



**Ryan Nichols. *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception***

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Ryan Nichols. *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 317. ISBN 9780199276912, Hardback, \$74.

In his introduction to this book, Nichols reprises and refers readers to a statement of his views of the history of philosophy that appears in an earlier essay (“Why is the History of Philosophy Worth Our Study?” *Metaphilosophy* 37.1 (2006): 34–52). In that essay, Nichols provides an illustration of valuable work in the history of philosophy that is also an exact *precis* of his project in this book. He summarizes the perceptual relativity problem for contemporary direct realist theories of perception, and then proposes that renewed consideration of Reid’s notion of “visible figures” may be helpful in this regard:

Thomas Reid is the foremost historical defender of direct realism, so it stands to reason that turning to his work will bear fruit in evaluating this [perceptual relativity] argument. . . . Here good exegetical and philosophical history can be conducted in concert to understand one option a direct realist has to respond to this argument. By doing the history of philosophy—by articulating, then analyzing and evaluating, Reid’s resolution to this problem—we will discover one creative response to this problem. Reasoning that Reid was a brilliant philosopher, and also a direct realist . . . leads us to explore the contemporary direct realist’s options via interpreting Reid as accurately as possible. . . . The Reidian “visible figure” is a relational property between eyes and objects. Since it is itself mind-independent, and since its geometrical features are proof theoretically equivalent to the mind-independent objects of sight, it can save direct realism about vision. (Nichols, “Why is the History of Philosophy Worth Our Study?” 46–7)

In the essay, Nichols frames his views on the history of philosophy with the question “Why is the history of philosophy worth our study?” His answer is that it is worth it when we “utiliz[e] doctrines associated with or endorsed by a historical figure to create a new theory” and at the same time “[s]uppose the primary goal of doing history of philosophy is identical to the primary goal of analytic philosophy—finding philosophical truths and avoiding philosophical falsehoods through analysis of arguments—and suppose this is to be achieved via the supplementary goal of getting the truth-values of authorial propositions right” (48). Nichols’s book-length treatment of Reid is a contribution to this effort, for, as Nichols remarks in the essay, “on this particular point contemporary analyses

of visual perception have not caught up to Reid's subtle treatment of perceptual relativity of vision" (47).

This emphasis on the importance of Reid's views for contemporary theories of direct realism forms the first of two main organizing principles of Nichols's argument. The second of these principles is an emphasis on Reid's philosophical development as a reaction to the "Way of Ideas" or "the ideal theory." Nichols sets aside historical and interpretive controversies about Reid's understanding of his predecessors identified with the Way of Ideas and about a definite set of claims properly attributed to it, in order to "follow Reid's unrestrained use of the term to refer in general to his predecessors' views" (7). In two chapters following the introduction, Nichols first summarizes the methodological (Newtonian and introspective) and metaphysical presuppositions Reid brings to his treatment of perception. Second, Nichols explains Reid's theory of the intentionality of mental states as a reaction to the Way of Ideas and its skepticism about mind-independent objects as intentional objects, which Nichols characterizes as skepticism about the knowability of intentional contents. In this discussion Hume appears as the representative Way-of-Ideas figure for both Reid and Nichols. I will return to this discussion in a moment.

