

Belief in Reid's Theory of Perception

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Against external-world skepticism, Thomas Reid famously argued that sense perception involves *prima facie* justified belief in extra-mental material objects. In fact, according to Reid perception just is conception of and belief in a material object, occasioned by sensation. Similar, though importantly non-Reidian, doxastic analyses of perception have been recommended in the contemporary philosophical literature by D.M. Armstrong and John Heil, among others.¹ Recent work has shown, however, that there appear to be cases of full-fledged perception that do not include belief.² Interestingly, Reid seems to have been aware of this problem for his view—a point that has, as yet, gone virtually unnoted. In what follows I evaluate Reid's treatment of this problem, suggesting various replies to the purported counterexamples on behalf of Reid's theory. I then propose a modification of Reid's theory in which I replace his belief component with a kind of 'seeing-as' mental state, which I call *construal*. I argue that this modified Reidian theory of perception has the advantage of better handling the proposed counterexamples without sacrificing any of the anti-skeptical force of Reid's theory.

§1. Belief and Perception in Reid

Belief lies at the heart of Reid's theory of perception. He affirms the central role of belief in perception in both his early and late philosophical writing on the topic. In his discussion of the distinction between mere sensation and perception, Reid testifies, "I know this also, that the perception of an object implies both a conception of its form, and a belief of its present existence" (*Inq* VI xxii, 168).³ In the conclusion to his *Inquiry* Reid writes, "We have shown...that every operation of the senses, in its very nature, implies judgment or belief, as well

as simple apprehension....When I perceive a tree before me, my faculty of seeing gives me not only a notion or simple apprehension of the tree, but a belief of its existence, and of its figure, distance, and magnitude; and this judgment or belief is not got by comparing ideas, it is included in the very nature of perception” (*Inq* VII, 215).

In his later work Reid defines perception as: “First, Some conception or notion of the object perceived. Secondly, A strong and irresistible conviction and belief of its present existence. And, thirdly, That this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning” (*IP* II v, 111-2).⁴ Likewise, Reid explains that, “In perception we not only have a notion more or less distinct of the object perceived, but also an irresistible conviction and belief of its existence” (*IP* II v, 107).⁵

Despite the centrality of belief in his theory of perception, Reid nowhere analyzes belief by giving a strict definition. In fact, he contends that belief is unanalyzable in this way. Early on in the *Inquiry* he unapologetically explains that “the belief which accompanies sensation and memory, is a simple act of the mind, which cannot be defined...every man that has any belief, and he must be a curiosity that has none, knows perfectly what belief is, but can never define or explain it” (*Inq* II v, 31). Reid does, however, provide a working definition of the closely related term ‘judgment’ in his later writing. He suggests that judgment “is an act of the mind, whereby one thing is affirmed or denied of another.” At least, writes Reid, “this is as good a definition of it as can be given” (*IP* VI i, 532). Later, he explains, “That I may avoid disputes about the meaning of words, I wish the reader to understand, that I give the name of judgment to every determination of the mind concerning what is true or what is false” (*IP* VI i, 539).

Reid’s view of the relationship between judgment and belief is not entirely clear. In some passages he uses belief and judgment interchangeably, as though identical. For example, he

writes that “a man who feels pain, judges and believes that he is really pained. The man who perceives an object, *believes* that it exists, and is what he distinctly perceives it to be; nor is it in his power to avoid *such judgment*” (italics added). Later in the same paragraph, however, he treats belief as a mental act or state that accompanies judgment. He explains that the operation we call judgment “is a mental affirmation or negation...accompanied with the firmest belief” (*IP* VI i, 536). On the basis of this and similar passages, including one quoted in the following paragraph, it appears that Reid distinguishes judgment and belief in the following way. While judgment is the momentary mental act of initially affirming or denying some proposition, belief is the mental state that follows immediately upon judgment as its natural consequence and, as it were, completes the judgment.⁶ In other words, judgment is the activity of beginning to believe (or disbelieve).⁷

In light of this intimate relationship between judgment and belief, Reid’s discussions of judgment can help to illuminate the role of belief in his theory of perception. One observation worth noting, for example, is that Reid suggests in one passage that judgment and its consequent belief might not be a necessary ingredient in perception, but rather a necessary correlate (or, ‘concomitant’) of perception: “Whether judgment ought to be called a necessary concomitant of these operations, or rather a part or ingredient of them, I do not dispute; but it is certain, that all of them are accompanied with a determination that something is true or false, and a consequent belief” (*IP* VI i, 536).⁸ It is thus worth noting that the cases of apparent perception without belief considered below are intended as counterexamples to the claim that belief is a necessary ingredient in perception, as well as to the claim that belief is a necessary concomitant of perception.

