



Thomas Reid, Hume and Theology

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Thomas Reid (1710–96) was a believer in God whose philosophical response to Hume’s philosophical scepticisms and religious agnosticism presents, or contains, reasons of a kind for affirming theistic belief, as we’ll see. But what he wrote, and argued in his lectures, was presented with less of the explicit and up-front prominence given to ‘The question of God’ than that which we see in Hume.

Hume pursues his philosophical labours explicitly with the intention of establishing the nature and proper limits of human cognitive powers and so de-legitimizing what he mostly calls ‘superstition’. Where that word is most used it is plain that the superstitions to which Hume is most opposed are religious, or are pretentious philosophies offered by some as supportive of religion.¹ And Reid did not, as Hume did, publish works whose specific topic is the implications of his philosophical views for belief in God. Relatedly, as the passages from Hume which have just been referred to, as also many others, illustrate, Hume’s elegant witty writing does not obscure a spirit which in the opposing cause might be called evangelistic. ‘Superstition’, ‘absurdity’, ‘sophistry’ and ‘illusion’ are strong words whose hearers or readers will, if they are believers in God, feel got at every bit as much as a sinner being harangued in the church. Hume’s much touted (by his admirers) equable tolerant geniality of disposition has to be set against such writings as these, as also e.g. his written remark to his publisher about ‘that bigoted silly fellow Beattie’. Not that his dispositions, genial, edgy, or tetchy, have any bearing on the soundness or otherwise of his argument or his philosophy. Still it too often gets mentioned as if it might, or as if liking Hume might incline us to like what he says, as in ‘love me, love my dog’. Compare Reid, who in his use of humour and ridicule seems altogether more laid back, and, which is my present point, whose interest in religious convictions comes out, less than in Hume, as the motivating or focal concern. As

a consequence, if we are to see Reid's reasons for believing in God, we have to grasp the core points of his philosophical system and its central arguments and affirmations.

What Reid published, even when he comments on the longer history of philosophical work, is with a view to responding to Hume. So we need to remind ourselves about Hume's reasonings. In his first publication, the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738), Hume confesses that he experiences troubling despair. We'll look at: (i) Hume's reasons for despair, and then his own remedy for his condition, and then his direction of travel from that despair; (ii) Reid's ways of avoiding or, as necessary, dealing with the problems which led to Hume's gloomy plight and their implications for belief in God. Prompted by this we can reflect a little on possible differing ways of engaging in apologetics.



Hume's despair

Hume has shown, he says, that

[...] the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that [...] property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things, and are not able to accompany them with so sensible an impression, as we do those, which are more easy and natural.²

– i.e. abstract arguments, 'remote views of things', notably considerations of a profoundly philosophical sort. The conclusions of such reflection do not have such an impact on us as to make us actually set aside 'easy and natural' concerns which avoid reference to the abstruse. But while we can and do find attention commonly diverted from abstruse anxieties by the everyday, we're bound to have – and quite properly bound to have – something like a troubled conscience about it; this particularly because the undealt-with theoretical issues raise seemingly unanswerable questions about the presumed nature, and even the very existence, of the everyday world.

In this most autobiographical portion of his philosophical writings he seems to be trying to find a third way between the mind of the ordinary person in the street with her everyday beliefs, concerns and pleasures, and that of the rigorous rather sceptical philosopher who has exposed clear error and groundlessness in all or much of the ordinary person's less reflective take on the world. He wishes to avoid mere mental oscillation according to circumstance or the mood between these two (logically incompatible) ways of thinking, and being. Because it's impossible to live out one's life in practice in a way that is consistent with being the sceptical philosopher of the understanding, the stance or the path of the ordinary person in the street seems, practically speaking, the only option. But Hume insists that that really won't do. For one thing, it's 'almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of the objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action'.³ For another, if we could rest there in the narrow circle of the matters of everyday concern to us all, and according to some principle exclude reflection of that more troubling sceptical kind which undermines the very credentials of our understanding, that principle would exclude science and all philosophy. For yet another, in our reading and experience we meet disputes about morality, the principles of good government, what's reasonable and what's folly, what's worthy of belief and what isn't; and Hume, for his part, is 'uneasy' to think, for example, that he decides 'concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed'.⁴ He desires, in facing up to his dilemma, to help in the better resolution of such disputes. (Though he finds no fault in those, like the English country gentleman, to whom philosophical issues do not occur.) Human beings do often feel the need of guidance and it is not good for them to be led by superstition and better that they should turn to some sort of modest philosophy – modest in comparison with the unconstrained, unprincipled excesses of superstition.