The next six chapters review and evaluate elements of Reid's theory of perception, covering touch, vision, sensations, qualities, and Reid's distinction between original and acquired perception. Throughout, Nichols sets up Reid's views as reactions to the indirect realism, anti-realism, or skepticism of the Way of Ideas and pursues the proper statement, potential clarification and extension, and finally evaluation of the usefulness of Reid's arguments for theories of direct realism. Along the way, where relevant, Nichols invokes the aid of contemporary theories of perception to refine and explicate Reid's arguments. The promise and limits of Reid's theory of suggestion and natural signs for avoiding perceptual intermediaries are aired in Nichols's review of perception through touch. Problems with the extension of these arguments to visual perception retreat upon favorable comparison of Reid's views with those of the Way of Ideas. Challenges to direct realist theories posed by sensations as themselves intentional objects are met by Nichols's view that for Reid sensations, rather than being informative, are intended instead to help us navigate the world safely. Reid attributes this feature to the creator; Nichols characterizes it on Reid's behalf as "proto-evolutionary" (148). Reid's doctrine of natural signs and his care to avoid the errors, especially Locke's, of the Way of Ideas secure the immediate perception of primary and secondary qualities. The chapter on Reid's views of our awareness of sensations provides an occasion for Nichols to summarize his case for Reid's direct realism, specifically, "to identify the degree of contact between our minds and the world" (186). Reid's treatment of perceptual knowledge via his distinction between original and acquired perception, though

inferential, nonetheless escapes assimilation to the inferential account of perception and belief that characterizes the Way of Ideas.

Nichols's penultimate chapter reviews the responses of Reid's predecessors to the Molyneux problem and then turns to the different answers Reid himself gives to the question in different contexts. Nichols offers a reading of Reid that resolves apparent inconsistencies in Reid's responses, which is all the stronger for its reliance on the form of the direct realist view of perception Nichols has explained in the preceding chapters. The final chapter discusses the competing claims of Reid and Hume to Newton's method and thus, for Nichols, to the mantle of empiricism. Nichols concludes that Hume's "foundational division between impressions and ideas" is just the kind of hypothesis eschewed by Newtonian methodological prescription. On these grounds, Nichols argues, "Hume is not an empiricist" (282). Since Reid repudiates this particular hypothesis, refocuses on "worthwhile epistemological questions," and "embrace[s] a contented quietude about questions that cannot be answered" (284), Nichols concludes that Reid "has placed knowledge of self and world on firmer footing" (285).

Nichols supports his reading of Reid in several places by reference to Reid's lectures, both published and unpublished, and to unpublished student notes, as well as to less well-known published works, in addition to the *Inquiry* and the two *Essays*. He reviews particular discussions in the literature on Reid's theory of perception where they are relevant to his argument. Discussions of Reid's predecessors and contemporaries and the relevant contemporary treatments of direct realist theories of perception round out his bibliography.

One decision that scholars who discuss Reid's views of Hume must make is how to handle the polemical quality of Reid's reading of Hume. Nichols's emphasis on Reid's reaction to the Way of Ideas as an interpretive principle makes this decision especially acute. Seen this way, Reid's achievement, as Nichols tells it, is partly negative: Reid "has avoided [the] errors" (184) of the Way of Ideas. The relevance of Reid's conclusions depends in part on the persuasiveness of his interpretation of the views of figures he associates with the ideal theory; any contribution to contemporary theory claimed for Reid is similarly dependent. In his first substantive chapter, on conceptual awareness and intentional contents, Nichols begins his account of Reid's reaction to the Way of Ideas with analysis of Hume's assertions about impressions and ideas. Nichols presents Reid's views, but also—and here his concern to establish Reid's contribution to contemporary direct realist theories emerges—he develops his own reading of Hume. Nichols dismisses concerns that Reid's views of Hume lack support in Hume's texts by pointing out that Reid found Hume confusing and that he was "not in the business of reconstructing the theories of his predecessors" (55–6). That Reid's interpretations of Hume are a "reasonable use of the texts in their context of the eighteenth

century” is enough (55). Cover for Nichols’s own treatment of Hume, however, requires more, which Nichols provides by way of reference to what he sees as the perennial state of Hume scholarship:

[I]nterpreting Hume has been difficult—then and now. . . . [E]xpert commentary on the nature and relation of Humean impressions and ideas continues to lack significant consensus. This serves as a testament to the difficulties in which Reid finds himself—and as ample reason to be charitable to him. (50)

For Nichols, Reid’s confusion about Hume’s text shows up everywhere people offer interpretations of Hume. The diversity and disagreement among readers of Hume in and across all periods is such that nearly every interpretation has at least some justification (55). Nichols’s charity to Reid is thus also designed for Nichols’s own reading of Hume. The use Nichols ultimately makes of this license is so distinctive and important for his own project in this book that it is worth looking in detail at a particularly notable instance.

