

History of Philosophy

50 Scottish Realism

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Abstract:

The provided text outlines the philosophy of **Scottish Realism**, primarily through the teachings of **Thomas Reid** as a response to the skepticism of **David Hume**. Reid champion's "**common sense**" and **direct realism**, arguing that humans have an immediate awareness of the external world rather than just internal mental representations. This perspective relies on **natural beliefs**—spontaneous, universal inclinations implanted by a **Creator** that allow us to perceive truth, cause-and-effect, and moral principles. In contrast to Hume's empiricism, Reid asserts that **human agency** and **moral judgment** are rooted in the intrinsic nature of the human constitution rather than mere habit. The source highlights how this movement influenced later thinkers like **Immanuel Kant** and **G.E. Moore**, bridging Enlightenment thought with modern realism. These lectures emphasize that while the Scottish realists acknowledged the limits of reason, they maintained a **foundationalist** approach built upon these divinely ordained natural certainties.

Briefing Document:

Scottish Realism: Epistemology, Agency, and the Common Sense Tradition

Executive Summary

Scottish Realism, primarily represented by Thomas Reid and the 18th-century Edinburgh circle, emerged as a robust philosophical response to the skepticism of David Hume and the idealism of George Berkeley. The movement's central contribution is the rejection of the "Theory of Ideas"—the representationalist view that the mind only perceives internal mental images—in favor of **Direct Realism** (or Presentationalism). Reid argued that human beings possess "common sense" or

"natural beliefs," which are spontaneous, God-given proclivities that allow for direct awareness of an independent material reality.

Key takeaways include:

- **Direct Realism:** The assertion that physical objects and their qualities are directly presented to consciousness, rather than represented by intermediate mental "ideas."
- **Natural Beliefs:** Foundations of knowledge rooted in the intrinsic nature of human constitution, providing a theistic justification for trusting cognitive faculties.
- **Agency Causation:** A defense of human freedom based on the direct awareness of one's power to initiate events, contrasting with Humean determinism.
- **Foundationalist Ethics:** The treatment of ethics as a science based on self-evident first principles and the "law of God written in the heart."

The Critique of Representationalism

The Scottish Realists targeted the "Theory of Ideas" prevalent in the tradition of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. This theory posited that the immediate objects of mental awareness are merely ideas within the mind, creating a dualism between the idea and the external object.

From Representationalism to Direct Realism

Reid dismissed the representational view as a "fiction created by philosophers." He argued that this tradition falsifies human experience.

- **Representational View (Epistemological Dualism):** Awareness is limited to internal ideas; the external world is inferred (or, in Berkeley's case, denied).
- **Direct Realism (Epistemological Monism):** Objects are directly presented to consciousness. Awareness is of the object itself, not a mental surrogate.

The Role of Ideas as Signs

Reid did not completely discard the concept of ideas but redefined their function.

- **Ideas as Signs:** In normal perception, ideas act as signs that trigger a spontaneous affirmation of the object's existence. They are not intermediaries but part of a "two-fold mental act" involving immediate apprehension.
- **Accounting for Error:** Ideas explain illusions, misconceptions, and memory. In these cases, the mind is aware of an idea (a mental state) that does not correspond to a present reality.

Common Sense and Natural Beliefs

Reid's "Common Sense" is not merely popular opinion but refers to the **intrinsic nature of human beings**. He preferred the term "natural belief" to describe the analytic assumptions necessary for human life.

Feature	Description
Origin	Rooted in the human constitution; spontaneous and non-voluntary.
Justification	Theistic; God designed human nature so that we would arrive at these beliefs in the course of nature.
Function	Acts as the "foundational truths" from which deductions are made.
Infallibility	Not rationally indubitable, but psychologically necessary—one cannot help but believe them.

Comparison with David Hume

While Hume also recognized "natural beliefs" (e.g., animals behaving as if they have beliefs), Reid differed in his justification:

- **Hume:** Beliefs arise from the "psychology of belief" and habit, with no underlying soul substance or divine guarantee.
- **Reid:** Beliefs are "necessary truths" because God made us to perceive the world accurately.

Epistemological Foundations and Causality

Reid operated as a foundationalist, asserting that all reasoning begins with first principles derived from natural beliefs.