One problem with all this is: on what principle does Hume think he can exclude the seriously worrisome critical aspects of his philosophy that have reduced him to black despair while retaining a beneficent fumigating scepticism which will free us from the extravagances of 'superstition' and the like? The principle seems so far to be little more

than that our ordinary natural beliefs about the world should not be too much disturbed, nor the even tenor of our minds scandalized by deep anxieties. Surely, though, whether the conclusion of a course of reflection or reasoning is found troubling or not is not a good ground for demarcating the good philosophy from the bad. A proper criterion for good philosophy will differentiate between what reliably leads us to truth, and what does not. Whether our conclusions then leave us calm or troubled is irrelevant to their value as philosophy.

Recently, in the sports pages of *The Times* of 16th November 2011, I read an allusion to Hume's angst. Matthew Syed is writing about sportspeople who have been troubled people, even suicidal. He thinks that an obsessive perfectionism is the reason, and that if one has a 'hinterland' one can relax into and in it. He writes,

'Sport has to be the most important thing in the world if you are going to be the best', Martina Navratilova once told me, 'But it also, at times, has to be the least important thing.' Hume, the great British [sic] philosopher, made the same point. As a thinker he reached some dark conclusions about the human condition, but (unlike, say, Beckett or Nietzsche) never allowed them to affect his daily life. Instead he forgot about them. 'I dine, I play a game of backgammon and am merry with my friends; and when, after three or four hours of amusement, I return to my philosophical speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further.'⁵

However, the problem for Hume is not that he is obsessional about being as good a philosopher as he, or anyone, can be. The problem is that if philosophical reasoning compellingly leads us to conclude that we can know very little even, or especially, about things fundamental to our conception of our situation and nature, and about many things we had thought were obviously true, we cannot just turn away from that to diversions because that is too unsettling or uncomfortable for us. If the mood of anxiety or despair is alone the problem, a psychological solution (distracting social life and good food) may serve. Hume is no doubt sensible to leave off for a bit from reckoning

with these conclusions and grappling with them, leaving off so that he doesn't become too despairing, losing his wits even. But what if it only makes defensible sense to carry on our ordinary, as it seems not specially philosophical, lives at all if we can deal with and see off those philosophical worries, defeat the reasoning which concludes that what we take to be the ordinary world of common experience isn't at all what it seems – maybe even isn't at all, doesn't exist. Surely we cannot just leave them, stop worrying about them and turn to enjoy ordinary life. Turning to engage in and enjoy ordinary life is hardly possible with intellectual integrity when we have it on the authority of philosophical reason that we have no justification for thinking that there are physical objects, that we are persisting selves, and that these are other sentient selves. These were conclusions, with others as troubling, to which Hume has come and to which he has to come to terms.

Let's now see how he came to the (to him) most troubling features of his view of our situation. Hume begins by talking of the contents of our awareness: our 'perceptions', as he calls them (meaning to include not only the experiences we associate with the eyes, but those which we attribute to other senses, and also with the eye of the mind: reveries, dreams and so on), and our impressions or ideas. These are our subjective awarenesses; they exist insofar as we have them in consciousness. And it is these, and only these which we are immediately aware of. Impressions or ideas, then, are the contents of our conscious minds, the immediate content of consciousness. Whether our ideas do or do not provide a link to a world beyond the mind, we can still consider and contemplate them. Further we can recognise properties of the ideas and relations, resemblances or differences between these ideas. The thought-model is a sort of inner perception – the eye of the mind – by which we are aware of ideas. By introspection we are aware of ideas, while reason, more than mere awareness of ideas, recognises, intuitively properties of ideas and relations between ideas. Intuition gives us to see/notice/recognise properties and to grasp relations between them, logical and non-logical relations.

Hume, then, follows a lead given by Locke and Berkeley in holding that we can legitimately claim to know only what we can establish by the use of introspection and intuition (i.e., by inferring from the

contents of our awareness): impressions and ideas. There may be any number of further deductive, inferential, steps deriving from the basic scrutiny of ideas; and knowledge will be built on ideas and reason's scrutiny of them. Thus, for Hume, knowledge, like an edifice, will have to rest on, depend on, the results of our scrutiny of our ideas. The foundational propositions for the structure of knowledge express truths about the ideas we are aware of, truths recognized by reason as it contemplates these ideas.

