of faculties) that is held in common by all normally functioning human beings. For example, some first principles issue from memory and perception. But, of course, not everyone shares the same memories or perceptions.[4]

More exactly, the principles of common sense come in two varieties: particular and general. It is true that the general principles are commonly shared. For example, 'that, in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.' But there are also particular principles, i.e. judgments that are the product of an individual subject's perspective in time and space: 'I see the sun when he shines;' 'I remember the battle of Culloden.' In other words, there are the particular judgments of perception, memory, and 'consciousness' (or introspection).

The following passages confirm that the principles of common sense come in both the particular and general variety.

The first principles of mathematical reasoning are mathematical axioms and definitions; and the first principles of all our reasoning about existences, are our perceptions. (*Inquiry*, 185)

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> It is another property . . . of many first principles, that they force assent in particular instances, more powerfully than when they are turned into a general proposition . . . Many have in general maintained that the senses are not fallacious, yet there never was found a man so skeptical as not to trust his senses in particular instances when his safety required it; and it may be observed of those who have professed skepticism, that their skepticism lies in generals, while in particulars they are no less dogmatical than others. (*Essays* VI, V, 448)

Another point that we can make about first principles is that their instances are not always clear. In other words, it is not always clear what is or is not a first principle.

> What the precise limits are which divide common judgment from what is beyond it on the one hand, and from what falls short of it on the other, may be difficult to determine; and men may agree in the meaning of the word who have different opinions about those limits, or who even never thought of fixing them. This is as intelligible as, that all Englishmen should mean the same thing by the county of York, though perhaps not a hundredth part of them can point to its precise limits. (*Essays* VI, II, 423)

Moreover, apparent instances can be challenged.

> Upon the whole, I acknowledge that we ought to be cautious that we do not adopt opinions as first principles which are not entitled to that character . . . We do not pretend that those things that are laid down as first principles may not be examined, and that we ought not to have our ears open to what may be pleaded against their being admitted as such. (*Essays* I, II, 234)

In sum, the principles of common sense do not have their status by virtue of being common. Neither do they have it by virtue of their content. Rather, the notion of 'common faculty' is prior to the notion of 'common principles.' The first principles of common sense have their status by virtue of their source in the faculty (or faculties) of common sense. Such principles can be general or particular, and apparent instances can be challenged.

2. Two kinds of priority for the first principles of commons sense: epistemic and methodological

In this section we distinguish two kinds of priority that Reid supposes the principles of common sense to enjoy.[5] The two kinds of priority are often confused by Reid scholars, resulting in misinterpretations of Reid's epistemology of common sense.

First, there is epistemic priority:

> **Epistemic priority:** First principles have the status of non-inferential knowledge. That is, first principles are known, but not on the basis of reasoning, or inference, or argument from other things that are known.

Second, there is methodological priority:

> **Methodological priority:** First principles have *prima facie* plausibility as pre-theoretical starting points. They can be rejected by philosophical theory, but only on the basis of very strong considerations. Put differently, first principles constrain

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theory: they act as (defeasible) pre-theoretical commitments that philosophical theories ought to respect.

In the following passage Reid emphasizes the epistemic priority of first principles, i.e. their status as non-inferential knowledge, or knowledge not inferred from other things that are already known.

> ...there are... propositions which are no sooner understood than they are believed... 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 as no occasion to borrow it from another. Propositions of this last kind, when they are used in matters of science, have commonly been called *axioms*; and on whatever occasion they are used, are called *first principles*, *principles of common sense*, *common notions*, *self-evident truths*. (*Essays* VI, IV, 434)

In the next passage, Reid echoes a familiar Aristotelian argument for the existence of first principles: they are necessary to stop a regress of reasons, or evidence.