1. **Laws of Logic and Mathematics:** Beliefs in the axioms of logic and Euclidean geometry are foundational.
2. **Material Existence:** Belief in the independent existence of material things and their qualities (e.g., roses actually smell; ideas do not).
3. **Causal Connections:** Contra Hume, Reid argued that we have a direct awareness of causal power, particularly through our own bodily feelings and the exercise of will (e.g., feeling the "causal force" when lifting a heavy weight).
4. **Memory and Freedom:** We naturally believe in the reliability of memory and the reality of human liberty because they are rooted in our "proclivities."

Human Agency and Freedom

Reid strongly opposed Humean determinism (necessitarianism). He distinguished between **physical causation** and **agency causation**.

- **Direct Awareness of Power:** Humans have immediate awareness that they possess the power to initiate events. This "causal agency" is an unavoidable natural belief.
- **Choice vs. Reasoning:** While reasoning and motives might be influenced by antecedent factors, the "choice" between alternative motives remains free.
- **Sufficient Reason:** Reid argued that human agency itself is a "sufficient cause" for an action, negating the need for a chain of prior physical causes.

Ethical Science and First Principles

Reid viewed ethics as a science based on self-evident first principles, paralleling the structure of mathematics.

- **The Law of the Heart:** Conscience is viewed as the "law of God written in the heart," growing from an "imperceptible seed" planted by the Creator.
- **Reason and Feeling:** Reid argued that moral approval requires both feeling (emotive) and judgment (rational). Unlike Hume's subjectivism, Reid maintained that moral judgments are based on intuitive principles regarding right and wrong.

- **First Principles of Ethics:** Examples include the belief that "some things merit approval, others merit blame" and the obligation to "prefer a greater good to a lesser."

Historical Influence and Legacy

Scottish Realism exerted a significant influence on subsequent philosophical and theological traditions:

- **The Enlightenment Circle:** Part of the "Edinburgh circle," it provided a counter-narrative to British Empiricism.
- **Princeton Realism:** The movement had a "powerful influence" at Princeton University and Princeton Seminary. Theologians like Charles Hodge used Scottish Realist foundations to build inductivist apologetics and deductive arguments for God's existence (cosmological and teleological).
- **20th Century Realism:** G.E. Moore's "Common Sense" philosophy shares "verbal similarities" with Thomas Reid, particularly the argument that philosophers often deny in theory what they must accept in practice.
- **Immanuel Kant:** Kant was well aware of the Scottish Realists, and his work was in many ways an attempt to address the "crucial question" of cause and effect that Reid and Hume had debated.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide on Scottish Realism and the Philosophy of Thomas Reid

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the Scottish Realist movement, focusing on the theories of Thomas Reid as presented in the lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores the transition from British Empiricism to the realism that influenced both Immanuel Kant and 20th-century philosophy.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided source context.

1. What is the "theory of ideas" that Thomas Reid criticizes, and why does he reject it?
2. How does Reid's "direct realism" (or presentational view) differ from the "representational view" of perception?
3. In Reid's philosophy, what are the two senses in which a theory can be called "realism"?
4. If ideas are not the objects of knowledge, what role do they play in Reid's epistemology?
5. What does Reid mean by "common sense," and how does it differ from Aristotle's *sensus communis*?
6. How does Reid's "theistic justification" for natural beliefs differentiate him from David Hume?
7. Describe Reid's version of "foundationalism."
8. How does Reid argue for the existence of causal connections?
9. What is "agency causation," and how does it relate to Reid's view of human freedom?
10. According to Reid, what are the "first principles" of ethics?

Part II: Answer Key

1. **The "theory of ideas"** is the representational view asserting that the immediate objects of mental awareness are merely ideas within the mind. Reid rejects this as a philosophical "fiction" because it suggests we only have direct awareness of mental content rather than the external objects themselves, such as smelling a rose rather than just having an "idea" of a smell.
2. **Direct realism** maintains that objects are directly presented to consciousness, allowing for direct awareness of physical objects without

intermediaries. In contrast, the **representational view** is a form of epistemological dualism where ideas represent objects, making knowledge of the external world indirect.