Locke and Berkeley also thought this way, as remarked. One big attraction of it is its seeming to secure certainty for knowledge. Whether, in order to know you do have to be certain is a moot point; indeed I think that what certainty is is open to discussion. But it has seemed clear to many that what we're aware of introspectively in our conscious awareness is something we can be certain of. Suppose we have before our minds, whether by conjuring up the idea or receiving it somehow what seems to us a yellowish patch or object. We may not know exactly what to call it: gamboge, ochre, or what. But we know how it seems to us, even if we are not good at describing it, and that must be how it does seem to us. So there is certainty there. And if by introspection and/or reason we recognise that it is coloured and extended, or that it has a weight if it is an object, these sorts of judgements seem certain, certainly true. This sort of foundationalist approach ('classical modern foundationalist' in the jargon) requires that our knowledge, the structure of knowledge rests on our grasp – by reason scrutinizing the ideas we've received – of basic propositions. These are propositions whose truth we see by the eye of reason as we are aware of our given ideas. Hume's angst overcomes him because so little can in fact be established as certain knowledge by this means. His worry extends over a huge range of areas where we just take it that we have knowledge. We'll consider some obvious cases.

There's our knowledge (as we suppose it to be) of a world of physical objects which exist, we suppose, quite independently of our minds' awareness of them: tables and chairs, apples and planets, our own bodies, and so forth. These sorts of things constitute what in this context is called 'the external world'. But, now, if all that we're directly aware of are ideas, mind-dependent mental entities, how can we gain access to, knowledge of, this alleged world of independent

things, the external world? According to the accounts of Locke and especially Hume, we seem to be on one side of, and viewing, a passing show of ideas, but we are never able to access whatever, if anything, might lie on the other side of what is in effect a barrier of ideas. On this construction of our situation we cannot get at an external world, if indeed there is one.

Berkeley thought that we don't get at it, because actually there isn't an external world, and that we know only ideas; what we think of as physical objects are ideas which are given to us structured in certain sorts of consistent ways by God. God gives us these ideas ordered so that they constitute for us the world we experience. No need for an 'external world' on that view.

Hume cannot follow Berkeley because, for one (big) thing, we can't on the basis of the ideas we experience grasp a concept of a self or mind, nor, therefore affirm the existence of continuing persisting selves or minds – our mind, other minds or God's mind. When we look into our idea stock we find ideas of heat or cold, light or shade, pain or pleasure, but no such idea as that of a self nor our own self. There are bundles of ideas, ideas of all sorts; the member ideas of these bundles change as time passes. So such bundles do not constitute any persisting mind or self. Since we must have an idea (in Hume's sense) of anything about which we can meaningfully speak, belief in personal identity lacks rational basis.

More: If the accessibility of any objects in the supposed external world 'out there' at present is deeply problematic, how much more so is the accessibility of an external world, or anything, in the past? Its pastness adds another barrier between us and it as distinct from and in addition to its being external: Hume cannot see how to distinguish ideas of the past and those of the present experience except in respect of 'force and vivacity'. And that surely does not give us a reliable basis for distinguishing remembered ideas from imagined ideas, which on Hume's view also lack force and vivacity as compared with ideas of the actual.

Then, causation is an important conception for our understanding of how the world works. A great proportion of human effort to understand the world is devoted to our identifying the causes of things or events. Science of one sort or another is into causes. Hume

finds this, too, deeply problematic. We don't have any basis in our experience of A and B when we say that A caused B: there is nothing experienced when B follows A in addition to the sequence of A, then B – nothing to justify our saying A caused B. And it is not a logical connection which, if it were so, might be grasped by intuition. There is no reason, then, to attribute a causal link between events. Attributing causal links is, thus, problematic.

