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Reid's Critique of Berkeley and Hume: What's the Big Idea?

JOHN GRECO
Fordham University

Thomas Reid thought that the linchpin of his response to Berkeley and Hume was his rejection of the common theory of ideas. On this point his commentators have generally taken him at his word, so much so that it is difficult to find one who explicitly disagrees.[1] In this paper I will argue that Reid's assessment of his own work is incorrect. Specifically, I will argue that there are two main arguments for skepticism in Berkeley and Hume, although Reid never clearly distinguishes them and in fact tends to run them together.[2] One of these arguments, which I will call 'the inconceivability argument for skepticism,' begins by establishing the impossibility of the conception of external objects and their qualities. But since belief requires conception and knowledge requires belief, it follows that we can have no knowledge of the external world. The second argument for skepticism, which I will call 'the evidential argument,' turns on the impossibility of our providing adequate evidence for our beliefs about the external world. My thesis will be that Reid is correct about the centrality of the theory of ideas in the first argument for skepticism, but he is incorrect about the centrality of the theory in the second. I will argue that the theory of ideas in fact plays no important role in Berkeley's and Hume's evidential argument for skepticism, and that rejecting it is therefore neither necessary nor sufficient as a reply. However, I will argue that Reid does in fact provide the materials for an adequate reply to the evidential argument. But the linchpin of that reply is Reid's theory of evidence, not his rejection of the theory of ideas.

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1 But see R. C. Sleigh, Jr., "Reid and the Ideal Theory on Conception and Perception," in Stephen F. Barker and Tom L. Beauchamp, eds., *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Philosophical Monographs, 1976), and Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Hume and Reid," *Monist* Vol. 70, No. 4 (1987): 398–417. Sleigh and Wolterstorff seem to agree with Reid about the role of the theory of ideas in skeptical arguments. But this is only because they interpret the theory of ideas as involving a theory of evidence, a point on which I disagree below.

2 Keith DeRose makes a similar distinction between two lines of argument in Berkeley and Hume. See his "Reid's Anti-Sensationalism and His Realism," *The Philosophical Review* Vol. XCVIII, No. 3 (1989): 313–48.

Finally, I will end with some brief remarks about the implications of this discussion for philosophy in general. Specifically, it seems to me that the discussion refutes the familiar claim that skepticism about the world depends on a modern distinction between the internal knowing subject and an external object of knowledge. If I am right, then philosophers as diverse as Heidegger, Dewey and Austin have mischaracterized the problem of skepticism about the world.

In section one I will look at some passages which indicate the importance which Reid places on his rejection of the common theory of ideas. In section two I will take a closer look at Reid's idea of the theory of ideas. In sections three and four I will look at the two main skeptical arguments advanced by Berkeley and Hume, and I will show how Reid's rejection of the theory of ideas plays an important role in his critique of the first of these, but not the second. In the final section of the paper I will argue that my discussion of Reid has broad implications for philosophy in general and epistemology in particular.

1. The central place of the theory of ideas, according to Reid.

In a letter to Dr. James Gregory, Reid suggests that the chief merit of his philosophy is his rejection of the theory of ideas.[3]

> The merit of what you are pleased to call *my philosophy*, lies, I think, chiefly, in having called into question the common theory of ideas, or images of things in the mind, being the only objects of thought.... I think there is hardly anything that can be called *mine* in the philosophy of mind, which does not follow with ease from the detection of this prejudice. (*Works*, p. 88b.)

But one need not go to Reid's correspondences to detect the opinion expressed above. In his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* and in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* Reid repeatedly tells us that the rejection of the common theory of ideas is the linchpin of his critique of the skepticism of Berkeley and Hume. In several passages Reid claims that skepticism is a necessary consequence of the theory of ideas, and this implies that rejecting the theory of ideas is a necessary condition for avoiding skepticism. Here are three such passages.

> I acknowledge, my Lord, that I never thought of calling in question the principles commonly received with regard to the human understanding, until the "Treatise of Human Nature" was published in the year 1739. The ingenious author of that treatise upon the principles of Locke—who was no sceptic—hath built a system of skepticism, which leaves no ground to believe any one thing rather than its contrary. His reasoning appeared to me to be just; there was, therefore, a necessity to call in question the principles upon which it was founded, or to admit the conclusion. (Dedication to *Inquiry*, p. 95a-b.)

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[3] References to Reid will be from Thomas Reid, *Philosophical Works*, H. M. Bracken, ed., 2 volumes (Hildesheim, Germany: Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), vol. I.

These facts, which are undeniable, do, indeed, give reason to apprehend that Des Cartes' system of the human understanding, which I shall beg leave to call *the ideal system,* and which with some improvements made by later writers, is now generally received, hath some original defect; that this scepticism is inlaid in it, and reared along with it... (*Inquiry*, p. 103b.)

