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# Reid: Conception, Representation and Innate Ideas

ROGER D. GALLIE

Section I of this paper begins with a presentation of Thomas Reid's doctrine of the signification of words, of what words signify or represent. That presentation serves to introduce a problem of interpretation, namely, what Reid thinks the connection is between conceiving something and grasping what a term for it signifies. It is pointed out that even if Reid maintains that what a word *signifies* is *conceived* by both speaker and hearer when that word is understood, this is a far cry from the position that he takes the stronger view, whether for all or only for some things, that their being conceived involves the understanding of a term or terms. The position that he does indeed take this stronger, although moderate, view is defended in sections II, III and IV.

In sections II and III it is argued that, in Reid's view, for an adequate conception of an individual, real or imaginary, a conception of its attributes is needed. In section IV it is argued that the *possession* of general conceptions (in distinction from their *formation*), without which conception of attributes is impossible, requires appropriate understanding of general terms. So since for the conception of an individual a conception of its attributes is needed, and since for the conception of attributes appropriate understanding of general terms is required, we arrive at a textually well-founded position: for the conception of most things, in Reid's view, understanding of terms is indispensable.

The remainder of the paper considers the following question: to what extent, if any, Reid is committed to acceptance of nativist views on concept possession?

To answer, in section V we consider to what extent Reid's moderate position on the possession of conceptions commits him to accepting Jerry Fodor's representational theory of mind (RTM) for propositional attitudes. It is clear that the view that a propositional attitude state such as belief involves some relation between a person and a representation such as a significant word, phrase or sentence of a natural language such as English can fairly be attributed to Reid. But it is also clear that Reid cannot be an adherent of the view that persons have a functional *cum* computational relation to Fodorean mental representations, so he cannot be an adherent of any nativism explicitly contained in such a view. But it is to be noted that in his *Inquiry*, Chapter IV, Reid argues by a different route that in order to acquire a language such as English prior mastery of a system of significant signs is required.

In section VI Keith Lehrer's argument in criticism of a reductionist interpretation of a position such as Fodor's is presented: that for a sign to signify something to someone presupposes that that person has a conception of what is signified. It is however pointed out that since there is a case for not viewing Fodor's position as reductionist overall Fodor can accept Lehrer's argument. Lehrer's innatist position, which he both claims to follow easily from this critical argument and to be a correct interpretation of Reid, is then presented: that we must presuppose an innate understanding of some signs to account for our learning the meaning of any signs. The objection that Reid too must accept the alleged innatist implications of Lehrer's critical argument in view of the implications of his moderate position on the possession of conceptions is considered and rebutted.

In section VII I argue that while Lehrer makes a respectable case for innate principles of *formation* of conceptions such as that of hardness, something that Reid clearly endorses in his *Inquiry*, Chapter V, he does not succeed in making a case for there being any innate *possession* of conceptions. Finally, in section VIII, Reid's mature views in the *Intellectual Powers*, Essay VI, on how conceptions come to be possessed are expounded, and are fleshed out with some help from present-day connectionism.

## I

Reid makes a customary division between proper names and all other words of language (*Intellectual Powers* V i H 389a-391b).<sup>1</sup> Proper names are intended to signify one individual only; examples are names of human beings, such as "Thomas Reid," of kingdoms, of cities, such as "Paris," and of rivers, such as "The Trent," which we choose to distinguish from all others of their

kind by a name appropriated to it alone. All the other words of language, including verbs (“smokes”), adjectives (“bright”) and substantives with a plural number (“philosophers”), are general words which are *not* appropriated to signify any one individual thing of a kind but equally related to many. (Clearly “philosopher” applies equally to each philosopher.) Plural substantives name classes. Observing many individuals to agree in certain attributes, we refer them all to one class, and give it a name. Men, dogs and horses are so many different classes of animals. A substantive “comprehends in its signification” not one attribute only, unlike an adjective such as “yellow” is held by some to be, but rather all the attributes that distinguish the class, *all the attributes that its members must possess to be in the class*. By affirming a singular substantive of any individual we affirm it to have all the attributes which distinguish the class. We may sum up at this point by saying that a general word, such as a substantive or adjective, signifies either an attribute, or a combination of attributes, while a proper name signifies an individual. But note that where a general word is said to signify an attribute this is not a case of a proper name of an attribute signifying an attribute, as if an attribute were an individual of a queer kind, unless sentences must be viewed as mere strings of proper names. From the infinite number of combinations of attributes that might serve as genera and species we select only those that are useful for arranging our thoughts in discourse and in reasoning.

What a word signifies, and thereby *represents* in one sense of that difficult term, is conceived by both speaker and hearer if the words have distinct meaning and are distinctly understood (*Intellectual Powers* V ii H 391b). It may therefore seem that Reid thinks that whenever I grasp something that a term signifies or represents through understanding that term I conceive what it signifies or represents. One may thereupon be led to ask whether it is Reid’s view that the converse holds: whenever I conceive something that a term signifies or represents I grasp something that the term signifies or represents through understanding that term.