Surveying the wreckage of what we thought to be the edifice of our knowledge, Hume despairs:

The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.⁶

When he manages to put this mood of hopelessness behind, he returns, the wings of intellectual pretension clipped, to consider the operations of human minds; he is aiming to construct a third way between overconfidence about our cognitive powers (which he has now exposed and demolished) and black hopelessness. He will describe how our minds actually work as we acquire the beliefs that we do form and adopt. He believes that by accurate description of the workings of the mind we can still discover what the proper limits of our understanding are, so as to avoid overreaching, and to avoid superstition. With a modest scepticism we shall eliminate sophistry, illusion and superstition while affirming what we may properly affirm given the limitations of our powers of understanding. Describing precisely how our minds actually work, how our beliefs come about,

will, he hopes, give us reasons to determine what sorts of conclusions our intellectual capacities are fitted to reach. We can see how this proposed third way works as Hume employs it in one of the several problematic topics to which he returns. Let's take causation, causality as our example.

When we say A causes B, we're aware of A and (then) B; but what justifies our claiming that there is connection between A's occurrence and (then) B's? We have no experienced idea of a link between A and B (so there's even a question of what we can mean by 'cause'). So far as reason goes, any event of its kind may be caused so far as reason goes – that is in respect of whatever can be deduced from the very natures of the events involved – by any kind of event. Reason, scrutinizing the idea of some thing or an event in itself recognises no necessity that it can be caused in this way, or that. Further, and again so far as reason goes, an event may not have a cause at all. So far as reason (as it scrutinizes ideas) goes, the very idea of some event is consistent in reason with any kind of cause, or none whatever. Ideas are distinct, and there's nothing in the idea, say, of a flame that necessitates the flame's causing heat and pain. Nor, so far as its idea goes, does heat have to come about in some particular way. On foundationalist grounds, it's hard to see how beliefs about causal connections can be justified when the necessity of connections between ideas is lacking. Hume's answer is that experience leads us to connect causes and effects according to the way in which we are habituated to think, habituated by experience of ideas found together in certain ways. The habitual experience of the successions of ideas, together with our mind's tendency to associate ideas thus habitually encountered, gives us to relate causes and effects. We put in the connection between cause and effect.

Analogous moves are made by Hume to deal with his range of problems, e.g. over belief in a world of objects external to our minds and over belief in personal identity. The subjective quality of our experiences, their force and vivacity (compared with mere fantasizing or, as we would put it, imagination) will serve to trigger our belief-forming disposition so that we judge there to be physical objects affecting us. Again the contents of what we judge to be our mind are held together in what we are aware of as our persisting self by a species of association of ideas. Hence, our beliefs in causal connections,

physical objects and in our ‘selves’ are generated by the ways our minds deal with ideas which they come to have. Our minds function in those ways, and we cannot help but believe in these ways.

Hume goes on to maintain that, given this third way, there remain sceptical implications for some areas of supposed knowledge, or supposedly justifiable belief. Notably, given Hume’s account of our minds’ workings, knowledge or well-grounded beliefs about God or the world to come are beyond us. Returning to arguments employing the concept of causation, as these are advanced to establish the existence of God, Hume points out that on his account we can form beliefs about what causes what (or what will be causes what) only on the basis of, as a consequence of, relevant experience. Recall the analysis of causal judgements to the effect that experience, habitual experience, is formative and needed for us to arrive at causal conclusions. Hume’s well-known objections to causal arguments for God’s existence (like the ‘first cause’ argument) are to the effect that we lack the necessary relevant experience of causal connections where God is experienced as a cause. The Humean critique of design arguments makes an analogous point: we have insufficient relevant experience, of worlds being caused, to have a properly founded view on the matter; and, Hume tells us, such distantly relevant experience as we do have is more varied in its guidance than to justify a robust theistic conclusion.



Reid’s response

What does Thomas Reid make of Hume’s reasonings? First, he rejects the ‘Way of Ideas’, which holds ideas to be the only immediate objects of experience, awareness or thought. Hume does belong squarely in the Way of Ideas tradition re-vivified by Descartes (but going much further back). Reid sees this starting point as inevitably leading to scepticism, first about the character, and even the existence, of the material world beyond, and independent of, our minds. Then also scepticism about the past follows at once from adoption of the Way of Ideas – the Ideal (in one sense anyway) Philosophy. But why on earth adopt *this* starting point as just obviously appropriate? Reid says this about Descartes, the giver of new momentum along the Way of Ideas:

It might have been expected, that a Philosopher who was so cautious as not to take his own existence for granted, without proof, would not have taken it for granted, without proof, that every thing he perceived was only ideas in his own mind.⁷

Why did people step out on the Way of Ideas so readily, uncritically, and with dire consequences? Partly it has been because of a common manner of speech. Instead of saying that John is thinking about his house or perhaps that he wants to improve it, it's said 'John has an idea of his house'; 'Jane saw the tumbler' can be expressed as 'Jane had a view (or a glimpse) of the tumbler'. So to have an idea of something is not merely, as it should be, engaging in an operation of the mind; it becomes having a thing there in the mind. 'Having something in the mind' is now being taken quite literally. In such ways, ideas or glimpses come to be treated as entities. But the use of the noun 'idea' misleads us if it inclines us to think that when John is simply thinking about the actual house there are then three things: (i) John; (ii) an idea; (iii) John's house.