We ought, however, to do this justice to the Bishop of Cloyne and to the author of the "Treatise of Human Nature," to acknowledge, that their conclusions are justly drawn from the doctrine of ideas, which has been so universally received.... The theory of ideas, like the Trojan horse, had a specious appearance both of innocence and beauty... but carried in its belly death and destruction to all science and common sense.... (*Essays*, p. 132a-b.)

In the next passages Reid suggests that rejecting the theory of ideas, or the ideal system, is not only necessary for defeating modern skepticism but also sufficient, since all of Berkeley's and Hume's skeptical arguments depend on that theory.

For my own satisfaction, I entered into a serious examination of the principles upon which this sceptical system is built; and was not a little surprised to find, that it leans with its whole weight upon a hypothesis, which is ancient indeed, and hath been very generally received by philosophers, but of which I could find no solid proof. The hypothesis I mean, is, That nothing is perceived but what is in the mind which perceives it: That we do not really perceive things that are external, but only certain images and pictures of them imprinted upon the mind, which are called *impressions and ideas.* (Dedication to *Inquiry*, p. 96a.)

If I may presume to speak my own sentiments, I once believed this doctrine of ideas so firmly as to embrace the whole of Berkeley's system in consequence of it; till, finding other consequences to follow from it, which gave me more uneasiness than the want of a material world, it came into my mind, more than forty years ago, to put the question, What evidence have I for this doctrine, that all the objects of my knowledge are ideas in my own mind?... I would at present only observe, that all the arguments brought by Berkeley against the existence of a material world are grounded upon it.... (*Essays*, p. 283a.)

All the arguments urged by Berkeley and Hume, against the existence of a material world, are grounded on this principle— that we do not perceive external objects themselves, but certain images or ideas in our own minds. (*Essays*, p. 446a.)

Reid, then, thought that rejecting the ideal system was both necessary and sufficient for an adequate reply to the skepticism of Berkeley and Hume. We may now take a closer look at what, according to Reid, the theory of ideas is supposed to be.

2. Reid's idea of the theory of ideas.

Providing an explication of Reid's understanding of the theory of ideas is not unproblematic, since Reid seems to contradict himself in his own characterizations of the theory. The problem is that Reid often claims that the ideal system was universally held, or nearly universally held, by his philosophical predecessors. But he also characterizes the ideal system as including theses

that many of these philosophers quite obviously did not hold. How can we resolve the seeming contradiction? One way in which commentators have attempted to resolve it is to claim that Reid is a bad historian of philosophy, and that he attributes positions to philosophers that they did not in fact affirm.[4] This characterization of Reid might be true to some degree, but it cannot be the whole story unless we are willing to say that Reid is a *terrible* historian, guilty of the most outrageous mistakes. A better way to resolve the tension is to distinguish between a narrow and a broad version of the theory of ideas as understood by Reid. I will claim that there is a group of core theses which Reid considers to be the common theory of ideas, and which he attributes to all or nearly all of his predecessors. It is this narrow version of the theory which he says is "generally received" and "hath some original defect." But second, Reid thinks of the theory of ideas in a broader sense. In this version the theory includes several auxiliary theses which Reid considered to be natural, if not strictly necessary, historical developments of the narrow core. I believe that this distinction will allow us to reconcile seemingly contradictory passages in Reid concerning the ideal system, and without attributing any outrageous mistakes of interpretation to him.

First, let us look at some passages where Reid explicitly talks about the history of philosophy, and claims that a certain theory of ideas is common throughout.

> Modern philosophers, as well as the Peripatetics and Epicureans of old, have conceived that external objects cannot be the immediate objects of our thought; that there must be some image of them in the mind itself, in which, as in a mirror, they are seen. And the name *idea*, in the philosophical sense of it, is given to those internal and immediate objects of our thoughts. The external thing is the remote or mediate object; but the idea, or image of that object in the mind, is the immediate object, without which we could have no perception, no remembrance, no conception of the mediate object. (*Essays*, p. 226a-b.)

> These shadows or images, which we immediately perceive, were by the ancients called *species, forms, phantasms.* Since the time of Des Cartes, they have commonly been called *ideas*, and by Mr. Hume *impressions.* But all philosophers, from Plato to Mr. Hume, agree in this, That we do not perceive external objects immediately, and that the immediate object of perception must be some image present to the mind. So far there appears an unanimity, rarely to be found among philosophers on such abstruse points. (*Essays*, p. 263a-b.)

> Philosophers, ancient and modern, have maintained that the operations of the mind, like the tools of an artificer, can only be employed upon objects that are present in the mind, or in the brain, where the mind is supposed to reside. Therefore, objects that are distinct in time or place must have a representative in the mind, or in the brain—some image or picture of them, which is the object that the mind contemplates. (*Essays*, p. 277b.)

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4 For example, see Sir William Hamilton's notes to Reid's *Works*.