We may then be led to ask whether Reid thinks that conceiving something is ever simply this: grasping the signification of a word, what a word means. Clearly if the answer to this question were yes for all cases of conception, *one could not conceive anything without having some dealings with linguistic representations of what is conceived*; for the grasping of what a word represents is, on this account, what it is to conceive whatever is conceived. At this point it should be noted that in the case of something complex such as a centaur, it is clear that Reid thinks one can go in for conceiving a centaur, presumably through having conceptions of its constituents, by thereupon visualising the centaur. This is clearly stated (*Intellectual Powers* IV ii H 373a,b). But that fact does not begin to establish that one was able to go in for conceiving it without having had linguistic

transactions with the terms for its components. As a result it might well emerge that, in Reid's view, while one can conceive something *without going directly via the signification of the term for it*, one still may be unable to conceive it without having undergone some transactions with terms. Indeed, we should observe that the proposition *that whenever I grasp what a word signifies I conceive the thing signified by that word* can be taken in two ways. To grasp what a word signifies can simply mean that I get acquainted with something which happens to have a name or description with which I have no transaction through my manner of getting acquainted with it. One can clearly get to know someone or something and not thereby get to know his, her, or its name. (One can indeed, according to Reid, become familiar with something via perception and handling and not be in any danger of thereby being committed to a doctrine that in such a case the perception of it involves prior transactions with a representation of that thing of the type involved in perceiving intermediary images of that thing. What is more, one can visualise a dragon and not thereby be visualising its image.) Alternatively one can be led to something via its name or a description of it, so that the resulting conception of it involves an understanding of a term.

Accordingly, it will take a substantial case to enable a commentator to attribute even the following moderate thesis to Reid: *to conceive something involves the understanding of a term for it or terms for its components*, whether such a thesis is unrestricted or confined to some subgroup of what is conceivable. It will, nevertheless, be the purpose of sections II, III and IV of this paper to defend the attribution of such a moderate thesis to Reid. And let us note here that the thesis in this moderate form does not attribute to Reid the very strong position that all there could be to acquiring a conception of something is acquiring the understanding of a term for it.

## II

The purpose of this section is to show that the conception of individuals involves the conception of attributes. Section III will argue that the conception of imaginary objects also involves the conception of attributes. That the conception of genera also involves the conception of attributes will be shown in section IV, in which it will be argued that the conception of attributes in turn involves the use of general terms.

Reid's doctrine that proper names signify individuals (*Intellectual Powers* V i H 389a; V v H 404b) seems to fit ill with certain other views he holds. For example, the view that the attributes of individuals are all that we distinctly conceive about them does not seem to fit with the view that we have a more clear and distinct conception of their attributes than of the subject to which these attributes belong (*Intellectual Powers* V ii H 392a,b). This lack of fit could

surely be made out, were it Reid's view that proper names have distinct meaning and are distinctly understood.

Speaking of the conception of individual things that really exist, Reid does say that the things conceived are the originals, the individual things themselves (*Intellectual Powers* IV i H 363b,364a). He adds that conceptions of individual things are called true when they agree with the thing conceived and false when they do not. In which case, since it is Reid's view that when we speak of true or false conceptions we mean true or false opinions, such conception cannot be bare. Bare conception, or simple apprehension, such as when I conceive a colour, as opposed to perceiving something of that colour, can be neither true nor false (if we accept what Reid says in *Intellectual Powers* IV i H 361a).

Now it is hard to see how a conception of an individual thing that really exists can be true unless it somehow matches the qualities of the object conceived—which helps to account for Reid's position that the attributes of an individual are all that we distinctly conceive about it. (Another important factor at work here is Reid's belief that our conceptions of individuals are always inadequate since no adequate conceptions of the materials of which they consist are available [*Intellectual Powers* IV i H 364b].) How such a conception can match the qualities of the object conceived without containing any kind of representations of these qualities is very hard to grasp, which brings us back to the issue of whether the conception of these qualities involves dealing with intermediary representatives such as words.

It is true that Reid insists that, in the case of his conception of Saint Paul's Cathedral, its *immediate object* is 400 miles distant (from Glasgow) and does not act upon him, nor him on it, in order to be conceived by him (*Intellectual Powers* IV II H 374b). Such conception might then seem not to involve any consideration of linguistic items that signify the building. Reid firmly insists, in particular, that its immediate object does not act upon him by producing in him an idea or likeness or image (or *representation*, in a second sense) of itself by transactions with which he who conceives Saint Paul's Cathedral conceives it. (Even if it did produce such images, could Reid not still insist that a transaction such as considering such intermediaries was one thing and conceiving what they resemble is another?) But ruling out a representation in this non-linguistic sense clearly need not count as ruling out there being any representation of the linguistic type being involved in such an act of conception or its enablement.

Reid insists on the point that in conceiving Saint Paul's there is no occurrence of an *intermediary* that is a likeness of Saint Paul's in spite of the fact that he admits that the case of conceiving actual individuals bears an obvious analogy to the painting of pictures of them. In the course of painting (a picture of) something (in his time at any rate) a likeness that we call "the painting" is

typically produced (*Intellectual Powers* IV i H 362b). Thus “the painting of a man” has, in John Haldane’s phrase, *product-process ambiguity*.<sup>2</sup> Reid alerts us to the same ambiguity for the term “conception” (*Intellectual Powers* V ii H 393b).