> ...I hold it to be certain, and even demonstrable, that all knowledge got by reasoning must be built upon first principles. This is as certain as that every house must have a foundation... When we examine, in the way of analysis, the evidence of any proposition, either we find it self-evident, or it rests upon one or more propositions that support it. The same thing may be said of the propositions that support it, and of those that support them, as far back as we can go. But we cannot go back in this track to infinity. Where then must this analysis stop? It is evident that it must stop only when we come to propositions which support all that are built upon them, but are themselves supported by none—that is, to self-evident propositions... So that it appears to be demonstrable that, without first principles, analytical reasoning could have no end, and synthetical reasoning could have no beginning; and that every conclusion got by reasoning must rest with its whole weight upon first principles, as the building does upon its foundation. (*Essays* VI, IV, 435)

The epistemological priority of common sense in Reid's philosophy is universally acknowledged by his commentators. It is less often made explicit that the principles of common sense also have a methodological priority for Reid. That is, they have *prima facie* plausibility as pre-theoretical starting points. The priority is 'methodological' in the usual sense: it concerns *the method by which we ought to proceed* in our theorizing.

Here we may quote Reid at length:

> It is a bold philosophy that rejects, without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind in the common concerns of life; and to which the philosopher himself must yield, after he imagines he hath confuted them. Such principles are older, and of more authority, than Philosophy; she resets upon them as her basis, not they upon her. If she could overturn them, she must be buried in their ruins...
>
> Zeno endeavored to demonstrate the impossibility of motion; Hobbes, that there is no difference between right and wrong; and this author [Hume], that no credit is to be given to our senses, to our memory, or even to demonstration. Such philosophy is justly ridiculous, even to those who cannot detect the fallacy of it. It can have no

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> other tendency, than to shew the acuteness of the sophist, at the expense of disgracing reason and human nature, and making mankind Yahoos. (*Inquiries*, 102)

> A philosopher is, no doubt, entitled to examine even those distinctions that are to be found in the structure of all languages [for example, the distinction between a thought and the object of thought]; and, if he is able to shew that there is no foundation for them in the nature of the things distinguished—if he can point out some prejudice common to mankind which has led them to distinguish things not really different—in that case, such a distinction may be imputed to a vulgar error, which ought to be corrected in philosophy. But when, in his first setting out, he takes it for granted, without proof, that distinctions found in the structure of all languages, have no foundation in nature, this, surely, is too fastidious a way of treating the common sense of mankind. When we come to be instructed by philosophers, we must bring the old light of common sense along with us, and by it judge the new light which the philosopher communicates to us. But when we are required to put out the old light altogether, that we may follow the new, we have reason to be on our guard. (*Essays* I, I, 224).

> … I beg leave to dissent from philosophy till she gives me reason for what she teaches. For, though common sense and external senses demand my assent to their dictates upon their own authority, yet philosophy is not entitled to this privilege. (*Essays* II, XIV, 302–303)

In sum, the principles of common sense serve to constrain philosophical theory: any theory that violates them incurs a cost as a result. Reid insists that the priority is indeed *prima facie* – there is no absolute bar to violating common sense. The point, rather, is that the philosopher must have *good reason* to violate common sense. One's theory might end by violating common sense, but it should not *start off* that way.

3. Why do the principles of common sense have priority?

Why do the principles of common sense have both epistemic and methodological priority? It turns out that Reid's answer is different in the two cases, and so we have to consider one kind of priority at a time.

a. Epistemic priority

From what does the epistemic priority of common sense derive? Why do the first principles of common sense have epistemic authority? We may first consider two mistaken interpretations of Reid on this question, leading to two misinterpretations of Reid's epistemology of common sense.

The first misinterpretation is that Reid holds an 'innocent until proven guilty' view of epistemic justification. According to this view, Reid thinks that beliefs enjoy a kind of default justification; they are epistemically innocent 'by nature' or 'in themselves,' so long as we have no reason for doubting them.