From these passages it seems that Reid is attributing the following set of theses to all or nearly all of his philosophical predecessors, and that it is these theses he has in mind when he talks about the common theory of ideas:

a. All thinking in general involves ideas which are in the mind or brain, and which have no existence outside the mind that thinks.

b. Such ideas are distinct from any operation of thought, but are rather the immediate objects of thought in such operations as conception, memory, imagination, perception, etc.

c. All thinking about external objects involves ideas which are images or resemblances of those objects in the mind or brain.

d. Such images or resemblances are the immediate objects of thought about external objects.

e. These images or phantasms or species or forms represent external objects, which are themselves thought only mediately, if at all.

Three comments are in order. First, it is clear that Reid does not deny the existence of ideas if ideas are thought of as operations or acts of thought. Rather, Reid objects only to ideas as mental entities distinct from any operation or act. "To prevent mistakes, the reader must again be reminded, that if by ideas are meant only the acts or operations of our minds in perceiving, remembering, or imagining objects, I am far from calling in question the existence of those acts; we are conscious of them every day and every hour of our life...." (*Essays*, p. 298a.) Second, Reid includes in the theory of ideas a theory of thinking in general and a theory of thinking about external objects in particular. In the theory of thinking about external objects, ideas are characterized as images or pictures or resemblances of external objects. Third, our explication leaves open whether, according to the theory of ideas, *all* ideas need resemble their objects. It is true that Reid often talks as if, according to the ideal system, all ideas are images or resemblances of their objects. But in such passages Reid is typically concerned with our knowledge of external objects in particular, and so it might be that he is speaking uncarefully here. In any case, understanding Reid in the latter way makes him a better historian of philosophy, since Descartes and others quite obviously did not hold that all ideas must resemble their objects. It is less obvious that Reid's predecessors did not universally hold a resemblance thesis with regard to our ideas of external objects, and the terminology of shadows, forms, species, phantasms, pictures, copies, impressions, and images supports Reid on this point.

Now this would be the end of the story about Reid's idea of the theory of ideas if it were not for other passages which seem to be inconsistent with those above. For Reid sometimes includes in the ideal system theses that are obviously peculiar to modern empiricism, and obviously not held by Plato or Descartes, for example. Consider the following passages.

And if no philosopher had endeavored to define and explain belief, some paradoxes in philosophy, more incredible than ever were brought forth by the most abject superstition or the most frantic enthusiasm, had never seen the light. Of this kind surely is that modern discovery of the ideal philosophy, that sensation, memory, belief, and imagination, when they have the same object, are only different degrees of strength and vivacity in the idea. (*Inquiry*, p. 107a.)

It is a fundamental principle of the ideal system, that every object of thought must be an impression or an idea—that is, a faint copy of some preceding impression. (*Inquiry*, p. 108b.)

There is no doctrine in the new system which more directly leads to scepticism than this. And the author of the "Treatise of Human Nature" knew very well how to use it for that purpose; for, if you maintain that there is any such existence as body or spirit, time or place, cause or effect, he immediately catches you between the horns of this dilemma; your notions of these existences are either ideas of sensation, or ideas of reflection: if of sensation, from what sensation are they copied? if of reflection, from what operation of the mind are they copied? (*Essays*, p. 209a.)

The common theory concerning ideas naturally leads to a theory concerning judgment, which may be a proper test of its truth; for, as they are necessarily connected, they must stand or fall together. Their connection is thus expressed by Mr. Locke, Book IV. chap. 1—"Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them. Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the *perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy, of any of our ideas. In this alone it consists.*" (*Essays*, p. 427a.)

In the first three passages Reid associates theses from Hume's extreme empiricism with the common theory of ideas. In the last passage he associates Locke's idiosyncratic definition of knowledge with the theory of ideas. How can we reconcile these passages with Reid's claim that the ideal system was held by all, or nearly all, of his philosophical predecessors?

Now again, we could resolve the seeming contradiction by saying that Reid is a very bad historian of philosophy, and that he attributed the above theses from Locke and Hume to all of his philosophical predecessors. But is it plausible that Reid could be that badly mistaken? I think it is more plausible to hold that Reid considered these latter theses from Hume and Locke, and perhaps some other theses, to be part of the theory of ideas only in a broad sense. They are not core theses of the theory shared in common by all Reid's predecessors, but rather historical developments which arose, in Reid's opinion, quite naturally from the shared core theses. This interpretation of Reid is bolstered by some of the phrases in the above passages. Thus Reid says that Hume's thesis about the vivacity of ideas is "a modern discovery of the ideal philosophy", and he says that the common theory of ideas "naturally leads" to Locke's definition of knowledge.

Therefore there is a narrow and a broad sense of the theory of ideas in Reid. In the narrow sense the theory of ideas is a set of core theses about thought in general and thought about external objects in particular. Specifically, all human thought is said to involve mental objects in the mind or brain, which are distinct from any operation of thought, and which are the immediate objects of thought in conception, imagination, memory, perception, etc. All thought about other things is mediate, and involves ideas as immediate objects. Second, all thought about external objects involves ideas which are images or resemblances of those objects in the mind or brain. These images (or phantasms, or species, or forms) represent external objects and the qualities of external objects, which are themselves thought only mediately, if at all.