### III

To be conceived by me an object does not have to act upon me. It does not even have to exist. Such are *entia rationis*, things conceived. For instance, claims Reid, there are conceptions, presumably products, which may be called fancy pictures, commonly called creatures of fancy. Such was the conception which Swift formed of the isle of Laputa and Cervantes of Don Quixote and his squire. We can give names to such creatures of the imagination, conceive them distinctly, and reason consequentially concerning them, Reid claims (at *Intellectual Powers* IV i H 363b), in spite of the fact that in these cases there is at best only *conferral of the name in the stories*. And so it does seem that Reid holds that we can conceive *individuals that do not actually exist*.

Again, we may certainly have distinct conceptions of what Reid calls *things which never existed*, centaurs for example. Thus Reid claims that he can conceive a centaur. This conception is an operation of the mind to which he can attend. The sole object of it is a centaur, an animal which never existed. Reid continues, insisting that this one object that he conceives is not the image of an animal but an animal, and that he knows perfectly well the difference between conceiving the image of an animal and conceiving an animal. The thing he conceives is a body of a certain figure and colour, having life and spontaneous motion (*Intellectual Powers* IV ii H 373a,b). The thing he conceives would thus *seem* to be an *individual* non-existent. For one thing, it does not seem appropriate to impose a reading of “any centaur” upon “a centaur” in this context. And so we might be tempted to think that the answer to the question how the conception of non-existents—*entia rationis*—is possible amounts to the question how the conception of *non-existent individuals* is possible. But this, arguably, is the wrong view, as we shall now see.

Suppose, says Reid, that I conceive a triangle—a plane figure terminated by three right lines. One who understands this definition distinctly has a distinct conception of a triangle. *But a triangle is not an individual, it is a species*. The thing conceived is general, adds Reid, and cannot exist without other attributes (*Intellectual Powers* V ii H 394a). (This time note that reading “a triangle” as “any triangle” is perfectly appropriate, except in the case of “A triangle is a species,” which itself can be rewritten “Triangles are a species.”) Every triangle that really exists must have a certain length of sides and measure of angles, time and place; the definition of a triangle includes neither

existence nor any of these attributes. Passages such as these suggest that Reid's thought could be that some *entia rationis* (unlike centaurs) are combinations of attributes lacking as members attributes that would be possessed by real things of the sort in question. This characterisation seems to fit the product conception of a centaur presented above in some important respects except that centaurs are clearly not a kind of real things. For that conception lacked time and place, although it did not lack colour and shape. But does Reid really think that Don Quixote is general rather than individual?

Reid readily allows that one may conceive of a machine that never existed or a plan of government that is never put into practice. He explicitly calls such an example a *thing conceived*: such compositions are things conceived in the mind of the author, not individuals that really exist; the same general conception which the author had may be communicated to others by language (*Intellectual Powers* V iv H 399a). This seems to support the view that Don Quixote is a general conception (product). And on behalf of this view it can be said that a mere combination of attributes, like any other universal, arguably has no real existence, even though Reid allows that we may ascribe existence to a universal in the sense of its being truly an attribute of a presumably actual, individual (*Intellectual Powers* V vi H 407a). Such then would appear to be Reid's most clearly articulated position on the nature of things conceived, of *entia rationis*.

Can we conceive Don Quixote and the like without dealing with linguistic representations? It seems hard to conceive how someone could have such a conception without reading or hearing parts of the story. Doubtless the name of the character cannot be a familiar kind of representative, since the character is fictional, but it is not clear that the everyday general words in the story used to describe him lack their usual signification and cannot therefore provide some kind of signification for the name. Having a fancy picture, such as a conception (process?) of a fictional character, would therefore seem to presuppose having dealt with linguistically representative items.

It may be objected at this point that, when Cervantes conceived of Don Quixote prior to having composed the work of that title in words, his conception of him was pre-linguistic: that he imagined a genteel aged crank thinking of trying to revive the ancient order of Chivalry and perhaps thought that a good tale or tales might be woven round such a figure. But we should not fail to note that without having some such complex general conception involving sharable features Cervantes would fail to have any conception at all on which to elaborate. And so we are led, somewhat as in the case of the conception of actual individuals, to consider the question whether the possession of shareable product conceptions involves dealing with linguistically representative items.

## IV

Reid insists that we have clear and distinct conceptions of attributes (*Intellectual Powers* V ii H 392b). He maintains that the attributes of individuals are all we can distinctly conceive about them, as we saw; but let us not forget that Reid holds in *Intellectual Powers* V iii H 394b, 395a that the whiteness of this sheet is one thing and whiteness another and that, unlike whiteness, the whiteness of this sheet is not a general conception (product), although it is an *abstract conception*. Reid calls it "abstract" presumably because he has already observed that nothing hinders me from attending to the whiteness of the paper before me, without applying that colour to any other object. But a point to note, due to A. N. Prior,<sup>3</sup> is that if the piece of paper in question actually is white then attending to its whiteness is attending to a fact, and it seems odd to those raised in the Russellian tradition to call a fact an abstract conception, even if it is true that the fact that this sheet is white is not the same fact as the fact that that sheet over there is white.

Reid takes the view that simple general conceptions are formed by the procedures of *abstraction* and *generalising* (*Intellectual Powers* V iii H 3394a-396a). Abstracting is "the resolving or analysing a subject into its known attributes, and giving a name to each attribute, which name shall signify that attribute and nothing more" (*Intellectual Powers* V iii H 394a). Generalising is "the observing one or more such attributes to be common to many subjects." (One feels like protesting, in the case of Reid's description of abstraction, that if one is capable of giving a name to an attribute that shall signify it and nothing more, then it is not true that I resolve the subject into *its attributes* and name them, since on the face of it each of them is, at this stage, "an individual quality really existing." And, in the case of the description of generalizing, one wants to say that one cannot in any obvious way observe that individual qualities really existing belong to other individuals.)

