

Thomas Reid & Common Sense Philosophy



Key Questions:

- What assumptions underlie Descartes' and Hume's theories?
- How else can we explain our knowledge of the external world?

Reid and Common Sense

- Reid is responding to the kinds of deep skepticism about the external world developed by philosophers like Descartes, Hume, John Locke, and George Berkeley
- Hume and Reid were contemporaries

Reid and Common Sense

- Reid believes that Descartes and Hume operate from some set of assumptions that lead inevitably to skepticism.
 - Descartes' skepticism leads me to believe that I can only be certain of my own existence
 - Hume's skepticism runs deeper: I can only be certain that *there are ideas and impressions*. I have no understanding of a mind independent of these ideas and impressions.

Reid and Common Sense

- But this is an unacceptable conclusion. So what are our options?
 - 1) Abandon philosophy entirely
 - “If Philosophy Contradicts herself, befools her votaries, and deprives then of every object worthy to be pursued or enjoyed, let her be sent back to the infernal regions from which she must have had her original.”
 - 2) Re-interpret our vision of *how philosophy must proceed*.

Reid and Common Sense

- Reid begins by noticing that there's a sense in which we can't help believing in the external world:
 - “Even those philosophers who have disowned the authority of our notions of an external world, confess, that they find themselves under a necessity of submitting to their power.”
- What could this tell us about how we should think about knowledge?

Reid and Common Sense

- “[I]f reason... will not be the servant of Common Sense, she must be her slave.”
 - Reid suggests that we appeal to *common sense* to justify our knowledge of the external world.
- But how can we justify knowledge in this way? Can we give *reasons* for taking common sense for granted?

Reid and Common Sense

- Reason 1:
 - Skeptical philosophers seem to assume that the external world could *only* be known to us by “the express image of our sensations”
 - This is the fundamental assumption made by empiricists—let’s call it ***E***.
 - ***But:*** There’s no reason to expect that our sensations should actually resemble anything in the external world.
 - Consider: We don’t confuse the pain that we associate with the tip of a sword with the tip of the sword *itself*.
 - Reid concludes that we should therefore reject ***E***.

Reid and Common Sense

- **Reason 2:**
 - Our concepts of extension, figure, and motion are not known to us either through sensation or reflection.
 - But we clearly *have* such concepts, and they have to come from *somewhere*.
 - Reid thus concludes that ***E*** must be false.

Reid and Common Sense

- Reason 3:
 - Skeptics don't doubt the existence of impressions and ideas. Even Hume thinks they exist.
 - But how do we *know* this? Certainly not by reason. And it can't be by empirical experience, either, because that would be circular.
 - So there must be some other faculty by which we acquire knowledge.

Reid and Common Sense

- What do we call this faculty?
 - Common sense!
 - Common sense is the faculty that reveals ***first principles*** to us. We use these to acquire knowledge about ourselves and the world.
 - “All reasoning must be from first principles no other reason can be given but this, that, by the constitution of our nature, we are under a necessity of assenting to them.” (71)

Reid and Common Sense

- Reid refuses to justify the existence of first principles:
 - “How or when I got such first principles, upon which I build all my reasoning, I know not; for I had them before I can remember: but I am sure they are parts of my constitution, and that I cannot throw them off.”
- **Can we really rely on common sense in this way to explain what we know?**

Reid and Common Sense

- Consider one of Reid's arguments:
 - P1) Our concepts of extension, figure, and motion are not known to us either through sensation or reflection.
 - P2) But we clearly *have* such concepts.
 - C) We have concepts that are not known through sensation or reflection.
- Skeptics like Hume are happy to grant P1, but they do something else with it entirely.

Reid and Common Sense

- Here's a different argument using the same premise:
 - P1) Concepts of extension, figure, and motion are not known to us either through sensation or reflection.
 - P2) We only have knowledge through sensation or reflection.
 - C) We have no concepts of extension, figure, or motion.

WHO SHOULD WE BELIEVE?