> Thomas Reid… held that we may trust the common sense. For instance, he argued that our beliefs that we are acting freely and that the persons with whom we converse are thinking, intelligent beings are justified. They have, he said, 'what

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> lawyers call a *jus* quaesitum, or a right of ancient possession, which ought to stand good till it be overturned' ... Reid held that many beliefs, including perceptual beliefs and beliefs of common sense, are 'innocent until proven guilty'. (Rot 2001, 25)

> Reid's general approach to rational belief is this: trust the beliefs produced by your cognitive faculties in the appropriate circumstances, unless you have good reason to reject them. (Clark 2004)

> I agree with Thomas Reid that we are rational in believing what we are told unless there is good reason to think that the source is untrustworthy. Beliefs are innocent until proven guilty. (Vanhoozer 2005, 197)

The position here ascribed to Reid is a version of 'epistemic conservatism,' the view that a belief has some degree of positive epistemic status simply in virtue of being believed (Foley 1983).[6] Although there is some textual evidence for this interpretation of Reid, we will see below that there is good reason for rejecting it. On the contrary, the 'innocent until proven guilty' character of first principles involves their methodological priority as pre-theoretical commitments, rather than their epistemological priority as first knowledge. As we shall see, however, Reid does not think that first principles, or anything else, are innocent until proven guilty in an epistemic sense. That is, no beliefs are epistemically innocent 'by nature' or 'in themselves,' so long as we have no reason for doubting them.

A second interpretation of Reid regarding the source of epistemic priority is the 'no view' view.[7] On this account, the authority of first principles is a kind of theoretical primitive: it is used to explain other things, but goes unexplained itself. Here is an oft-cited passage that lends support to the 'no view' interpretation.

> Philosophers have endeavored, by analysing the different sorts of evidence, to find out some common nature wherein they all agree, and thereby to reduce them all to one ... I confess that, although I have, as I think, a distinct notion of the different kinds of evidence above-mentioned, and, perhaps, of some others, which it is unnecessary here to enumerate, yet I am not able to find any common nature to which they all may be reduced. (*Essays* II, XX, 328)

That passage continues, however, in this way:

> 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.)

Throughout his writings, Reid notes that all sources of knowledge, including common sense, are 'fitted by Nature' to operate in us as they do, that they are 'given us by Nature' and 'the result of our constitution.' Reid also notes that the various sources of knowledge are equally trustworthy in their normal and healthy state:

> There is no more reason to account our senses fallacious, than our reason, our memory, or any other faculty of judging which nature hath given us. They are all limited and imperfect ... We are liable to error and wrong judgment in the use of them all; but as little in the informations of sense as in the deductions of reasoning. (*Essays* II, XXII, 339)

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These points taken together imply a kind of 'proper function' faculty reliabilism. According to Reid, our cognitive faculties give us knowledge so long as they are part of our natural constitution and 'not fallacious.' Put another way, knowledge arises from the proper functioning of our natural, non-fallacious (i.e. reliable) cognitive faculties.[8]

We are now in a position to answer our present question: From what does the epistemic priority of common sense derive? In general, positive epistemic status derives from the proper functioning of our natural, non-fallacious cognitive faculties. The faculties that make up common sense (for example, perception, memory, consciousness) are faculties of that sort. As such, they are of equal authority with reason, and with all other natural, non-fallacious cognitive faculties. Since they are non-inferential (non-reasoning) faculties, they are sources of non-inferential knowledge.

In sum, Reid's account of epistemic justification in general is that it arises from the proper functioning of our natural, non-fallacious cognitive faculties. This is true for the epistemic justification enjoyed by first principles as well. But since first principles enjoy this status without grounding in further evidence, they enjoy a kind of epistemological priority that is special to them; they are a kind of foundational knowledge, a kind of basic evidence. They are regress stoppers.

b. Methodological priority

From what does the methodological priority of common sense derive? Why do the first principles of common sense have methodological pride of place? Reid gives several reasons here.

First, it is inconsistent to begin our inquiry by trusting some of our faculties but not others. Reid notes that there are three options available in epistemology, and in philosophy in general: (a) we may begin by trusting none of our faculties until we have reason for believing them trustworthy, (b) we may begin by trusting some of our faculties but not others, or (c) we may begin by trusting all of our faculties until we have reason for believing them untrustworthy.