Highlighting the centrality of belief in Reid's theory of perception, A.D. Smith paraphrases Reid in the following way: "perception is a matter of occurrently having, or acquiring, immediate (that is, non-inferential) beliefs about the physical world. Perception is judgment."⁹ As Smith notes, however, Reid is best interpreted, not as defending a reductive doxastic analysis of perception according to which perception is solely constituted by judgment or belief, but rather as defending a non-reductive, or dual-component theory (DCT) of perception according to which perception involves a sensory component as well.^{10, 11}

Although he emphasizes the role of conception and belief in his official definition of perception, Reid nevertheless maintains that sensations play an integral role in human perception as the 'natural signs' that direct our minds to awareness of material objects. Reid explains that "The external senses have a double province; to make us feel, and to make us perceive. They furnish us with a variety of sensations...; at the same time they give us a conception, and an invincible belief of the existence of external objects" (*IP* II xvii, 265). To give a full Reidian account of perception, one must, therefore, mention the important role of sensations in suggesting the conceptions and beliefs about extra-mental objects that are constitutive of perception. As Smith puts it, for Reid "sensation is an ingredient in the total perceptual situation for us humans, given our frame."¹² The reason that sensation does not enter into Reid's official analysis of perception is that it is not metaphysically necessary for perception, though it is nomically or causally necessary that sensation accompany and occasion perception in human beings, given our (contingent) constitution.¹³ Reid writes, "For anything we know, we might perhaps have been so made as to perceive external objects, without any...of those sensations which invariably accompany perception in our present frame" (*IP* II xx, 289). This is, as Smith points out, one of Reid's reasons for excluding sensation from his analysis of perception.¹⁴

I will not rehearse any further the reasons for reading Reid as a dual-component theorist. The evidence presented here is sufficient for present purposes to conclude that according to Reid human perception essentially involves belief (and conception) and, given our constitution, perception is initiated in sensation. We might, therefore, without doing injustice to Reid, broaden Reid's official definition of perception to highlight the important but metaphysically contingent role of sensation. The result would be a definition according to which, given our contingent constitution, it is a necessary condition for perception that the conception of and belief in a physical object be caused in the right way by sensation.¹⁵

While it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the full Reidian story of perception must make reference to sensation in addition to conception and belief, my primary intent here is to highlight the important place of belief in Reid's DCT. Many more passages could be added to those enumerated above to demonstrate the strength of Reid's conviction that belief in the existence of extra-mental objects of perception is essential (either constitutively or concomitantly) to perception. It might seem, therefore, that any analysis of perception that does not involve belief as an essential cognitive aspect of perception is not, in fact, a Reidian analysis at all. Nevertheless, in section four I will show that the dual-component structure of Reid's theory, together with its anti-skeptical resources, is not inextricably tied to its doxastic aspect. I argue that, given the plausibility of counterexamples to strict doxastic analyses of perception, Reid (or the Reidian) should replace belief with another kind of mental state—construal—as the essential cognitive component in perception.¹⁶ In fact, as we will see in the next section, a non-doxastic analysis of perception finds support in some of Reid's own reflections.

§2. Perception without Belief

According to Reid's analysis of perception every instance of perception is partially constituted by belief in the existence of the extra-mental object of perception. Yet, there seem to be cases of perception that do not involve belief in the existence of the perceptual object. Here I will consider four types of cases, two that Reid himself suggests as possible examples of (some kind of) perception without belief, and two further examples that represent a development of the problem Reid's cases suggest.

2.1 Dim Perception

First, take cases of what Reid refers to as 'faint' and 'indistinct' perception. Immediately following one of his statements of the essential role of belief in perception, Reid suggests, in the only passage in which he takes up the question, that there might be (momentary) dim perception without belief. He writes:

In perception we not only have a notion more or less distinct of the object perceived, but also an irresistible conviction and belief of its existence. This is always the case when we are certain that we perceive it. There may be a perception so faint and indistinct, as to leave us in doubt whether we perceive the object or not. Thus, when a star begins to twinkle as the light of the sun withdraws, one may, for a short time, think he sees it, without being certain, until the perception acquires some strength and steadiness. When a ship just begins to appear in the utmost verge of the horizon, we may at first be dubious whether we perceive it or not: But when the perception is in any degree clear and steady, there remains no doubt of its reality; and when the reality of the perception is ascertained, the existence of the object perceived can no longer be doubted. (*IP* II v, 107)

2.2 Infant Perception

A second case of apparent perception that does not seem to involve belief is the perception of infants and some non-human animals. Reid acknowledges this possible exception to his theory and sets it aside, opting to focus solely on the way that belief functions in adult human perception:

In persons come to years of understanding, judgment necessarily accompanies all sensation, perception by the senses, consciousness, and memory, but not conception.