Of course, the Way of Ideas philosophers have offered arguments for this approach, and Reid confronts these. There is an argument from the relativity of perception. It goes like this: what I see when I look at a 10p coin directly from above is round; what I see from an angle, as I move to one side is elliptical; and thirdly, what I see with my eyes level with the coin when only the edge is visible, is a short, thick, line. But the coin is not all of these, round, elliptical and linear. So that which I see in each of these cases is not the coin. What I see is something in the mind.

But Reid asks: Why not say I am seeing the coin each time but that it looks different from different angles? By such reasonings (there are several arguments) Reid rejects the Way of Ideas and asserts that when we see things, like apples or tables, usually we see them directly: we do see apples and tables rather than ideas or images of them (leaving aside photographic images, drawings or mirror images).

Then, further, he complains that Hume's foundationalism (inherited, as we saw) is arbitrary in accepting two, and only these, sorts of belief-formation as being trustworthy. For any belief of ours to be rational on Hume's view they have to be prompted and generated by

either or both of these belief-forming processes or quasi-mechanisms: introspection and intuition. Reid asks: Why favour these two modes of belief-production while rejecting others such as our beliefs about mind-independent physical things as seen by us, or our beliefs about past events which we remember, or our beliefs in causal links – as well as the several other sorts of belief-producing disposition whose dubiousness in Hume’s eyes gives rise to scepticism about them and the beliefs they generate? The favour shown, to these two modes only, seems arbitrary. The Humean sceptic says that we need to find a reason to trust, say perception and/or memory, before we accept the beliefs they generate, but that we can and should accept introspection and intuition without any need for validation. However, Reid points out, there has not been shown to be any relevant difference between the favoured, trusted ways to belief and those which are held to be unreliable, standing in need of vindication, justly under suspicion. Consider introspection: I can easily get wrong what I seem to be aware of by inattention, perhaps by having my expectations about what I should be seeing so strongly misdirected by what I have been told that I mis-see. Intuition, rational awareness can similarly prove fallible: when we rely on rational intuitive powers rather than calculators to do arithmetic we can get the answer wrong; and philosophers’ paradoxes raise grounds for lack of trust in our ‘rational’ intuitions. Infallibility does not characterise and so does not mark off introspection or intuition from our other belief-forming mechanisms as distinctly wholly reliable.

Reid’s contention, then, is that as we humans are constituted we find ourselves with belief-forming dispositions. None of these is infallible; but there is a presumption in their favour such that unless we have some reason to suspect that they may have misled us, or that we have been careless in our use of them, we should accept beliefs formed by them. So we may have formed false beliefs due to inattention, or the influence of other people as suggested above. Or again, if the conditions in which they’re used are inappropriate (poor light may undermine the worth of perceptual beliefs), we may have reason to doubt our powers of vision. Lacking such reasons for doubt, we should exercise a presumption in favour of the belief-forming mechanisms with which we’re endowed.

It isn't, on Reid's view, that we can provide evidence or grounds for trusting in the reliability of any of these belief-forming dispositions. If we try to do that the effort will turn out to be futilely circular. Take an example, say memory. If we wish to establish the credentials of the memory-belief-forming disposition, how can we check out its reliability? We can only check out the correctness of some memory by appealing to other memories. If we wonder whether we misbehaved at Avril's birthday party at Crieff we might check a diary or ask someone who was there. But we have to remember that we wrote a diary entry, that this is our diary, that someone else was there then, and that their memory is trustworthy. The same sort of circularity is inevitable whenever we might try to check the trustworthiness of our other belief-forming dispositions. So, take perception: Suppose we call into question the accuracy of our perception that that which we see is a statue of a man with a top hat, how can we check this matter out without using and in some way relying upon perception? We can't. Reid points out that there is no non-circular justification for each of the modes of belief-formation.