The first option, Reid argues, is a non-starter:

> If a sceptic should build his scepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to withhold assent until it be proved that they are not, it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of his stronghold; and he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism . . . . For if our faculties be fallacious, why may they not deceive us in this reasoning as well as in others? (*Essays* VI, V, 447)

The second option, Reid argues, is inconsistent:

> Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception?—they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another? (*Inquiry*, 183)

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> … the faculties of consciousness, of memory, of external sense, and of reason, are all equally the gifts of nature. No good reason can be assigned for receiving the testimony of one of them, which is not of equal force with regard to the others. The greatest sceptics admit the testimony of consciousness, and allow that what it testifies is to be held as a first principle. If, therefore, they reject the immediate testimony of sense or of memory, they are guilty of an inconsistency. (*Essays* VI, IV, 439)

That leaves the third option: begin by trusting all of one's faculties, until we have reason to doubt them. In sum, the only option that is both available and consistent is to begin by trusting all of one's faculties. But those include the faculties of common sense, and so our theorizing is constrained by the judgments that issue from common sense, i.e. by first principles. Again, this kind of constraint is *prima facie* and can be overridden – we should trust our faculties, including those of common sense, *until we have reason for doubting them*. But that is just the sort of methodological priority that Reid thinks first principles have.

A second reason that first principles have methodological priority is that what we ought to do is constrained by what we can do.

> Even those philosophers who have disowned the authority of our notions of an external material world, confess, that they find themselves under a necessity of submitting to their power. Methinks, therefore, it were better to make a virtue of necessity; and since we cannot get rid of the vulgar notion and belief of an external world, to reconcile our reason to it as well as we can. (*Inquiry*, 127)

> This, indeed, has always been the fate of the few that have professed skepticism, that, when they have done what they can to discredit their senses, they find themselves, after all, under a necessity of trusting to them. Mr. Hume has been so candid as to acknowledge this; and it is no less true of those who have not shewn the same candour; for I never heard that any sceptic run his head against a post, or stepped into a kennel, because he did not believe his eyes. (*Essays* I, II, 233–234)

A third reason for giving first principles methodological priority is that common sense has a better track record than philosophical theory. In other words, experience shows us that theorizing often goes wrong, and so it is reasonable to use common sense as a check.

> Of all the discoveries that have been made concerning the inward structure of the human body, never one was made by conjecture… What we have said of the internal structure of the human body, may be said, with justice, of very other part of the works of God, wherein any real discovery has been made. Such discoveries have always been made by patient observation, by accurate experiments, or by conclusions drawn by strict reasoning from observations and experiments; and such discoveries have always tended to refute, but not to confirm, the theories and hypotheses which ingenious men have invented. As this is a fact confirmed by the history of philosophy in all past ages, it ought to have taught men, long ago, to treat with just contempt hypotheses in every branch of philosophy, and to despair of ever advancing real knowledge in that way. (*Essays* I, III, 235)

Finally, a methodology ought to be judged by its fruits. Results, results, results.

> It may be observed, that the defects and blemishes in the received philosophy concerning the mind, which have most exposed it to contempt and ridicule of

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> sensible men, have chiefly been owing to this—that the votaries of this Philosophy, from a natural prejudice in her favour, have endeavored to extend her jurisdiction beyond its just limits, and to call to her bar the dictates of Common Sense. (*Inquiry*, 101)

> In this unequal contest betwixt Common Sense and Philosophy, the latter will always come off both with dishonour and loss . . . Philosophy (if I may be permitted to change the metaphor) has no other root but the principles of Common Sense; it grows out of them, and draws its nourishment from them. Severed from this root, its honours wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots. (Ibid.)

> When a man suffers himself to be reasoned out of the principles of common sense, by metaphysical arguments, we may call this *metaphysical lunacy*; which differs from the other species of the distemper in this, that it is not continued, but intermittent; is apt to seize the patient in solitary and speculative moments; but, when he enters into society, Common Sense recovers her authority. (*Inquiry*, 209, Reid's emphases)

In other words, philosophical theorizing that is not constrained by common sense ends in dishonor and lunacy. That is not speculation – it is history. Better, then, to adopt the alternative methodology.