And we may now clarify the thesis of the present paper. In the sections that follow I will argue that (a) through (e), or the core theses of the common theory of ideas, are essentially involved in only one of the two main arguments for skepticism from Berkeley and Hume. As such, Reid's reply to one of those arguments importantly involves his rejection of the core theory of ideas, but his reply to the second argument does not. Reid's own assessment to the contrary, the linchpin of his response to Berkeley's and Hume's evidential argument for skepticism is not his rejection of the ideal system, but his theory of evidence.[5]

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[5] Sleigh and Wolterstorff might argue that even the core theory of ideas should be understood to include a theory of evidence, and Keith DeRose has argued that point to me in correspondence. In response, I know of no passages where Reid explicitly includes a theory of evidence as part of the theory of ideas in my narrow sense, but there are many passages where he talks about the common theory of ideas and seems clearly not to have a theory of evidence in mind. More importantly, there are places where Reid indicates that he does not associate a theory of evidence with the common theory of ideas. See especially Chapter VII of the *Inquiry*. There Reid attributes the theory of ideas to the Peripatetics. But immediately afterward he claims that those philosophers held that our evidence for bodies is immediate. "The old system admitted all the principles of common sense as first principles, without requiring any proof of them; and, therefore, though its reasoning was commonly vague, analogical, and dark, yet it was built upon a broad foundation, and had no tendency to scepticism." (*Inquiry*, p. 206a.)

This shows that Reid makes a distinction between the narrow foundationalism of modern philosophy and the theory of ideas. Modern philosophy, Reid holds, accepts both i) the theory of ideas and ii) the theory of evidence of narrow foundationalism. But the theory of ideas, according to Reid, is embraced by nearly all philosophers, modern and ancient.

Finally, it seems clear that Reid considers theses (a) through (e) above to be essentially involved in all of Berkeley's and Hume's arguments for skepticism. So even if Sleigh, Wolterstorff and DeRose are right about how Reid understands the theory of ideas (and I think they are not), it remains interesting that (a) through (e) do not have the intimate relation to skepticism that Reid and many others have thought.

3. The argument from inconceivability.

I have claimed that we can distinguish two main arguments for skepticism in Berkeley and Hume. In the following passage Reid seems to run the two arguments together.

> Mr. Locke had taught us, that all the immediate objects of human knowledge are ideas in the mind. Bishop Berkeley, proceeding upon this foundation, demonstrated, very easily, that there is no material world.... But the Bishop, as became his order, was unwilling to give up the world of spirits. He saw very well, that ideas are as unfit to represent spirits as they are to represent bodies. Perhaps he saw that, if we perceive only the ideas of spirits, we shall find the same difficulty in inferring their real existence from the existence of their ideas as we find in inferring the existence of matter from the idea of it; and, therefore, while he gives up the material world in favour of the system of ideas, he gives up one-half of that system in favour of the world of spirits; and maintains that we can, without ideas, think, and speak, and reason, intelligibly about spirits, and what belongs to them.
>
> Mr. Hume shows no such partiality in favour of the world of spirits. He adopts the theory of ideas in its full extent; and, in consequence, shows that there is neither matter nor mind in the universe; nothing but impressions and ideas. What we call a *body*, is only a bundle of sensations; and what we call the *mind* is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions, without any subject. (*Essays*, p. 293a.)

At the beginning of this passage Reid seems to have in mind what I have called the inconceivability argument for skepticism, or the argument which proceeds from the impossibility of conceiving external objects and their qualities. That argument claims that ideas are the only immediate objects of thought, and that external objects can be conceived only mediately, by means of ideas which are images or resemblances of them. But, Reid says, Berkeley "saw very well, that ideas are as unfit to represent spirits as they are to represent bodies." By the middle of the passage, however, Reid seems to have in mind what I have called the evidential argument for skepticism, or the argument which claims that beliefs about our ideas cannot provide adequate evidence for our beliefs about external objects. For here Reid says the problem is that "if we perceive only the ideas of spirits, we shall find the same difficulty in *inferring* their real existence from the existence of their ideas, as we find in inferring the existence of matter from the idea of it." (my emphasis) By the end of the passage Reid is back to the inconceivability argument, citing Hume's conclusion that "What we call a *body*, is only a bundle of sensations; and what we call the *mind* is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions, without any subject." In other words, here Reid is citing Hume's conclusion that we can *conceive* of nothing but ideas or bundles of ideas. In the present section I will take a closer look at Berkeley's and Hume's inconceivability argument for skepticism. In the next section I will take a closer look at the evidential argument.

Here is a passage from Reid in which the inconceivability argument for skepticism is made more explicit.