It does seem clear, given that one can after all accept this account of the *formation* of simple abstract conceptions, that the giving of a name to each attribute of the individual that signifies the attribute and nothing more does not amount to an essential ingredient of the formation process. Thus one may well agree with Lorne Falkenstein's claim (made in correspondence) that Reid's account of the *formation* of simple general conceptions is essentially non-linguistic. But one is not thereby forced to accept that the *possession* of such conceptions is a state that could be attained without suitable transactions with linguistic items.

At this point someone might reasonably press the question: just what is the difference between the formation of a conception and its possession that forces upon possession the requirement of linguistic transaction? The answer is that the possession of a conception enables one, in a normative sense of "enable," to conceive something correctly, and so, for instance to (correctly)

understand what they have said. Thus Reid says that

my conception of felony is true and just, when it agrees with the meaning of that word in the laws relating to it, and in authors who understand the law. The meaning of the word is the thing conceived; and that meaning is the conception affixed to it by those who best understand the language.

And he also says:

Universals are always expressed by general words...they are the signs of general conceptions, or of some circumstances relating to them. These general conceptions are formed for the purpose of language and reasoning; and the object from which they are taken, and to which they are intended to agree, is the conception which other men join to the same words.<sup>4</sup>

The formation of a general conception, through such alleged processes as abstraction and generalization is, presumably, at best a necessary condition for its possession, a condition that, in Reid's view, is not sufficient. As he puts it at *Intellectual Powers* IV i H p364a: "The common meaning is the standard by which such conceptions are formed, and they are said to be true or false as they agree or disagree with it."

We have seen that Reid allowed that there is a close analogy between conceptions of individual things that really exist and pictures taken from life. But our conceptions of universals, Reid claims, are, instead, analogous to the copies which the painter makes from pictures done before. Why does Reid say this?

He gives the following answer:

The meaning of most general words is not learnt like that of mathematical terms, by an accurate definition, but by the experience we happen to have, by hearing them used in conversation. From such experience we collect their meaning by a kind of induction; and as this induction is for the most part lame and imperfect, it happens that different persons join different conceptions to the same general word; and though we intend to give them the meaning which use, the arbiter of language, has put upon them, this is difficult to find, and apt to be mistaken, even by the candid and attentive. (*Intellectual Powers* IV i H 365a)

This answer would seem to again indicate that Reid's position is that *you cannot possess general conceptions without considering how general words are applied by other users of them in a linguistic community*, and that therefore, you

cannot have a general conception, such as that of yellow, without considering a linguistic representation, such as "yellow." In sum, it seems that Reid's position might be that you cannot have, or possess, general conceptions without having had transactions with linguistically meaningful items such as general terms. This is a thesis about possession of general conceptions and is *not*, on the face of it at least, a thesis about their formation, which appears to be in Reid's view essentially a non-linguistic affair, as was conceded above.

However, it has also to be conceded that the view might not unreasonably be taken that coming to possess a general conception might, in at least some cases, only involve a conception being formed in me by the non-linguistic procedures that Reid describes. To take this view, however, is to allow that there might be individual persons who form a conception of something that they never share in any way with anyone else, based on their entirely individual assessment of resemblances and differences between individual items in the world or their own mental acts. But we might in our turn dismiss this possibility as unimportant, if only because the account of concept possession that is involved is too feeble to support the customary criteria by which we determine whether or not a person really possesses a general conception. Must she not be able to explain it to another at least by way of examples, or indicate the component conceptions? And it certainly does seem to be Reid's view, based on his statement that general conceptions are analogous to copies the painter makes from pictures done before, that the criteria are public.

Attributes of individuals are expressed by general words, such as the adjective "white." Reid now moves to say that the other class—not another class—of general terms are those that signify the genera and species into which we divide and subdivide things. These are the remaining general conceptions, once attributes have been dealt with, but it should be clear that their possession by individuals has to satisfy the same linguistic precondition of conformity to common meaning as the possession of conceptions of attributes. Genera and species differ from attributes in that the words that signify them signify those attributes which individuals must possess to be members of the genus or species in question (*Intellectual Powers* V ii H 392b-393b).

The last two points about signification leave certain substantive-like expressions, such as "thing" and "entity," out in the cold; they may not be genuine substantives, but if they are genuine general terms, they can scarcely be said to signify either an attribute or a finite collection of attributes each of whose possessors belong to a kind of thing. Indeed Reid himself notices that there are adjectives, such as "beautiful" and "excellent" that are applied to things of such different kinds that he is unable to conceive any quality that is

common to all the different things to which such adjectives apply (*Intellectual Powers* VIII iv H 498a).

## V

That Reid takes the view that possession of conceptions of such items as Saint Paul's Cathedral, Don Quixote and felony involves having dealt with linguistic items that have signification in his sense is a position for which there clearly is, I should say, a considerable wealth of textual evidence. And so it would seem the moderate thesis can for a considerable variety of cases be ascribed to Reid, the thesis *that to conceive something involves the understanding of a term for it or terms for its components*. But now an important issue arises, namely, whether Reid, in taking such a view, is committed to any extent to accepting some version of RTM.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of this issue does not merely reside in one prominent feature of Fodor's version of RTM, namely, in its well-known advocacy of the following view: that there is a functional *cum* computational relationship between a person *qua* organism and a mental representation (which in turn belongs to a certain type of system of mental representations) whenever a person is in a propositional attitude state.