4. Reid and his critics

We have seen that Reid assigns two kinds of priority to the principles of common sense: a) epistemological priority as non-inferential knowledge, and b) methodological priority as a constraint on theorizing. Each kind of priority is defeasible in its own way. Thus the evidence of first principles can be overridden by other evidence, as when, for example, perception proves to be illusory. And philosophical theorizing can, in principle, discover good reasons for overriding common sense judgment. Moreover, the privileged status of common sense is not a theoretical primitive, something that is itself left unexplained. On the contrary, the epistemological priority of first principles is due to their source in natural, non-fallacious, non-inferential faculties of belief. Their methodological priority is due to several considerations regarding method, or how philosophical inquiry ought to proceed.

With these points in mind, we can see that Kant's complaints about Reid are off the mark. Here is what Kant writes:

> To appeal to common sense, when insight and science fail, and no sooner – this is one of the subtle discoveries of modern times, by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most thorough thinker, and hold his own. But as long as a particle of insight remains, no one would think of having recourse to this subterfuge. For what is it but an appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and confides in it? (Kant 1902, 7)

First, it is clear that Reid's appeal to common sense is not an appeal to the multitude. In fact, we have seen that, for Reid, the authority of common sense, whether epistemological or methodological, is not owed to its being *common*, or something shared by the multitude, at all.

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The passage from Kant continues as follows:

> Chisels and hammers may suffice to work a piece of wood, but for steel-engraving we require an engraver's needle. Thus common sense and speculative understanding are each useful in their own way, the former in judgments which apply immediately to experience, the latter when we judge universally from mere concepts, as in metaphysics, where sound common sense, so called in spite of the inapplicability of the word, has no right to judge at all. (Kant 1902, 7–8)

Regarding the epistemic priority of common sense, Kant and Reid are in agreement: common sense has authority 'in judgments which apply immediately to experience.' Regarding methodological priority, however, Reid would insist that Kant has it wrong. In metaphysics, Kant thinks, common sense 'has no right to judge at all.' On the contrary, Reid thinks, common sense has an important role to play in metaphysics and in philosophy more generally: methodologically, common sense should serve as a check on 'speculative understanding,' on pains of falling into dishonor and metaphysical lunacy.

We are now in a position to answer Wolterstorff's criticism of Reid as well. According to Wolterstorff, Reid was confused between two understandings of 'the principles of Commons Sense': first principles of reasoning vs. things taken for granted. 'My conclusion will be that two quite different lines of thought were in conflict in his mind: He thinks of the principles of Common Sense both as *shared first principles*, and as *things we all take for granted*.' (Wolterstorff 2001, 220) But, 'Obviously the concept of something taken for granted in one's activities is different from the concept of a justifiedly held immediate belief.' (Wolterstorff 2001, 224)

We may now see that, contra Wolterstorff, Reid was not confused between two understandings of the principles of common sense. Rather, Reid gives the same principles two kinds of privileged status, epistemic and methodological. The first principles have epistemic priority as 'first principles of reasoning.' That is, such principles serve as evidential starting points, as evidential grounds from which further reasoning can extend.

> . . . all knowledge got by reasoning must be built upon first principles. This is as certain as that every house must have a foundation.

The same first principles have methodological priority as 'things taken for granted.' They are 'taken for granted' in the sense that they are pre-theoretical commitments for constraining further theory.

> It is a bold philosophy that rejects, without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind . . . Such principles are older, and of more authority, than Philosophy; she resets upon them as her basis, not they upon her.

5. The circle of belief

There is a long-standing objection to foundationalism that goes roughly like this: A foundation of knowledge is impossible, because it is impossible to go outside our beliefs for the justification that knowledge requires. In more colorful terms,

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we are 'trapped' in a circle of belief, and the foundationalist's attempt to escape this circle is futile.