Bishop Berkeley gave new light to this subject, by shewing, that the qualities of an inanimate thing, such as matter is conceived to be, cannot resemble any sensation; that it is impossible to conceive anything like the sensations of our minds, but the sensations of other minds.... But let us observe the use the Bishop makes of this important discovery. Why, he concludes, that we can have no conception of an inanimate substance, such as matter is conceived to be, or of any of its qualities; and that there is the strongest ground to believe that there is no existence in nature but minds, sensations, and ideas... But how does this follow? Why, thus; We can have no conception of anything but what resembles some sensation or idea in our minds; but the sensations and ideas in our minds can resemble nothing but the sensations and ideas in other minds; therefore, the conclusion is evident. (*Inquiry*, pp. 131b–132a.)

I suggest that the argument Reid here attributes to Berkeley can be interpreted as follows.

1. The only immediate objects of thought are ideas and sensations.

2. All thought of other (mediate) objects must be by means of ideas or sensations which represent them.

3. In the case of external objects, the ideas or sensations which mediate our thought must be images or resemblances of those objects.

4. No idea or sensation resembles any external object.

Therefore,

5. There is no thought or perception of external objects.

According to (3), mediate thought of external objects must be by means of images or resemblances. This accords with our explication of the ideal system in section two, and especially with thesis (c). In fact, all of the premises of the above argument correspond to core theses of the ideal system except premise (4), which Reid accepts. So on this interpretation Reid is correct that he must reject the theory of ideas in order to avoid the argument.[6]

Before moving to the next section I will briefly mention a different argument which proceeds from the impossibility of conception, and which also seems to rest on the ideal system in the way that Reid claims. Here Reid is discussing Locke's assertion that "the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas...." (Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, ch. 1.)

[Locke] has never attempted to shew how there can be objects of thought which are not immediate objects; and, indeed, this seems impossible. For, whatever the object be, the man

[6] Here I disagree with both Sleigh and Wolterstorff, each of whom claims that representationalism does not by itself lead to skepticism. See Wolterstorff, p. 399, and Sleigh, p. 78.

either thinks of it, or he does not. There is no medium between these. If he thinks of it, it is an immediate object of thought while he thinks of it. If he does not think of it, it is no object of thought at all. Every object of thought, therefore, is an immediate object of thought, and the word *immediate*, joined to objects of thought, seems to be a mere expletive. (*Essays*, p. 427b.)

But from Locke's position, Reid thinks, it follows easily that there can be no knowledge of external objects. The argument seems to be something like this.

1. We can have no immediate object of thought but our own ideas.

2. All objects of thought are immediate objects of thought.

Therefore,

3. We can have no object of thought but our own ideas.

4. We can have knowledge only of what is an object of thought.

5. External objects are, by definition, not ideas.

Therefore,

6. We can have no knowledge of external objects.

Again, premise (1) of the argument is from the core theses of the theory of ideas. (2), (4) and (5) are also independent premises in the argument, but Reid accepts them all. Therefore Reid must reject the theory of ideas in order to reject the argument.

4. The argument from lack of evidence.

In section three I argued that Reid is correct when he claims that the theory of ideas plays an essential role in the inconceivability argument for skepticism from Berkeley and Hume. In this section I will argue that, contrary to Reid, the theory of ideas plays no important role in Berkeley's and Hume's evidential argument for skepticism.

a. The argument.

Reid mentions the argument I have in mind in the following passage.

Ideas are said to be things internal and present, which have no existence but during the moment they are in the mind. The objects of sense are things external, which have a continued existence. When it is maintained that all we immediately perceive is only ideas or phantasms, how can we, from the existence of those phantasms, conclude the existence of an external world corresponding to them?

This difficult question seemed not to have occurred to the Peripatetics. Des Cartes saw the difficulty, and endeavoured to find out arguments by which, from the existence of our phantasms or ideas, we might infer the existence of external objects. The same course was followed by Malenbranche, Arnauld, and Locke; But Berkeley and Hume easily refuted all their arguments, and demonstrated that there is no strength in them. (*Essays*, pp. 357b–358a.)

Here the problem is not that we cannot conceive external objects and their qualities. Rather, it is that our sensations cannot give us adequate evidence for our beliefs about external objects. The argument can be reconstructed as follows.

1. All knowledge is either immediate (non-inferential) or mediate (by means of an adequate inference from immediate knowledge).

2. All immediate knowledge is about our ideas or sensations.

Therefore,

3. If we are to have knowledge of external objects, it must be by means of an adequate inference from knowledge of our sensations.

4. But there is no adequate inference from knowledge of our sensations to our beliefs about external objects.

Therefore,

5. We can have no knowledge of external objects.

The obvious question that arises at this point is this: Where does the theory of ideas figure in the above argument? Remember that Reid does not object to the mere existence of ideas and sensations, so long as these are thought of as operations of the mind. But the present argument does not seem incompatible with that innocent reading of "our ideas or sensations".