Nichols’s approach to Hume interpretation shows up early in his account of Reid’s reaction to the Way of Ideas. The penultimate section of this chapter on conceptual awareness is entitled “Unaccountable Intentionality and the Poverty of Humean Replies,” and provides textual support for Nichols’s conclusion that Hume’s impressions lack intentional content. In a general discussion of ideas, Nichols paraphrases a passage from the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* to show that Hume is unable to account for the intentionality of perception. Here is the original passage from the *Enquiry*:

All **events** seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we can never observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected*. And as we can have no idea of any thing, which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion **seems** to be, that we have no idea of **connexion** or **power** at all, and that these words are absolutely without meaning. . . . But there still remains one method of avoiding this conclusion, and one source which we have not yet examined. . . . [W]hen one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning, which can alone assure us of any matter of fact or existence. We then call the one object, *Cause*; the other, *Effect*. **We suppose**, that there is some connexion between them; some power in the one, by which it infallibly produces the other, and operates with

the greatest certainty and strongest necessity. (EHU 7.2; SBN 26–7, my emphases in bold)

This is Nichols's paraphrase of the same text:

Recall Hume's comments that **ideas** are "loose and separate" and "conjoined, but never connected." Hume recognizes that **his theory implies** that "these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings or common life." But he doesn't stop there. He manages to find "one source [of meaning] which we have not yet examined." He says, "We suppose that there is some connexion between them" [citation omitted]. His suggestion seems to be that **an act of supposing** they have meaning plays a role in *giving* the terms that refer to ideas and impressions meaning. (Nichols 65, author's interpolation in brackets, my emphases in bold)

First, Nichols makes no mention of the fact that Hume is talking about a particular idea, the idea of necessary connection, in this passage, and he presents the excerpts as part of a discussion by Hume of the nature of ideas and their meaning in general. Nichols is careful to replace "events" with "ideas" in his paraphrase and otherwise to eliminate Hume's references to them. Second, Hume repudiates the conclusion that these words ("connexion or power"—not words in general) are "absolutely without meaning" and says that this only "*seems*" (his emphasis) to be a necessary conclusion. Third, Nichols assigns the apparent meaninglessness of ideas in general to Hume's entire "theory"—an admission of its "poverty"—and locates what he calls the "incoherence" of Hume's theory in the attribution of the meaning of ideas to "an act of supposition." Nichols elides the intervening text about events and presents this supposition as an act of meaning-creation for all ideas. Instead, for Hume—and this is clear from the *Enquiry* text—the supposition arises after the effects on us of the conjunction of events in our experience.

This is a misrepresentation of Hume's text that is farther afield than anything that Reid, to my knowledge, commits to paper himself. Rather than confining the polemical quality of Hume interpretation to Reid's text and Reid's objectives, Nichols extends it into contemporary epistemological analyses in Reid's name and ends up expanding, rather than clarifying, an historical controversy. Nichols's own feelings about Hume and his readers come in through a disclaimer he makes on Reid's behalf: "Reid is not suggesting that the *Treatise* is a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, but . . ." (50). Nichols's suggestion, of course, is that this is his own view of Hume's text. His handling of the *Enquiry* passage bears this out. Further, in his zeal for a foil not only for Reid but also for direct realist theories of

perception generally, Nichols sets up a new Hume to knock down, and justifies his interpretive work under what is in effect an appeal to ignorance by reference to the disagreement of Hume scholars. In the end, these decisions hurt Nichols's project in this book: by developing his picture of the Way of Ideas in such a way, he weakens his case that Reid and contemporary direct realist theories succeed by avoiding the errors of Hume and others associated with the Way of Ideas.

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