Here is a statement of the objection from Keith Lehrer:

> In whatever way a man might attempt to justify his beliefs . . . he must always appeal to some belief. There is nothing other than one's beliefs to which one can appeal in the justification of belief. There is no exit from the circle of one's beliefs. (Lehrer 1974)

Here is Richard Rorty:

> . . . nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence. (Rorty 1979)

Here is Donald Davidson:

> What distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief. Its partisan rejects as unintelligible the request for a ground or source of justification of another ilk. (Davidson 1992)

There is a way of taking the 'circle of belief idea' as a platitude. We should all agree that, in some relevant sense, 'there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language,' and 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.' On the other hand, coherentism is a substantive epistemological position, and one with substantial reasons against it. (Cf. Sosa 1980) This suggests that the 'circle of belief' idea involves an ambiguity between two meanings, one platitudinous and one substantive.

Our distinction helps to resolve the ambiguity. In terms of methodology, we have no choice except to start from where we are. That is, we must begin with our pre-theoretical commitments, and then theorize from there. In fact, that idea is quite weak. It *is* a platitude. Reid's view regarding the methodological role of common sense is much stronger. Specifically, he thinks that the principles of common sense have a methodological *priority* – that a) they provide a defeasible *constraint* on theory, and b) the constraint is stronger than that provided by beliefs in general.

But we can also take the 'circle of belief' idea as an epistemological point. In that case, the idea is that all knowledge (or justified belief) depends for its status on evidential grounding in further knowledge (justified belief). If we add that evidential grounding can go in both directions, as talk of a 'circle' implies, then the idea expresses epistemological coherentism, and constitutes an alternative answer to the regress problem that we saw above. The issues involved in this dispute are, as we noted, substantive, and there is no hope in resolving them here. Suffice it to say that Reid gives good reasons for adopting the foundationalist alternative.

Taken as a methodological point, then, the 'circle of belief' idea is much weaker than what we find in Reid. It is in fact platitudinous. Taken as an epistemological point, the idea is substantive, and unsupported by the platitude.[9]

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Notes

1. 'It has to be conceded that Reid's discussion of Common Sense is confusing. And not just confusing but confused… I judge it to be, in fact, the most confused part of Reid's thought.' (Wolterstorff 2001, 218)
2. Patrick Rysiew makes a similar suggestion in Rysiew (2002, 442).
3. This is contra Wolterstorff: 'Reid usually means, by principles of Common Sense, shared beliefs or judgments – that is, propositions believed or judged in common…' (Wolterstorff 2001, 219)
4. Thanks to John Stolt for useful conversation on this point.
5. The two kinds of priority are nicely distinguished and elaborated in Depaul (1986).
6. 'The view implies that regardless of what a person happens to believe there is something favorable to be said on behalf of the belief, namely that the person has that particular belief. This is not to say that any belief whatsoever is rational. It is to say, however, that any belief whatsoever as least has some presumption of rationality.' (Foley 1983, 165) Foley attributes the position to Chisholm, among others.
7. This seems to be Lehrer's view of Reid on the nature of evidence: 'Evidence, Reid says, is something that… can be felt more easily than described. It seems, however, to have no common nature… Evidence is what makes us justified in our beliefs. In some cases, those in which our beliefs arise immediately from first principles, we cannot explain the nature of this justification to ourselves or to another… ' (Lehrer 1989, 114)
8. Cf. Plantinga (1993), especially p. 50. For a more detailed discussion of Reid on the nature of evidence, see Rysiew (2005).
9. Thanks to Patrick Rysiew for valuable comments on an earlier draft.

Notes on contributor

John Greco holds the Leonard and Elizabeth Eslick Chair in Philosophy at Saint Louis University, where he has taught since 2006. He has published widely on virtue epistemology, skepticism, and Thomas Reid, including: *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-theoretic Account of Epistemic Evaluation (Cambridge 2010); Putting Skeptics in Their Place: The Nature of Skeptical Arguments and Their Role in Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge: 2000); and "How to Reid Moore," Philosophical Quarterly (2002).

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