Perhaps the problem is that the ideal system is implicit in premise (2), since (2) says that only ideas and sensations are *immediate*. But the kind of immediacy involved in (2) is epistemic, not conceptual. Let us say that an object X is conceptually immediate for S only if S can conceive X without conceiving some other object that represents X. This kind of immediacy seems to be involved in theses (b) and (d) of the theory of ideas, when it is claimed that ideas and sensations are the only immediate objects of thought. But is there any good argument that only objects which are immediate in this sense can be epistemically immediate? In other words, is there any good reason to think that conceptual immediacy is a necessary condition of being known independently of adequate inference? Reid never considers any such argument, and I cannot think of any myself. But if premise (2) is about epis-

temic immediacy and not conceptual immediacy, then (2) is independent of any core thesis of the theory of ideas. Moreover, Reid would reject premise (2) since Reid thinks that we have immediate knowledge beyond our ideas and sensations. For example, Reid thinks that we have immediate knowledge of external objects. But then Reid can reject the evidential argument without rejecting the theory of ideas. Contrary to what Reid says, he need not reject the theory of ideas in order to reject Berkeley's and Hume's second argument for skepticism about the world.

But maybe there is a different way in which the ideal system is supposed to figure into Berkeley's and Hume's evidential argument. For perhaps there is a different way to understand the motivation for premise (3) of that argument, and the theory of ideas is supposed to be involved in that motivation. I have in mind the following line of thought. As Reid tells us in several places, proponents of the ideal theory assume that consciousness, or the faculty by which we are aware of our sensations and ideas, is a source of immediate knowledge. And on this point Reid agrees. "Every man finds himself under a necessity of believing what consciousness testifies, and everything that hath this testimony is to be taken as a first principle." (*Essays*, p. 231b.) On the other hand, it seems evident that our knowledge of external objects, if we have such knowledge at all, is grounded in some way or another in our sensations; in some important sense, our sensations give rise to our beliefs about external objects. But now it is natural to interpret this kind of grounding in terms of inference from evidence. If one accepts that we have immediate knowledge of our sensations, and that our sensations somehow give rise to our beliefs about external objects, it is natural to assume that our sensations, or knowledge of our sensations, constitute our *evidence* for our beliefs about the external world. In this way we get a different argument in support of premise (3) above.

1a. We have immediate knowledge of our sensations.

2a. Our beliefs about external objects are in some way grounded in our sensations.

3a. Such grounding is to be understood in terms of inference from evidence.

Therefore,

4a. Our beliefs about external objects are inferred from knowledge of our sensations.

5a. Knowledge requires that any inferences involved be adequate.

Therefore,

6a=3. If we are to have knowledge of external objects, it must be by means of an adequate inference from knowledge of our sensations.

The independent premises of this argument are (1a), (2a), (3a) and (5a). Premise (1a) might plausibly be considered to be a core thesis of the theory of ideas, but note that Reid would accept (1a) on an innocent reading of "sensations." Reid would also accept (2a) and (5a). But Reid could still avoid the argument without rejecting the theory of ideas, because Reid would certainly reject premise (3a). Reid thinks that sensations give rise to our beliefs about external objects, but not as evidence from which those beliefs are inferred. So once again, Reid need not reject the theory of ideas in order to reject Berkeley's and Hume's evidential argument for skepticism, even if we understand the motivation for premise (3) of that argument to be the supporting argument we have explicated above. It is simply false that rejecting the ideal system is necessary for rejecting the evidential argument for skepticism.

But a different question remains to be considered. Reid also said that rejecting the ideal system was *sufficient* for rejecting modern skepticism, since all the skeptical arguments from Berkeley and Hume rest upon it. Is this claim true? The answer is no, since the evidential argument does not involve the theory of ideas in any of its premises. But perhaps the motivation for premise (3) of that argument necessarily involves the theory of ideas, as was suggested by the supporting argument for (3) above. This is false as well. For the motivation for premise (3) does not involve the theory of ideas in any essential way. Rather, the theory of ideas is just one way to cash out the appearance/reality distinction that any theory of perception must recognize. And it is the appearance/reality distinction in general, not the theory of ideas in particular, which motivates premise (3) of the evidential argument.

To see that this is so, we may ask why someone might think that our beliefs about external objects are grounded in knowledge of our sensations. The obvious answer is that it is because our beliefs about external objects are grounded in the way things appear to us, and talk about sensations is one way of talking about the way things appear to us. Another way of putting the present point is as follows. Anything that the skeptic wants to say using the language of sensations can also be said using the language of the way things appear. Thus the argument in support of (3) can be reconstructed as follows, and without losing any of its force.

1b. We have immediate knowledge of the way things appear to us.

2b. Our beliefs about external objects are in some way grounded in the way things appear to us.

3b. Such grounding is to be understood in terms of inference from evidence.

