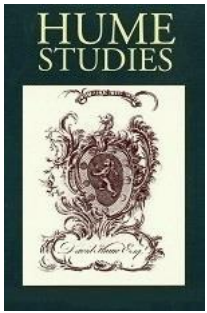

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The Rise and Fall of Scottish Common Sense Realism by Douglas McDermid (review)

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McDermid, Douglas. *The Rise and Fall of Scottish Common Sense Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 228, cloth ISBN 9780198789826, $67.00.

This rich and interesting book tells the story of the development and ultimate disappearance over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a central theme in Scottish philosophy: common sense realism. Taking Thomas Reid's version of common sense realism as the paradigmatic form, McDermid shows how Reid's views had their roots in Lord Kames's account of perceptual realism, how Dugald Stewart and Sir William Hamilton defended and modified Reid's view, and how James Ferrier systematically repudiated both Reid's appeal to common sense and his realism. McDermid succeeds in providing a clear overview of the trajectory, while not losing sight of the details of the individual philosophers' views.

The book has three primary aims: to show that Kames, Reid, Stewart, Hamilton, and Ferrier are "members of a rich and underappreciated tradition" (1); to "re-conceptualize some of the achievements of Thomas Reid" by reading him as more than just a "footnote to Hume" (3); and to show that the five philosophers discussed in the book had a shared goal of "determining whether any form of perceptual realism is defensible" (1–2).

McDermid is careful not to reduce this claim of a thematic continuity among their works to the claim that they were all answering the same question. One result of this is a proliferation of labels for the philosophical positions under consideration: not just "common sense realism," but also "perceptual realism" (57), "generic realism" (151), "natural realism" (159, 193), and "metaphysical realism" (190). While it is a virtue of McDermid's work that he does not try to force all the views into one framework, more explicit discussions of how these labels relate to each other, or at least ensuring that all of the terms occur in the index, might have been useful.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by clarifying what McDermid means by "common sense philosophy," focusing on Reid and drawing comparisons with the works of James Oswald, James Beattie, and George Campbell. McDermid argues that Reid's "common-sensism" is a response not just to skepticism generally, but to four forms of skepticism: epistemological, metaphysical, moral, and religious (11). He offers a broad overview of Reid's account of the principles of common sense, drawing primarily on Nicholas Wolsterstorff's 2001 book, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, and a clear account of why Reid thinks these principles help rebut the various forms of skepticism. Oswald, Beattie, and Campbell are offered as variations on the Reidian theme, and the chapter ends with a list of eleven

"themes and theses" (43) of common sense philosophy that can be distilled from the works of these four philosophers.

Chapter 2 is a relatively brief account of Lord Kames as "the *de facto* founder of the Scottish common sense realist tradition" (57). McDermid draws on Kames' 1751 edition of *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* to emphasize three main themes: the centrality of appeals to "natural feeling or perception" (57) in Kames's metaphysics and epistemology; the role of Kames's claim that our sense-perceptions are basically reliable under standard conditions in rebutting skepticism; and the role of Kames's claim that we immediately perceive material objects in his rebuttal of Berkeley. Kames's work has received little attention, so this is a useful contribution to the secondary literature on Scottish philosophy.

Chapter 3 lays out Reid's common sense realism, which in the briefest possible terms is the view that "the existence of the material world is self-evident or non-inferentially justified for us" (73). McDermid usefully positions Reid against Descartes throughout the chapter, surveying Reid's account of Descartes's role in changing how philosophers thought about first principles and the external world, contrasting Descartes's "minimalist" epistemological substructure (78) with Reid's much more expansive account of first principles, and contrasting the two philosophers' solutions to the problem of our knowledge of the external world. The chapter ends with a list of eleven theses of Reid's common sense realism (104–106).

Chapter 4 examines how Dugald Stewart and Sir William Hamilton took up Reid's arguments and either defended them (in Stewart's case) or extended them (in Hamilton's case). The discussion of Stewart focuses on his essay "The Idealism of Berkeley," showing points where Stewart followed Reid and points where he refined Reid's views. McDermid does an admirable job of extracting key arguments from "Hamilton's prolix prose," reading which, he says, requires either "the patience of a saint or the imperturbability of a Stoic" (132). Again, McDermid notes points where Hamilton's arguments have a "recognizably Reidian flavour" (129).

James Frederick Ferrier gets the most attention in McDermid's book, with the final three chapters devoted to his work. Chapter 5 (based on a 2013 article by McDermid) examines Ferrier's objections to those who championed Reid as, first, an able opponent of representationalist theories of perception, and, second, as drawing on common sense principles to defend a realist theory of perception. McDermid lays out Ferrier's arguments for why it was Berkeley, not Reid, who first opposed representationalism; why Reid should *himself* be read as a representationalist, and thus as ultimately unsuccessful in his opposition to both skepticism and idealism; and why belief in matter is so far from being "common sense" that it is in fact inconceiveable. Instead, McDermid notes, Ferrier thought common sense vindicated his own theory of "intuitive perception" (157).

Chapter 6 turns to Ferrier's argument for idealism. This chapter is primarily exegetical, since Ferrier's views are not well known; McDermid leaves the reader

to decide whether Ferrier's arguments are any good. At the end of the chapter McDermid brings the narrative back to Reid and Ferrier's twin objections to common sense realism: that realism is indefensible, and that common sense has no place in philosophical argument.

Chapter 7 is a brief historical coda, relating the 1856 contest between Ferrier and Alexander Campbell Fraser for the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics at Edinburgh. It was Ferrier's failure to secure this position that led to his near-disappearance from the story of Scottish philosophy, McDermid argues, for at the time of Ferrier's death in 1864, "he had founded no school, inspired no movement, attracted no followers" (207).

McDermid's book is a most useful addition to the growing literature on Scottish philosophy. And McDermid does not neglect the secondary literature; he engages with it concisely but effectively, in the footnotes, so that the arc of his story is not interrupted. The prose is lucid and a pleasure to read, although occasionally melodramatic. Since no single metaphor quite captures all aspects of the trajectory of the story told in this book, McDermid avails himself of many: Scottish common sense realism is the mother, with idealism as her child (198); Kames discovered a "diamond in the rough" while Reid shaped it into the "jewel in the crown" (107); Reid is the "hero of the battles" with Stewart as the "herald who announces the news" (120); or Reid is the founder of a religion, with Stewart and Hamilton as "defenders of the faith" (114). And then we get Ferrier, the alchemist who refined Hamilton's realism "until the realist elements have been eliminated from it like so much dross, and all that remains is an unalloyed idealism" (197–98). Or, even more dramatically, Ferrier is the exorcist who dispels the "dreadful spectres and frightful phantoms" found in the works of Locke, Reid, Kant, and Hamilton (198).

But McDermid's metaphors serve a purpose: they help put these five philosophers in relation to each other, so we can see both continuities and breaks. The result is a richly contextualized account of Reid's common sense realism, as well as clear elucidations of the views of lesser-known figures such as Kames, Hamilton, and Ferrier on the topic of the relation between mind and world. Scholars not just of Scottish philosophy but of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant will learn a great deal from this book.

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