Such a view, were it imputable to Reid, would of course serve to fully justify the very important contention of Lehrer and Smith that a computational model of the workings of the mind could be imposed upon Reid's account of the mind at the levels of understanding and conception as well as of any other propositional attitude state. But this point, although in itself important, does not in fact directly touch upon the importance of the issue above for the purposes of this paper.

The importance of this issue arises for us principally because of a distinctive feature of the representations of RTM, as well as from the fact that to accept RTM is to accept that there are mental representations at all, since the mental representations that RTM postulates are emphatically not the items of a natural language such as English. It is admittedly true that they are to be viewed as a system of signs on which a compositional semantics can be imposed and thus, in a sense, are, or constitute, a language. But Fodor is emphatic that although the computation allegedly involved in many psychological processes, such as perception, presupposes a representational language, it does not presuppose that that language must be one of the ones which function as vehicles of communication between speakers and hearers.<sup>6</sup>

Now languages of the latter sort, natural languages, have to be learned. And so, given the view that the learning of one's first natural language is a matter of hypothesis formation and confirmation, we seem forced to accept that natural language acquisition involves deployment on the part of a person

of such a system of mental representations as is envisaged by Fodor. In sum, we would be quite close to being compelled to endorse one nativist view of possession of conceptions.

To what extent then is Reid compelled, by his acceptance of the moderate view of conception possession presented in Sections I-IV above, to accept RTM? (It should of course be clear that in accepting the moderate thesis Reid is committed to there being a special variety of mental representations in the form of pieces of a natural language wholly or partly understood.)

Speaking of RTM, Fodor says:

This is the theory:

- (a) Propositional attitude states are relational.
- (b) Among the relata are mental representations (often called "Ideas" in the older literature).
- (c) Mental representations are symbols: they have both formal and semantic properties.
- (d) Mental representations have their causal roles in virtue of their formal properties.
- (e) Propositional attitudes inherit their semantic properties from those of the mental representations that function as their objects.<sup>7</sup>

Fodor also says:

Ideas are mental symbols *par excellence*. They do for Hume just what mental representations are supposed to do for cognitive science: that is, they provide the source of the intentionality of mental states (in virtue of their semantic properties) and they provide the vehicles of mental processes (in virtue of their causal properties).<sup>8</sup>

The view that a propositional attitude state involves *some relation* between a person and an internal mental representation, *such as a piece of a natural language*, can, it would seem, be attributed to Reid with considerable plausibility. Thus a person cannot have a belief about Fodor without both having a conception of Fodor and conceptions of qualities attributable to him. And the possession of such conceptions involves having dealt with linguistic items, as we have seen. Moreover, we have also seen that there is textual evidence in the *Intellectual Powers* for the view that Reid holds that the sentence that expresses what is believed by the person about Fodor itself signifies an *abstract conception*, provided its subject is an indexical such as "he."

If Humean ideas lack formal properties of the sort that English assertoric sentences such as "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man" possess then it is not at all clear that they possess the desirable features of mental

representations that RTM needs. If thinking is the processing of inner representations having appropriate formal structure, or has such processing as its close analogue in an information processing model of thinking such as Lehrer's, then only if ideas have appropriate formal properties can they be viewed as inner representations or their analogues in such a model. Now while Reid seems to be, to a considerable extent, wedded to there being transactions with representations belonging to a natural language with syntactic structure among those who possess conceptions, including conceptions of states of affairs (which need not be actual, by the way), he is not, as we said in section II, to be saddled with the view that there must have been transactions with mental pictures (produced by the object of conception) in those who have these conceptions, where mental pictures are viewed as intermediaries different from acts of conception.

It should be clearly noted at this point that it is one thing to reject the view that Reid espouses RTM and its attendant nativism about conceptions and quite another to have refuted the view that in the *Inquiry* Reid accepts nativist positions about possessing concepts. Indeed it should perhaps be better known than it is that the nativist position that the very existence of a language such as English presupposes the possession of something amounting to a prior language is clearly endorsed by Reid (*Inquiry* IV ii H 117b, 118a). There Reid, who thinks of languages such as English as artificial constructs, argues:

...all artificial language supposes some compact or agreement to affix a certain meaning to certain signs; therefore there must be compacts or agreements before the use of artificial signs; but there can be no compact or agreement without signs, nor without a language, and therefore there must be a language before any artificial language can be invented....

To sum up at this stage, in Reid's philosophy, acts of conception, such as conceiving Saint Paul's Cathedral, Don Quixote, a triangle, whiteness or the whiteness of my handkerchief involve such transactions on the part of the conceiver with items of a natural language with signification, and hence syntactic structure, as are needed for the possession of the conceptions in question, assuming that one cannot conceive an item without possessing a conception of it. To this meagre extent Reid is in explicit agreement with the RTM; and so to this extent his philosophy of mind, and of mental operations, can be construed as accommodating representations of what we conceive as entities. But, as should be clear already, to concede this is only to impute to Reid's position a very shallow resemblance to the full-blown Fodorean theory of mental representations.

