

Royal Society of Edinburgh

Lecture

Thomas Reid and the Art of Philosophy

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Reputations come and go, as Gordon Graham, the Henry Luce III Professor of Philosophy and the Arts at Princeton Theological Seminary, pointed out in his introduction to this lecture on the life and influence of Thomas Reid. Two hundred years ago, a century after his birth in Scotland, the star of Reid, an 18th-Century Scottish philosopher, was in the ascendant. A century later, it had sunk without trace. Yet, 300 years on, in the tercentenary year of his birth, his star is rising again. "Reid is back," Graham said, adding that no-one was better qualified to tell us why than John Haldane, Professor of Philosophy at St Andrews University, who has rekindled interest among scholars on both sides of the Atlantic in Reid's work.

So much esteem is Reid now held in that celebrations of his tercentenary are being held both in Scotland, his birth place, and in America (at Princeton), where the Scottish philosopher's influence is still widespread, Haldane said. Some of the scholars who were due to be at both events were here today and although his lecture was intended for those with no prior knowledge of Reid, he hoped he would not leave Reid scholars without something to take issue with.

In saying that, he was thinking not only about the issues that Reid was most associated with but about the nature of philosophy itself, particularly in relation to the natural sciences as invoked as opposition to traditional philosophical understandings. This led neatly on to the "art" of philosophy – the title of the lecture - a discipline which may now be under threat.

So how was Reid's reputation recovered? The revival dates back to 1941 with the publication of an abridged version of Reid's essays on intellectual powers produced by the late Anthony Wolseley, who was at the time in military service with the Dragoon Guards in the Middle East but later became Professor of Moral Philosophy at St Andrews University. Wolseley saw in Reid an affinity with the style of philosophy then developing in England, with particular attention to ordinary language and the diagnosis of sceptical philosophical theories arising from mis-use of the language.

It was possible to say that Wolseley rediscovered Reid. He was certainly neglected, even in Scotland, partly because his writings were not easily available, but more so because of the prevailing verdict on his Scottish School of Common Sense system of philosophy. That verdict dates back to Emmanuel Kant in the 18th Century but which was revived by 19th-Century Scottish neo-Kantians philosophers, namely James Frederick Ferrier, Professor of Moral Philosophy at St Andrews. Prior to Wolseley's 1941 edition, scholars would have to have gone back to Sir William Hamilton's works from 1849. These ill-served Reid in two respects, with their double columns and small print and the long notes that Hamilton made to improve them, when no improvement was called for. Wolseley's work had the disadvantage of being an abridgement, so the serious work of producing a critical edition only got underway 20 years ago by Princeton University and Edinburgh University Press. These volumes are transforming the study of Reid, Haldane said, so once again, as in his own time, he is becoming read and appreciated.

So who was Reid and what was his background? Reid was born in the manse in Strachan in Deeside, in 1710, a year to the day before David Hume and 15 years before Kant. Reid, like Kant, was brought to life as a critical philosopher by reflecting on Hume's sceptical empiricism, which Reid sought to counter by placing human knowledge on a better foundation than that of impressions and ideas. For this reason, Reid was described as the Scottish Kant. As it happens, Kant believed his own grandfather to be an emigrant from northern Scotland, so he could himself have taken that moniker. However, Reid's antecedents were in no doubt. On his father's side he had clergy and officers of the court. On his mother's side there were a number of distinguished mathematicians.

With this family background, it is no surprise that he showed an appetite for study and intellectual life. Educated at home until the age of 10, he went to school in Kincardine, then briefly to Aberdeen Grammar before Marischal College. At that time, Marischal operated a regenting system in which each student was taught natural, moral and metaphysical philosophy by the same teacher throughout. For three years, Reid was instructed by George Turnbull, an important figure in the development of Scottish moral philosophy.

Turnbull could not have failed to influence Reid. His principles of moral philosophy, published in 1740, included particular claims that contain echoes in Reid's own philosophy. Turnbull maintains that judgements and reasoned conclusions in the moral sphere should be tested against common sense, which is fully adequate to determine their truth or falsity.

The idea that common sense provides a standard appears in Reid's own thoughts, although broadened and deepened. It became a term in Reid's philosophy and has been ascribed to his name ever since the publication in 1764 of his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. One school of thought was that common sense was literally another sense, with a sense faculty or organ, but this is not what Reid meant, Haldane argued. It was not a distinctive power of the intellect, nor the common consensus conceived of as a general opinion. It is reason itself, according to a set of principles, the negation of which is self contradictory or self-refuting.

