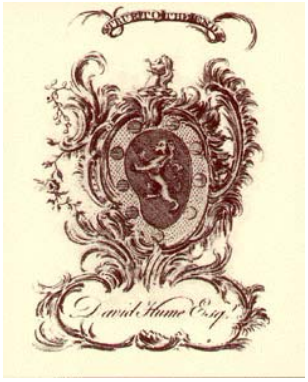

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PETER J. DIAMOND. *Common Sense and Improvement: Thomas Reid as Social Theorist*.Bern: Peter Lang, Scottish Studies International, Volume 24, 1998. 406 pages. ISBN 38204360 US $56.95 paper.

Peter J. Diamond's *Common Sense and Improvement* offers an interpretation of Reid's philosophy of decision, action and morality that relies not only on Reid's published materials and manuscripts but also takes into account the broader context of his Aberdeen background. Diamond attempts to persuade us that Reid's main purpose in teaching philosophy, if not in writing it, was to fulfill a commitment to human improvement. Following the lead of his "scientistic" regent, George Turnbull, Reid holds that an anatomy of the mind conducted on Newtonian lines confirms the view that "man is very well fitted and qualified for attaining to a very high degree of moral perfection even here," a view in tune with the well-known episcopalian strain in Aberdonian religious belief of the time rather than the Calvinist strain (37-61). Reid comes into his own in virtue of his insight that refuting the theory of ideas is the first crucial step towards prosecuting an adequate empirical and inductive science of man of which an anatomy of the human mind is a principal component.

Hume, too, had an agenda based on a science of man and a consequent anatomy of the mind, but one which, by contrast, embraced the theory of ideas. Diamond describes Hume's plainly secular agenda in the following terms:

> Nevertheless, at a minimum he believed that philosophy and the other liberal arts can produce a disposition of mind "best suited to love and friendship" by refining a man's sensibilities, calming violent passions and affording opportunities for communicating knowledge. As tempers are softened and knowledge is improved, men are instilled with a greater sense of humanity; in the political realm, "Factions are then less inveterate, revolutions less tragical, authority less severe, and sedition less frequent." (220)

But Reid—according to Diamond—sees more fundamental and widely based improvement as surely possible. For an adequate mental anatomy reveals the importance of "carrying on the improvement of Mankind in Knowledge and Virtue" in a style best suited to "the capacity of the greater

part [of one's audience], which in all congregations [is] the unlearned, & unimproved" (223). What makes this improvement possible, in Reid's view, is an adequate representation of the foundations of morality, which resides not in feelings in reaction to character traits, as in Hume, but which springs from another source (229). As Reid put it, in his *Essays on the Active Powers*, "if virtue and vice be a matter of choice they must consist in voluntary actions, or infixed purposes of acting according to a certain rule when there is opportunity, and not in qualities of mind which are involuntary." Hence Reid's emphasis on morality as yet another department of judgment based on first principles alongside an emphasis on active power and choice, in opposition to Hume's compatibilism and his sentimentalist version of the moral sense.

So far, so good. Diamond seems to have made out his basic contention. There are, however, plenty of other contentions that he wants—or needs—to make which oblige him to confront Reid's published philosophical texts. And in this, and related activities, he does not appear as surefooted as could be desired.

Consider the topic of first principles: Diamond repeatedly tells us that it is wrong to assume that Reid was a "providential naturalist." This appears to be because "Reid did not believe that our faculty of judgments is supernaturally guaranteed to be free from error" (20). But surely no one of any substance ever believed *that*, not even Turnbull. No, providential naturalism extends this guarantee only to successful candidates for first principle status. Diamond perhaps recognizes this point as he makes some remarks that indicate that Reid may be, after all, a providential naturalist. He says, for example, that for Reid the principle of veracity and the principle of credulity are "'simple and original' first principles" and we can give no account of them "but the will of our maker" (125). Moreover, Diamond mentions Hume's refusal to countenance the providentialism that is implicit in Reid's array of moral first principles, but his mention of this may not refer to providential naturalism as such (216).

Are we then to take it that Diamond thinks that first principles are, in Reid's view, in need of guarantees, supernatural or otherwise? He says:

> Clearly, Reid needed to establish the existence of first principles that are no sooner understood than they are believed, without the need for further operations such as deductive or inductive reasoning. But by declaring that the first principles of common sense are self evident while claiming that our common sense enables us to judge the truth of self-evident propositions, Reid had reasoned in a circle. (132)

This passage will only count as a difficulty for Reid if its talk of common sense enabling us to judge the truth of self-evident propositions is to be construed as common sense enabling us to justify such propositions. Since Diamond thinks he has Reid in difficulties here, he presumably thinks that first principles need a form of justification or guarantee.

Diamond may nevertheless be on to something in this remark on Reid's *Inquiry*:

> Reid's approach had more to do with the rhetoric of eighteenth-century scientism than with the successful implementation of a specific scientific method. Moreover from a rhetorical perspective, Reid's message was not consistently presented in terms of a strict application of the experimental method of reasoning. This is most clearly the case with respect to his appeal to common sense. (185)

In other words, it might be the case in the *Inquiry* and in the *Intellectual Powers* that Reid sometimes invokes the notion of common sense in cases where the principle appealed to was far from self-evident. That position, in contrast to the case of individual first principles of common sense, however, would surely need to be established—on a case by case basis.

Diamond claims that Reid endorses Hume's wholly unmitigated epistemological scepticism respecting the efficient causes of natural phenomena (205). But if by the expression "efficient cause" Diamond means what Reid means by it—and what else *could* he mean by it?—one can only say that this is not a scepticism for which Hume is noted. Hume's determinism rules out Reidian efficient causation in the world. Hume's difficulties with the notion of cause and with the establishment of empirical generalizations are another matter. It seems clear enough that Reid thinks there really is no such animal as a Humean necessary connection and that there are, at best, only invariable sequences involving different natural kinds of events in accordance with what Reid calls laws of nature. Moreover, it is clear that Reid does not endorse "whole scale epistemological scepticism"—whatever that may be—about establishing individual natural laws.

Diamond's wording at 226f might lead one to suspect that Reid endorses a cosmological argument that would guarantee that the deity has attributes such as moral perfection. This argument would enable Reid to refute Hume's suggestion that our services to the deity are the effects of some such emotion as fear rather than of true devotion. So why didn't Reid allow his theism an argumentative role? I suspect the reason was that Reid was perfectly well aware that cosmological arguments do nothing, by themselves, to establish the moral attributes of the deity. Certainly Reid does not attempt to argue in such a manner in his 1780 lectures on natural theology. A first cause may well be simple in the sense of Aquinas, but it is a long, hard road from

simplicity to goodness. Reid does, however, treat features of the world that suggest design and wisdom in its Author as suggesting further attributes. Thus, speaking of the fixed stars, in his *Lectures on Natural Theology*, Reid says:

> They were made not for the sole purpose of glimmering faintly in a serene sky upon this Earth, but they exhibit marks of wisdom and design intending them for the most beneficial purposes.

While it emerges that Diamond's book has defects of the kinds illustrated above, that does not mean that it would be entirely useless to the serious student of Reid. Diamond goes a long way towards establishing his main contention that Reid's teaching was undertaken to fulfill his commitment to human improvement. Furthermore, the concluding chapter on Reid's politics and the bibliography are useful. Overall, Diamond gives a reasonable overview of Reid's position on morals and virtue.

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