Corresponding to these modes of belief-formation are what Reid calls 'Principles'. Various, these are the 'Principles taken for granted', 'First Principles', or 'Principles of Common Sense', and they each register trust in one of our belief-forming practices. They are Principles descriptive of our cognitive constitution. They have three marks:

- (i) they are universal among humankind – apart from lunatics and excessively sceptical philosophers;
- (ii) they are not grounded in any reasoning and they cannot be supported in such ways;
- (iii) they are part of the constitution of the mind itself; consequently no-one can sustain resistance against them.

Principles of this sort speak of: our capacity to perceive objects in an independently (of our minds) existing world; of our remembering actual occurrences; that we converse with others of our fellows in whom are life and intelligence; that in the course of nature what will be will probably resemble what has been in similar circumstances.

Several modern Christian apologists have taken up Reid's treatment of our human situation in matters cognitive, and have made use of his conception of distinct belief-forming dispositions whose reliability cannot be non-circularly assessed or established.

William Alston's book on ordinary sense perception⁸ offers a Reidian case in that field, while his much fuller *Perceiving God*⁹ maintains that we have (i.e. have been given) a belief-forming disposition by which in appropriate circumstances we perceive (though not with our eyes, particularly) God. Alvin Plantinga and, perhaps most congenially to Presbyterians, Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale, in *Divine Discourse*¹⁰ (where the imagery of God who speaks is central) have been advancing, with grateful acknowledgement to him, such Reid-inspired approaches to knowledge of God.

Alston maintains that a propensity to form beliefs about God, even specifically Christian beliefs, is a mode of belief-formation, a disposition which is activated when the circumstances are right – i.e. when we have certain sorts of experience in appropriate circumstances and there are no counter-considerations (drugs, madness, etc.) to raise doubt about the truth of the belief thus formed. Such beliefs will be no less defensible and respectable than our perceptual beliefs about the physical world, or our memory beliefs about the remembered past.

On the major topic of causation, Reid has important things to say which take their point of departure from Hume's discussion of causation. They are not (in the way of much of what he says) a countering or even a ridiculing of Hume. With regard to ridicule, Reid had said that someone who really does believe as the philosophical sceptic prescribes (i.e. that maybe there are no physical objects, no past, no sentient me, or you) is actually mad. The philosophical sceptic himself only *pretends* to think that he can know as little as he says he can know. Reid says that you cannot argue with the thoroughgoing philosophical sceptic because he allows no firm ground for anyone to argue from – but you can ridicule him. And any person who really does believe the sceptic's teaching needs treatment. But back to causation.

Reid says that we acquire the concept of one thing's having the power to affect another from our experience of our exerting power when by our volition and deliberate agency we bring some specific thing about. Merely inanimate material things cannot have power

to bring about specific effects. Not only is he making a point about how we can conceive of causal power, i.e. as involving a will, but he is picking up Hume's celebrated insistence that when we scrutinize what we are aware of when we say that one material thing (or event involving material things) causes another, there is no idea of a necessary connection between so-called cause and its effect – there is no idea of power detectable in such a causing, power such that the effect must follow. In fact, so Reid contends, only a possessor of a will can be conceived of by us as having causal power. The only experience we have of power's exertion and application is in our bringing things about by the exertion of our will. That is where our conception of power comes from, where it can only come from.

Now, most changes in the world are not brought about by our exerting our will. We have to attribute most of the power which effects physical change in the world to God. Causal connections require power effectively directed towards a specific outcome (which we incline to see as necessitated). At this point, God enters explicitly and essentially (as Reid sees it) into Reid's system. But to say only that about God's role in Reid would be to leave out what Wolterstorff (who is probably Reid's most penetrating and appreciative advocate) calls Reid's 'epistemological piety'. What's in mind here is that our human situation in respect of our possession of knowledge has been revealed by Reid as one calling for humility, gratitude and trust. Humility because we know so little about how our mind gains its awareness of the world of objects: the objects themselves do not act upon us (lacking power as they do). That ignorance is a particular sort of case of the general ignorance as to why when one sort of thing happens another specific sort of thing generally follows in accordance with a recurring pattern. Why that pattern, and perhaps why any pattern? An explanation of sorts in terms of God's power and benevolence may help with the latter question – why any pattern at all? Why not a chaos rather than a cosmos?