## VI

To make this point even clearer, we shall next consider the question of what kind the relation is between the person, or organism, and a representation, when a person is, according to Fodor's theory, in a propositional attitude state. What is the nature of the transaction that a person, or organism, must have with such symbols which enables the relation to constitute belief or some other propositional attitude? The following statement of Fodor's RTM should help to clarify that matter:

Claim 1 (the nature of propositional attitudes):

For any organism O and any attitude A toward the proposition P there is a ('computational'/'functional') relation R and a mental representation MP such that

MP means that P, and  
O has A iff O bears R to MP.

Claim 2 (the nature of mental processes):

Mental Processes are causal sequences of tokenings of mental representations.<sup>9</sup>

It should be perfectly clear that according to this statement of Fodor's theory the relation between the person, or organism, and a token mental representation when the person is in a propositional attitude state is a *naturalistic* relation.

At this point Keith Lehrer asks:

Does it suffice for the sign, S, to signify to me some object, O, that S stand in the natural relation, R, to O? For example, does it suffice for one thing to signify another to me that it stand in a relation of similarity or causation to it? Clearly not. Why? Because I might not *interpret* S as signifying O. What else is required?<sup>10</sup>

Lehrer then offers the following answer to the question he has raised:

Obviously, I must have some conception of O, the object represented or signified by S in order for the sign to signify or represent the object to me. If I have no conception of O, a rose, or any quality of the rose, for example, then I cannot interpret or even learn to interpret the sign, S, a sensation, impression, or idea, as representing or signifying the rose, or any quality of the rose. Representation presupposes conception of the object represented and cannot explain conception of the object. (Lehrer, *Reid*, 14)

The main point that Lehrer seems to be making here is that on any given occasion one cannot come to interpret a sign as signifying anything of which one has no conception on that occasion. This certainly seems right to me. And it may seem that Fodor's theory in the version just given is a naturalistic *cum* reductionist account of the possession of propositional attitudes, such as a belief that Fodor writes philosophy or an indication by S of something about a rose, by way of a causal (specifically, functional *cum* computational) construal of the relation between the organism and the representational item. And that theory, viewed as such a reductionist account, surely fails in the way Lehrer claims above. It fails, in that the reduction rules out the presence of factors whose presupposition is essential to any interpretation of a sign having the remotest chance of being a correct or useful interpretation—namely, that an interpreter has some conception of the item that the sign might reasonably be taken to signify.

Now what is supposed to follow from this victory over the reductionist version of the RTM, according to Lehrer? Lehrer thinks that what is supposed to follow is that

[t]he most fundamental level of conception, our original conceptions of objects, cannot be explained by saying some object before the mind represents those objects. In order to learn to interpret signs, we must have some conceptions of objects, for without such conceptions, the so-called "signs" will signify nothing. We must presuppose some original conceptions of objects in order to account for our learning the meaning of any signs. We must presuppose an innate understanding of some signs. It is not the sign that explains how we conceive the object, it is, rather, some innate principle of the mind giving rise to our conception of the object "by a natural kind of magic." (Lehrer, *Reid*, 14)

But from the fact that we must presuppose the availability of certain conceptions in order to be able to learn or grasp the meaning of a given sign that is presented to us, it does not follow that the conceptions needed on that occasion are innate. Of course it will be said, and I think it is said in the above passage from Lehrer, that, in order to learn the meaning of any sign whatsoever, certain conceptions must be possessed, as well as other conceptions needed for learning the meaning of a particular given sign. But it still does not follow from this that the required conceptions are innate in any other sense than that they must have been acquired in a different manner from the manner in which conceptions are acquired via transactions with signs.

In addition to these difficulties with the alleged corollary, a difficulty about the argument from which the corollary springs must now be faced. It

must be asked whether the version of RTM that has just been stated is really a naturalistic cum reductionist account of being in a propositional attitude state, such as an indication by S to someone of something about a rose or someone's believing that Fodor is a disciple of Chomsky. After all, Claim 1 of the statement of the theory does contain the clause

MP means that P

and it is surely not obvious that an account of what it is to be in a propositional attitude state containing a relation between an organism and a *meaningful* token can rate as a fully naturalistic reduction of being in a propositional attitude state. If this contention is correct then the following question arises: why can't Fodor accept the contention of Lehrer's initial argument in full?

But what is Reid's situation now? I have defended the view that Reid maintains a moderate thesis that the possession of conceptions involves having dealt with items of a natural language that have meaning. And naturally this raises the issue of to what extent a claim like Fodor's Claim 1 can be attributed to Reid. Given that English admits a compositional semantics, it may well be harmless to attribute to Reid the view that a person bears a computational/functional relation to those items of the natural language transactions with which are needed to count as possessing conceptions. This, however, is clearly not to attribute to Reid the view that there are mental representations admitting a compositional semantics corresponding to Humean ideas or impressions and that are needed to account for such acquisitions as the ability to use one's first (natural) language.

At this point someone may object that although it may be true that Fodor may be able to accommodate Lehrer's first argument, the Reid who holds even the moderate thesis about concept possession cannot. The moderate thesis claims that to possess conceptions involves having had suitable transactions with appropriate expressions of a natural language. And now it can surely be maintained, following Lehrer, that the person must have some conception of the object represented or signified by such an expression in order for the sign that they invoke in the transaction to be significant. Surely then, in order to end up possessing the conception I come to possess after suitable transactions with the natural language sign I must already possess that very conception.

