Reid – Direct Realism

1. The skeptical project: Reid sketches the progression of the skeptical project of the modern era, beginning with Descartes and ending with David Hume (a contemporary of Reid). Briefly:

   • Descartes admitted that nothing is certain, except that thinking exists (including sensation). Yet, Descartes still believed that bodies exist as we perceive them.
   • Locke notices that the sensations corresponding to the secondary qualities cannot exist in the bodies themselves, but only in minds. Yet, bodies still have primary qualities as we perceive them.
   • Berkeley adds that the sensations corresponding to PRIMARY qualities ALSO cannot exist in the bodies themselves, but only in minds. So, material bodies are reduced to an unintelligible nothingness.
   • Hume notes that, using Berkeley’s reasoning, we should not stop at skepticism about material bodies. Rather, we should be skeptical about other MINDS as well. Yet, the existence of our OWN mind is still certain.

This progression toward complete skepticism is a necessary result of the Cartesian system, Reid says. But, why stop there? The next step is likely to be skepticism even of our own minds!

2. Metaphysical lunacy: Reid charges the entire skeptical project as being the result of “metaphysical lunacy.” The existence of the external world seems to be one of the most certain things, and yet philosophers, in all their wisdom, have rejected it. Reid writes, “If this is wisdom, let me be deluded with the vulgar!” Reid encourages the reader to use some common sense. Common sense tells us that the existence of the external world is one of the most certain things. Any philosophy that rejects this must be seriously flawed.

3. Of impressions and ideas: The problem begins with Descartes and Locke

   1. The problem: ideas: The reason philosophers fell into skepticism was because they took to be one of their starting principles that all we ever perceive are ideas—as if all that man ever thinks about are the operations of his own mind!

   2. The solution: realism: Reid argues that we perceive more than ideas only. Consider pain, for instance: If I feel pain in my toe, this is not merely the perception of the ideas “pain” and “toe.” Rather, the painful sensation points BEYOND itself, and is accompanied by a BELIEF in the existence of the toe being harmed. This belief doesn’t occur by comparing ideas, as Locke suggested. It is a natural and irresistible accompaniment of perception.
It is said that things like extension, shape, and motion are either ideas (in which case they do not exist in material bodies, but only in the mind), or they are not (in which case they are unperceivable and unintelligible). But, this dilemma is erroneous. For, we DO recognize what qualities of bodies are, and—as Locke and Berkeley pointed out—we DO recognize that the things in bodies are not exactly like the things in our minds. But, how could we ever recognize these things about bodies unless we were somehow perceiving them directly? Reid writes,

Our conceptions of extension, shape and motion are not ideas of sensation or of reflection, so the mere fact that they exist overturns the whole ideal system by which the material world has been tried and condemned. ... The conception of extension, motion and the other attributes of matter can’t be the effect of error or prejudice; it must be the work of nature. And the power or faculty through which we acquire those conceptions must be something other than any power of the human mind that has been explained by philosophers up to now, because it isn’t sensation and isn’t reflection.

It MUST be the case that we perceive more than the ideas of sensation and the ideas of reflection, because we DO in fact have knowledge that neither of these two faculties could ever give us. Reid admits that these faculties may be the things that make us AWARE of the external world, but they are not the faculties by which we judge or perceive the existence of that world. He writes,

It may be true that those sensations first brought the material world to our knowledge; it may be true that it seldom or never appears except in company with them; but still they are as unalike as the passion of anger is unlike the facial expressions that go with it.

Here are the seeds of a view called “Direct Realism.” This is the view that, the things that we perceive are not ideas. The things we perceive are the objects themselves. Ideas are merely the MEANS by which we perceive the external world. The sensation of “pain” and “toe” is merely WHAT IT FEELS LIKE to be perceiving pain in my (external, material) toe.

4. Common sense: The truth is that we simply CAN’T AVOID believing in the existence of an external world. Even the most extreme skeptics must ACT AS IF there is an external world. So, Reid writes, “Since we can’t get rid of the vulgar notion of and belief in an external world, let us reconcile our reason to it as well as we can.” In short, in order to reconcile philosophy with our unavoidable common sense notions, we must take the existence of the external world as a GIVEN. It must be one of our STARTING principles—not something to be proven.