Applying the above to belief formation: we do not understand in any deeper ways than noting recurring patterns why in particular our belief-forming mechanisms – those causal events – are as they are. Nor do we understand why we have these (so we have memory which gives us access to beliefs about the past: why do we not have

a capacity to form beliefs about the future?). Humility is proper for those philosophers who have thought they could base all beliefs on introspection and intuition. But these (foundationalist) philosophers cannot justify their believing in any such way. They must trust, like everyone else. Gratitude is called for because our belief-forming dispositions or ‘mechanisms’ are generally reliable when appropriately employed. We can trust them. All of us, philosophers specially included, have to trust our belief-forming dispositions. That is a thumbnail sketch of epistemological piety.

What is the relevance of this ‘epistemological piety’ to apologetics understood as giving reasons for belief in God? Reid clearly is a believer in God; but he is not in the writings we’ve considered offering arguments whose main aim is to give reasons for believing that there is a God. Nor does he address Hume’s arguments specifically against ‘superstition’.

Still, doesn’t what we’ve just seen about the appropriateness of the Judaeo-Christian teaching, which otherwise commends humility, gratitude and trust, to what we have discovered of our epistemic situation – doesn’t this constitute a modest measure of support and maybe confirmation for Judaeo-Christianity? What I have in mind is this: Judaeo-Christianity strongly commends humility, gratitude and trust supposedly by plain injunction, and as implications of other things God is, or has said or done, or maybe both these ways (straight commands, and in response to God’s salvific action). That being so, if we now find that our environment and our relation to it through our cognitive endowments call for these virtues, does that not count as a kind of support (far short of clinching proof) for Judaeo-Christian teaching?

Then what Reid says about power may, most easily of the Reidian ideas we’ve touched upon, be transposed into a reason for belief in God. The argument would go like this: we acquire the idea from our own experience of intentionally bringing things about. It is common ground between Reid and Hume that when we are acquainted with what we reckon to be causal connections (as contrasted with merely coincidental sequences of events) we have no awareness, no ‘idea’ of anything other than that one kind of event follows another. Hume seems to hold, roughly, that our concept of a cause requires only the

facts: (i) of the sequence of events conforming to a common pattern in experience; and (ii) our having become habituated to, or by, that recurring sequence so as to expect it. (Some recent scholars suggest that Hume thought that there may well be a connection, but quite unknown to us, between a cause and its effect.)

Reid apparently says that there is surely more than expectation-creating recurrence in causation: power to secure the effect is employed. And the only power of which we have acquired a relevant concept is the power of an agent; and a god is the only agent who could have the required power or powers in causal process. Perhaps, cautiously, Reid may be ready to say only that while power at work in causal transactions remains a mystery, God would constitute a possible explanation. There could be a debate over whether appealing to a god's power as offering a possible explanation of what cannot otherwise be explained counts as a good reason to believe in God. Perhaps, as Robert Adams says in another connection, 'it is a theoretical advantage of theistic belief that it provides attractive explanations of things otherwise hard to explain'.¹¹

Reid did believe in a causal argument for the existence of God, depending rather on the need for some causal explanation of the world's existence than on anyone's experience of worlds having been preceded by a god's action. Accordingly the part of Hume's critique of causal arguments for theism which will affect Reid's view is Hume's contentions that we can suppose an event or object to have had no cause at all, and do not require to propose any cause for the world. Reid can reply that what we can suppose or imagine may not be what our belief-forming powers lead us to believe. We can imagine fairy-godmothers turning mice into horses, after all. We do not believe that there are or have been causeless events. If our belief-forming dispositions in respect of causation are to be trusted along with our belief-forming powers which conform to standards required for the Principles of Common Sense, then a causal argument for God has value.

Notes

- ¹ See the First Enquiry, Section One, para 6, second half, or the famous concluding paragraph of that Enquiry at the end of Section Twelve, or indeed the earlier concluding section of Book One of the *Treatise*, where the principal species of that superstition which is to be undermined is in places explicitly religious.
- ² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge; 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch; Oxford: Clarendon, 1978 [1739–40]), 267 f.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 271.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Citing Hume, *Treatise*, 269.
- ⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, 268 f.
- ⁷ Thomas Reid, “Of the Powers We Have by Means of Our External Senses” in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (ed. D. R. Brookes; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002 [1785]), 126.
- ⁸ William P. Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- ⁹ William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- ¹⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ¹¹ Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 218.