3. **Realism** first implies the independent existence of material objects and their qualities, meaning they exist whether or not they are being perceived. Second, it signifies the belief that humans have true, direct knowledge of that independent, objective reality.
4. **Ideas function as "signs"** of what may or may not be present, rather than as intermediaries. They are necessary to account for mental acts like memory, reflection, and errors such as illusions or misconceptions, where a mental state exists but does not accurately reflect reality.
5. **Reid defines common sense** as the natural, unphilosophical beliefs held by every person, such as the assumption that the external world is real. This differs from **Aristotle's *sensus communis***, which refers to a specific sense that coordinates and unifies the inputs from the other senses.
6. **Reid believes God created humans** with a nature that spontaneously produces certain "natural beliefs" in the course of experience, providing a theistic undergirding for trusting our faculties. While **Hume** also acknowledges natural proclivities toward belief, he lacks this theistic justification and views these beliefs as a result of human psychology without a divine guarantee of their truth.
7. **Reid's foundationalism** posits that there are certain foundational truths from which further knowledge can be deduced. However, unlike traditional rationalism, these foundations are not "rationally certain" or indubitable through logic; instead, they are "natural beliefs" rooted in the human constitution.
8. **Reid argues that we have direct awareness** of causal power through our own inner experience and bodily feelings. For example, when choosing to move or when feeling the strain of lifting a heavy weight, we experience the causal connection between the will and the body's actions.
9. **Agency causation** is the distinctive power of a human agent to initiate events. Reid argues that we have direct awareness of this power, and freedom

consists of the ability to choose to cause (or not cause) an event to happen, independent of antecedent motives or reasoning.

10. **Ethical first principles** are self-evident axioms, such as the idea that some things merit approval while others merit blame. Reid views ethics as a science where these intuitive principles, planted in the human heart by the Creator, serve as the basis for making rational moral judgments.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following prompts to develop deeper analytical essays. (Answers not provided).

1. **The Critique of Representationalism:** Analyze Reid's argument that the "theory of ideas" is a philosophical fiction. How does his move toward "epistemological monism" attempt to resolve the skepticism inherent in the traditions of Descartes, Locke, and Hume?
 2. **Natural Belief and Human Nature:** Compare and contrast the "proclivities of human nature" as described by David Hume and Thomas Reid. How does Reid's inclusion of a theistic framework alter the philosophical implications of these spontaneous beliefs?
 3. **The Problem of Causality:** Evaluate Reid's defense of "causal power" against Hume's "constant conjunction." Is Reid's appeal to the "feeling" of agency a sufficient philosophical response to Hume's skepticism regarding necessary connections?
 4. **Foundationalism and the Science of Ethics:** Discuss Reid's claim that ethics is a science based on first principles. How does his integration of "reason and feeling" challenge Hume's ethical subjectivism?
 5. **The Legacy of Scottish Realism:** Trace the influence of Scottish Realism from the Edinburgh Enlightenment to 20th-century thinkers like G.E. Moore and the Princeton theologians. What core tenets of the movement allowed it to persist against the dominance of British Empiricism?
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Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Agency Causation	The theory that a human agent has the direct power to initiate events; distinct from simple physical causation.
Common Sense	The natural, spontaneous, and analytic assumptions/beliefs common to all humans in an unphilosophical state.
Direct Realism	Also known as "Presentationalism," the view that objects are directly presented to consciousness without intermediary ideas.
Epistemological Monism	A view of knowledge where the mind and the object are directly linked, as opposed to the dualism of the representational theory.
Foundationalism	The philosophical position that all knowledge is built upon a set of basic, foundational truths or first principles.
Natural Beliefs	Beliefs that arise spontaneously due to the intrinsic nature and constitution of human beings, rather than through artificial reasoning.
Phenomenalism	The opposing view to realism, suggesting that humans only know appearances or ideas rather than independent material objects.
Proclivities	The natural tendencies or "impulses of nature" rooted in the human constitution that lead to specific beliefs or moral judgments.
Representationalism	The theory that the immediate object of awareness is a mental idea that represents an external object.
Signs	Reid's term for ideas or sensations that point to an object or reality but do not function as intermediary objects of knowledge.

Sensus Communis	The Aristotelian concept of a "unifying sense" that coordinates the other senses; distinct from Reid's use of "common sense."
Theory of Ideas	The philosophical tradition (critiqued by Reid) starting from Descartes and Locke that posits ideas as the direct objects of mental awareness.