This objection would apply to the moderate thesis if that thesis implied the following two points: (i) that to possess a conception of anything I must have had an appropriate transaction with a word or phrase of a natural language that represents that very thing, and (ii) that I fully understand that word or phrase in the course of the transaction. But the moderate thesis

does not have such implications. Thus in the case of individual concrete items such as Saint Paul's Cathedral it holds that to possess a conception of such an item I need conceptions of its features and that possession of conceptions of features of a concrete object would only require transactions with words for such features. Turning to the case of general conceptions, presumably including conceptions of features, it can surely be maintained that the transactions with the appropriate general terms that are needed, according to Reid, are not transactions with general terms whose meaning at that point I fully grasp. It is after all only after I have adequately mastered the employment of a general term that, according to the account given in section IV, I count as having fully acquired the appropriate general conception.

## VII

Some passages in the *Inquiry*, notably the one from which Lehrer quotes the phrase "a natural kind of magic" (*Inquiry* V iii H 122a), have suggested to philosophers as distinguished as Hume that Reid accepts a different version of the doctrine of *innate ideas* from the position presented in *Inquiry*, chapter IV, concerning the learning of one's first language, that I have sketched in section V. The version given there was that even in order for one's public native language to exist, one needed to have prior grasp of a language. This time the version of the doctrine to be attributed to Reid is that there are innate distinct conceptions of qualities such as hardness. Here is one of these passages:

I see nothing left but to conclude, that, *by an original principle of our constitution*, a certain sensation of touch both suggests to the mind the conception of hardness, and creates the belief of it; or, in other words that this sensation is a natural sign of hardness. (*Inquiry* V ii H 121a,b)

Speaking of hardness Reid says:

First, as to the conception: Shall we call it an idea of sensation, or of reflection? The last will not be affirmed; and as little can the first, unless we will call that an idea of sensation which hath no resemblance to any sensation. (*Inquiry* V ii H p121a)

It is perhaps understandable that Hume was reduced at this point to the opinion, expressed in a letter to Hugh Blair<sup>11</sup> recently discovered by Paul Wood,<sup>12</sup> that Reid accepted some version of the doctrine of innate distinct conceptions, given that Hume accepted that an idea of hardness was a less

lively likeness of a sensation of hardness and that such ideas invariably followed such impressions. But is it so understandable in the case of Lehrer?

It is admittedly hard to see how a sensation of touch, or the effects on the nervous system of touching a table top, neither of which resemble the hard top of a table, can produce a conception of, and belief in, a hard table top unless there is available to the toucher some concept forming resource over and above such sensory transactions with tables. But now there is an important question to consider: is *the possession of any distinct conception* required as part of the concept forming resource as well as transactions with persons, or material bodies, for such concept forming resources to be able to operate? And it should be clear that an affirmative answer to this question cannot be found in the quotations from the *Inquiry* we have so far considered.

Indeed, the same question applies to certain remarks Lehrer makes about the faculty of consciousness. Lehrer writes:

To account for our conception of impressions and ideas, one must assume an innate principle of conception, the principle of consciousness, that supplies such conceptions in response to those impressions and ideas. (Lehrer, *Reid*, 15)

Now for a comment. Suppose someone were to say that in order to account for our conceptions of bodies one must assume an innate principle of conception, the principle of perception, that supplies such conceptions in response to those bodies impinging on our senses. It seems to me that we have in front of us a statement that is the appropriate analogue of the above statement of Lehrer's about consciousness. Now it does seem that anyone who made such a statement about such a principle of perception, perception being a fundamental mode of acquaintance with bodies, need not at all be understood as advocating any version of a *doctrine of innate distinct conceptions*. For to say that there is an innate source of certain conceptions of bodies, namely perception, is not, at least in so many words, to say that there is an innate source of such conceptions having to employ *innate distinct conceptions* to supply the conceptions expected from that source. Similarly, to say that there is an innate source for our conceptions of ideas, impressions or Reidian sensations is not to say that there is an innate source that employs innate distinct conceptions in supplying us with these conceptions. Hence, I argue, there is no good reason available in the material from Reid's *Inquiry* on hardness that we have so far consulted for the view that Reid is committed to a doctrine of innate conceptions, if that means a doctrine of innate possession of distinct conceptions.

## VIII

But perhaps there is further material in Reid to which we can turn. The material I have in mind is the passages in the *Intellectual Powers* VI i where Reid deals with the problem of the extent to which judgment is involved in forming notions of things. He remarks that

a man who is able to say with understanding, or to determine in his own mind, that this object is white, must have distinguished whiteness from other attributes. If he has not made this distinction, he does not understand what he says. (*Intellectual Powers* VI i H 418a)

However, to say that distinct notions of the objects of sense cannot be formed without distinction, which presupposes judgment, is not to say that all notions of bodies presuppose judgment. For in the same passage Reid insists that

[i]t is acknowledged on all hands, that the first notions we have of sensible objects are got by the external senses only, and probably before judgment is brought forth; but these first notions are neither simple, nor are they accurate or distinct: they are gross and indistinct, and like the *chaos, a rudis indigestaque moles*. Before we can have any distinct notion of this mass, it must be analyzed; the heterogeneous parts must be separated in our conception, and the simple elements, which before lay hid in the common mass, must first be distinguished, and then put together into one whole.