Therefore,

4b. Our beliefs about external objects are inferred from knowledge of the way things appear to us.

5b. Knowledge requires that any inferences involved be adequate.

Therefore,

6b. If we are to have knowledge of external objects, it must be by means of an adequate inference from knowledge of the way things appear to us.

Similarly, premises (2), (3) and (4) of the evidential argument can be divested of any remaining traces of the ideal system. Thus we can reconstruct the evidential argument as follows.

1. All knowledge is either immediate (non-inferential) or mediate (by means of an adequate inference from immediate knowledge).

2′. All immediate knowledge is about the way things appear to us.

Therefore,

3′. If we are to have knowledge of external objects, it must be by means of an adequate inference from knowledge of the way things appear to us.

4′. But there is no adequate inference from knowledge of the way things appear to us to our beliefs about external objects.

Therefore,

5. We can have no knowledge of external objects.

Now of course Reid would still reject premise (3b) above, and he would still reject both (2′) and (3′) of the main argument. My present point is only that neither argument involves the theory of ideas in any important way, and therefore Reid is incorrect when he claims that all of Berkeley's and Hume's arguments for skepticism depend on the common theory of ideas.

I have argued above that Reid mischaracterizes the nature of his reply to Berkeley and Hume. But I have also claimed that Reid provides the materials for an adequate reply to those authors. In the remainder of this section I will

briefly explain Reid's theory of evidence, and I will show how Reid uses it to respond to the evidential argument for skepticism. In effect, we will be showing why Reid would reject premises (2′) and (3b) in the above recontructions of the evidential argument for skepticism.

b. Reid's theory of evidence.

Reid divides all knowledge into two classes: immediate knowledge, or knowledge not involving any inference from evidence; and mediate knowledge, or knowledge involving some inference from evidence. In this Reid takes himself to be in agreement with his predecessors. The disagreement is over *what* knowledge qualifies as immediate. "I take it for granted that there are self-evident principles. Nobody, I think, denies it....But there seems to be great differences of opinions among philosophers about first principles. What one takes to be self-evident, another labours to prove by arguments, and a third denies altogether." (*Essays*, p. 434b)

According to Reid the mistake of modern philosophy is to acknowledge too few first principles. Specifically, modern philosophy acknowledges only one first principle of contingent truths; that we have immediate knowledge of our own ideas and sensations.

> The new system admits only one of the principles of common sense as a first principle; and pretends, by strict argumentation, to deduce all the rest from it. That our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious, hath a real existence, is admitted in this system as a first principle; but everything else must be made evident by the light of reason. Reason must rear the whole fabric of knowledge upon this single principle of consciousness. (*Inquiry*, p. 206a-b.)

> This, therefore, may be considered as the spirit of the modern philosophy, to allow of no first principles of contingent truths but this one, that the thoughts and operations of our own minds, of which we are conscious, are self-evidently real and true; but that everything else that is contingent is to be proved by argument. (*Essays*, p. 464a.)

Reid replaces this narrow and inadequate foundation with a broad base of first principles. Thus for Reid there is a wide range of sources of immediate knowledge.

> The common occasions of life lead us to distinguish evidence into different kinds, to which we give names that are well understood; such as the evidence of sense, the evidence of memory, the evidence of consciousness, the evidence of testimony, and the evidence of reasoning. All men of common understanding agree that each of these kinds of evidence may afford a just ground of belief, and they agree very generally in the circumstances that strengthen or weaken them. (*Essays*, p. 328a.)

Among the sources of immediate knowledge, Reid clearly includes the perception of external objects.

The first principles of mathematical reasoning are mathematical axioms and definitions; and the first principles of all our reasoning about existences, are our perceptions. The first principles of every kind of reasoning are given us by Nature, and are of equal authority with the faculty of reason itself, which is also the gift of Nature. (*Inquiry*, p. 185a.)

Another first principle is, *That these things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be*. (*Essays*, p. 445b.)

We may conclude that Reid embraces a broad and moderate foundationalism. His foundationalism is broad because it allows a variety of sources of immediate knowledge. It is moderate because it does not require that these sources be infallible. Reid thinks, in fact, that not even consciousness and reason are infallible, and so it would be inconsistent to require that other sources of knowledge cannot at times lead to errors. As such, Reid denies premise (2) of the evidential argument for skepticism.

But is it plausible to hold that the perception of external objects is a source of immediate knowledge? What about the truism, mentioned above, that in some sense our beliefs about external objects are grounded in our sensations. Reid accepts the truism, but he does not agree that the grounding is to be understood in terms of inference from evidence. Reid denies premise (3b) of the supporting argument above. According to Reid sensation almost always accompanies perception. But sensations are not to be understood as evidence for our perceptual beliefs. Rather, sensations are "signs" of external objects and their qualities, and give rise to our perceptual beliefs by the laws of our constitution rather than by any inference or reasoning.