Reid describes this as the first degree of reason, which judges a thing self-evident and puts it to use to refute Hume. Hume saw knowledge as rooted in experience, as did Reid, but in a much pared-down way of flickering impressions. On that basis, Hume concluded that our ordinary understanding of the world around us was a mental construction. That produced a scepticism, because we have no direct experience ourselves that there is a world of objects beyond our own faculties.

Reid saw very clearly the meaning of Hume's ideas, perhaps more clearly than anyone else. He was in fact the first philosopher to do so, as he was a reader of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, published in 1739 when Hume was just 27. A little over a decade later, Reid published his *Inquiry*. It was only this that awakened Kant from his 'dogmatic slumber.' It was a quarter of a century later that Reid published his rejoinder to Hume's philosophy, but he had been working on it for many years. But it began with readings of Hume once he was established as the minister in Newmachar, west of Aberdeen, in 1737. The years that followed brought marriage to his cousin Elizabeth and the start of a family. Two of his daughters were born either side of the 1745 rebellion. The same year, Elizabeth fell ill and Reid wrote a petitionary prayer on her behalf, asking for her life to be spared. She was 22 and her life was spared and she lived on until 1792. Reid was then 82 and wrote of the "bosom friend" to whom he had been married for 50 years. Between times, he had been publishing, had been elected to Regent Mastership at King's College, in Aberdeen, co-founded the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, gained a doctorate of divinity at Marischal College in 1752 and later become Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University in succession to Adam Smith.

At the same time, Reid sold to a publisher the text of a reflection on the scepticism of Hume's philosophy. Letters between them suggest a mutual respect, but Kant was not as kind. But while there is no evidence of Kant ever reading Hume's work, Ferrier had no such excuse to miss the point of Hume's philosophy.

In 1774, Reid published *A Brief Account of Aristotle's Logic*, his only publication while teaching at Glasgow. A month later, he wrote he was growing old and said he was going to retire. What he did, Haldane said, was set about amending his lectures for publication. He died in 1796, followed by Kant eight years later, so within a decade the two great anti-sceptical contemporaries of Hume had passed away. People have speculated on how they might be compared. Kant's influence has been the greater, Haldane said, and his imaginative powers were superior, yet his writing is more difficult and most obscure where it needs to be clear. Reid, by contrast, is wholly devoid of pretension and lays great store on clarity and brevity of expression. In that, his prose is the most modern of any 18th-Century writer.

So Reid on the art of philosophy? More needs to be said about Hume, Haldane said. The power of his (Hume's) thought resides in its ambiguity in that it suggests two philosophies. One is avowedly sceptical, which is what Kant and Ferrier were troubled by. In the sceptical system, certainties are dissolved into impressions and ideas. In the second, we return to a more mature common sense. Here nature is the beginning and end of things. So was Hume an unsettling radical or a reassuring conservative? One way of regarding Hume is as a certain kind of naturalist but how would he have responded to questioners? How would he have responded to a real thinking Aristotelian, which is what Reid was?

Reid was in the middle, with Kant and Ferrier at one end and Hume at the other. Ferrier is withering (about Reid) in the 19th Century and he was influential, which partly explains the neglect of Reid. But, Haldane argued, if we merely look at the mind scientifically, then we lose sight of what the mind is about, which is consciousness. Ferrier was over-ambitious in his attack on the commonsense tradition deriving from Reid, but, like Kant, alludes to the successors of Reid, who were second rate, rather than Reid himself. He also brings philosophy into ridicule, doing great damage. If we have to choose between a study of nature that is merely an observation of objects or this crazed attempt to define everything logically and scientifically, then philosophy will lose out.

The greatness of Reid is that he negotiates a course between these two extremes. He believes philosophy can yield substantive knowledge about the world and the cause of the world and the conduct that should regulate us. But it is achieved not by pure logic but by inquiry into the world and ourselves.

Scepticism is overcome by showing its impossibility. But if there is nothing to be discovered beyond what science engages with, there would be no scope for philosophy. But with no scope for philosophy, there would be no questioning of the directions in which science was being taken. What Reid offers us is a view of the nature of philosophy that raises it, with dignity, into an inquiry into nature, but without the absurd pretensions of thinking an inquiry into nature is some sort of special domain of facts. We are investigating what is familiar to us, and what is revealed to us in the wise and prudent judgement that philosophy aims to arrive at is supported by the principles of common sense.

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