Someone might question whether, before a person has grasped any familiar features of a piece of paper, such as its whiteness or how it feels, they have any conceptions of sensible bodies at all. But if Reid's view is that the senses do not by themselves supply distinct notions, and therefore no notions, strictly speaking, that suggests strongly that his position is that the senses are still an innate principle that supplies, or helps to supply, such conceptions without it having to use distinct conceptions of the sort pertaining to bodies or indeed any other distinct conceptions. I conclude that these passages from *Intellectual Powers* VI i give support to an interpretation of Reid within which, even if there are innate sources of conceptions, such as consciousness, reasoning or the senses, it does not follow that such sources employ distinct innate conceptions in their contribution to the supply of concepts. The view that consciousness, the senses and reason might be innate sources of distinct conceptions which do not employ innate distinct conceptions in their provision of conceptions for us is, I submit, not incoherent, although it is admittedly by no means clear how the provision of

conceptions can be accomplished without the resource of innate distinct conceptions being at the disposal of such sources. It will be asked whether any help is available to make this clearer.

The connectionist notion of non-conceptual content in the writings of Cussins and Peacocke may be of help at this point.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it might be said that the senses, at least individually and by themselves, supply non-conceptual content of a nature that is highly perspective-dependent; and that, when one is confronted by such a thing as a table, the non-conceptual contents from the various sense organs stimulated by the table are a confusion of different perspective-laden contents underpinning how, as we would express it on a conceptual level, it looks to the eye, sounds to the ear and feels to the touch. Conceptual content, conveyed in Reidian judgments involving employment of distinct conceptions, is not at all, or much less, perspective dependent. Perspectival independence, at best an ideal on the connectionist view, is an attainment. And it is the same with the possession of distinct conceptions, and being able to employ them in judgment and adult perceptions, at least as far as the mature Reid is concerned. The contribution of non-conceptual content to the acquisition of conceptual content is indispensable, even if it does not, as it surely need not, presuppose the employment of what Reid calls distinct concepts. The way is now clearer for a philosopher such as Reid to allow that there are innate principles or sources of conceptions that may be needed for the interpretation of signs without there having to be innate distinct conceptions employed by such sources.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was read on my behalf in July 1995 at the 22nd International Hume Conference in Park City, Utah. I am grateful to all who participated in that session in spite of my absence, and, in particular, to Lorne Falkenstein, who took the trouble to send me a lengthy and detailed email message after the meeting summarizing the comments made and impressing a number of important points upon me, especially the point that Reid's view of the formation of general conceptions does not appear to essentially involve any linguistic element. I am also very grateful to the referee for *Hume Studies*, whose diligence, helpfulness, and patience with my earlier efforts can scarcely be adequately acknowledged in such a passage as this.

1 All citations from Reid's writings are from the seventh edition of Sir William Hamilton's edition of Reid's works, *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*

Seventh Edition (Edinburgh and London, 1872), Volume I. Specific references to Reid's texts take the following form. In the case of specific references to Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (first edition, Edinburgh 1764) they take the form *Inquiry* II iii H 105a or *Inquiry* II iii H 105b. The first means Chapter II, section III of the *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 7th Hamilton edition of Reid's works, left hand column of page 105 and the second means the same except that you are to refer to the right hand column of page 105. In the case of references to Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (first edition, Edinburgh 1785) it is similar: *Intellectual Powers* IV iii H 375a means Essay IV, Chapter III of the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 7th Hamilton edition of Reid's works, left hand column of page 375. So our first reference to the works of Reid is to *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay V, Chapter I, Hamilton's 7th edition, page 389 left-hand column to page 391 right-hand column.

2 John Haldane, "Whose Theory? Which Representations?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (1993): 247-57. The phrase occurs on 249.

3 Arthur N. Prior, *Objects of Thought*, edited by P. T. Geach and A.J.P. Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). On page 4 we find: "... to believe in the greenness of grass in this sense is just to believe that grass is green."

4 This quotation, and the previous one, are from *Intellectual Powers* IV i H 364b.

5 Robert Stecker, "Does Reid Reject/Refute the Representational Theory of Mind?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1992): 174-184. The issue of whether Reid is committed to any version of the RTM, and, in particular, to Fodor's version of this theory is vigorously taken up in this paper, to which Haldane's "Whose Theory? Which Representations?" is an interesting reply.

6 Jerry Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1976). On page 56 we find: "Computational models presuppose representational systems. But the representational systems of pre-verbal and infrahuman organisms surely cannot be natural languages. So either we abandon such pre-verbal and infrahuman psychology as we have so far pieced together, or we admit that some thinking, at least, isn't done in English."

7 Jerry Fodor, *Representations: Philosophical Essays on the Foundations of Cognitive Science* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), 26.

8 Jerry Fodor, "Mental Representation: An Introduction," in *Scientific Enquiry in Philosophical Perspective*, edited by Nicholas Rescher (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), 126.

9 Jerry Fodor, *Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 17.

10 Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London: Routledge, 1989), 13.

11 Aberdeen University Library MS 2814/I/39.

12 Paul Wood, "David Hume on Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense*: A New Letter to Hugh Blair from July 1762," *Mind* 95 (1986): 411-416.

13 Adrian Cussins, "The Connectionist Construction of Concepts," in *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence*, edited by Margaret Boden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 368-440.

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