We know nothing of the machinery by means of which every different impression upon the organs, nerves, and brain, exhibits its corresponding sensation; or of the machinery by means of which each sensation exhibits its corresponding perception.... And, because the mind passes immediately from the sensation to that conception and belief of the object which we have in perception, in the same manner as it passes from signs to things signified, we have, therefore, called our sensations *signs of external objects*; finding no word more proper to express the function which Nature hath assigned them in perception, and the relation which they bear to their corresponding objects. (*Inquiry*, pp. 187b–188a.)

Sensation, taken by itself, implies neither the conception nor belief of any external object.... Perception implies an immediate conviction and belief of something external—something different both from the mind that perceives, and from the act of perception. Things so different in their nature ought to be distinguished; but, by our constitution, they are always united. Every different perception is conjoined with a sensation that is proper to it. The one is the sign, the other the thing signified. (*Essays*, p. 312b.)

Thus Reid accounts for the role of sensation in perception, but not by making sensations evidence for our perceptual beliefs. Are Reid's theory of evidence and his corresponding theory of perception consistent with the common theory of ideas? Surely they are. For surely someone who accepts (a) through (e) above could accept that consciousness is not the only source

of immediate knowledge, and could therefore embrace Reid's broad foundationalism. And surely a proponent of (a) through (e) could accept that perceptual beliefs about external objects are related to sensations in the way that Reid claims they are. For one could hold that all perception of external objects involves a perception of representative ideas or images, and yet deny that mediate perception involves an inference from those images as evidence. In other words, one could hold that the perception of external objects is conceptually mediate but epistemically immediate. How would such a theory go? Well, one could make sensations, understood now as mental objects distinct from any operation of thought, signs for external objects. In other words, there would seem to be nothing in Reid's theory of evidence which precludes mental objects operating as signs rather than, as Reid has it, operations operating as signs.

In none of this do I mean to claim that Reid's philosophy is entirely consistent with the theory of ideas. Reid surely denies theses (b) through (e) of the ideal system, and would deny (a) on some readings of it. My point is rather that the essentials of Reid's response to the evidential argument for skepticism are consistent with the theory of ideas. And this goes to my thesis that Reid's rejection of the theory of ideas is not importantly involved in his reply to that argument. To put the point another way, Reid's theory of evidence is consistent with the theory of ideas, and so one need not reject the theory of ideas in order to employ Reid's theory of evidence against the skeptic.

5. Conclusion.

In conclusion, I would like to make some brief remarks about the implications of this discussion for philosophy in general.[7] What is important to notice is that Berkeley and Hume are not the only philosophers who have started from something like the theory of ideas and ended with skepticism about the world. And Reid is not the only philosopher who has thought that such skepticism can be met, and can only be met, by rejecting the theory of ideas. It seems to me that very similar conversations have been played out, although in somewhat different terms, by Heidegger responding to the Cartesian tradition, and by ordinary language philosophers responding to the phenomenalist tradition of logical positivism. More generally, philosophers as diverse as Austin, Dewey and Whitehead have argued that internal-external distinctions are the root of all epistemological evils, and that a rejection of such distinctions is necessary for making us at home in the world again.

But if my conclusions concerning the disputes between Reid and the modern skeptics are correct, then it seems to me that all of the philosophers

[7] I expand on the remarks of this section in "Modern Ontology and the Problems of Epistemology," forthcoming, *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

above must be wrong. For if I am correct, then it is false that skepticism about the world is so closely tied to a particular theory of ideas, or even to a particular ontology, as all of these philosophers (and many more) have thought. Another way to put the point is as follows. Any minimally plausible epistemology, as well as any metaphysics, would have to preserve the appearance/reality distinction. Different positions might cash out the distinction in different ways, but any position must acknowledge that there is a distinction to be cashed out. (It is just a platitude that things sometimes are not as they appear.) But if I am right, then at least one important argument for skepticism trades on the appearance/reality distinction itself, and not on any particular understanding of the distinction. And therefore *that* skeptical argument is still a problem for those epistemologies and metaphysics. One can cry about the internal subject-external object distinction of modern philosophy until the cows come home. But if a skeptical argument does not trade on that distinction, then the argument cannot be refuted by rejecting the distinction.

Finally, and again this is only if I am correct above, what *is* required to meet the skeptical argument is an adequate theory of evidence. Such a theory of evidence might be similar to Reid's semiotic theory, or it might characterize evidence in some other way sufficient for rejecting the relevant skeptical premises. Either way, I take it that such a proposal would be controversial, and in need of both support and detail. And that means that epistemology is not dead, even if one rejects the modern ontologies which have been thought to give rise to epistemology's main problems. [8]

[8] I would like to thank Vincent Colapietro, Keith DeRose, Chris Gowans, Judith Jones, James Marsh, Bob Roth, Dennis Sweet, John Van Buren, Margaret Walker, and Merold Westphal for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.