I restrict this to persons come to the years of understanding, because it may be a question, whether infants, in the first period of life, have any judgment or belief at all.

The same question may be put with regard to brutes and some idiots. (*IP* VI i, 536; cf. *IP* II v, 117-8)

As Reid here suggests, it might seem that infants are capable of something in the neighborhood of perception prior to developing the cognitive capacity to form beliefs.

2.3 Unattended Perception

Even if the examples considered above fail as counterexamples to a doxastic analysis of perception, they suggest a potential problem for Reid's analysis that is better demonstrated by cases Reid himself does not consider. One such case concerns unattended perception. It seems that we do, at least occasionally, perceive objects or situations without forming any beliefs about them due to a failure to attend to them. Think, for example, of cases in which one fails to attend to some object in her perceptual field and, when asked whether she saw it, initially answers that she did not or otherwise behaves as though she did not, indicating that no belief was formed, but then, after further prompting, remembers that she did see it, despite apparently forming no beliefs about it at the time. Reid acknowledges that we regularly fail to attend to the operations of our own mind, though we are nonetheless conscious of them (*IP* I v, 57.¹⁷ Why not think that

we are likewise conscious of, in the sense of really perceiving, objects in our perceptual fields even while failing to attend to and, hence, form beliefs about them? I admit such cases are not conclusive on their own, since they reasonably can be interpreted as cases of a forgotten perceptual belief, as opposed to cases of perception without belief.¹⁸ Taken together with other cases they do, nevertheless, increase the plausibility of perception without belief.

Contrast unattended perception with cases of Dretske-style ‘simple-seeing’ in which perceivers are unable to (re)call any perceptual experience/images to mind, despite the previous unnoticed clarity of the objects in their perceptual fields. Dretske’s primary example is of a man who “*must* have seen” a cufflink in his drawer despite failing to notice it and being unable to recall having seen it.¹⁹ In simple-seeing cases, it is plausible that the perceiver experiences only the sensation and does not have the cognitive component of perception at all (and so is not actually possessed of a full-fledged perception). As Heil notes, we vacillate between referring to the objects in such cases as ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’ depending on the context.²⁰ The fact that we loosely refer to some cases of unattended visual sensation as seeing does not require that we treat all such cases as full perceptions. Simple-seeing cases, therefore, do not cause trouble for the Reidian analysis of perception. In the case of unattended perception I’ve described, though, it is not as plausible to deny that the perceiver experienced a full-fledged perception, including the essential cognitive component(s) of perception, due to her ability to recall the perception to mind later. There must, then, be some difference between the simple-seeing case and cases of unattended perception. The most plausible candidate for the difference, it seems, is that simple-seeing is missing an essential cognitive component of perception while unattended perception is not.

2.4 The Oasis Case

Lastly, consider the following case, versions of which have been suggested in the recent literature on perception.²¹ After several days traveling in the desert, a veteran desert traveler seems to see an oasis not too far off in a region she believes to have no oases. Despite the astounding clarity of her visual sensation, including such details as green plants, small trees, and a small pool of still water, our traveler, knowing the likelihood of hallucination in such environments to be high and believing this region of desert to be barren, does not believe in the existence of the oasis. Unbeknownst to the traveler, however, this oasis is real. Perhaps it sprang up by some uncommon natural process in the time since the traveler's last journey through this patch of desert, or perhaps it is a man-made oasis fed by well water—the work of a committee of green-thumbed nomads for desert beautification. Whatever the explanation for our traveler's lack of belief in the existence of the oasis, this seems at least a *prima facie* plausible case of perception without belief. It seems a strained account of the situation, to say the least, to claim that the traveler does not perceive the oasis on the grounds that she does not believe it to exist or to be the cause of her sensation.

§3. Replies on Behalf of Reid's Doxastic Analysis

3.1 Perceiving, Asserting, and Believing

One might reply to the above counterexamples by suggesting that it would be inappropriate to assert "I see x , but I do not believe that x exists." The inappropriateness of such an assertion, so goes the reply, is explained by the fact that belief is somehow entailed by perception.

The problem with this reply is that it fails to distinguish adequately between one's perceiving x and one's appropriately asserting and, hence, at least in the normal case,²² believing that one perceives x . Perception is veridical. Assuming that appropriate assertions ordinarily

entail that one believes what one asserts, the assertion that I perceive x , therefore, carries the conversational implicature that I believe that I (truly) perceive x and, hence, that I believe that x exists. Believing that x exists is entailed by believing that I perceive x ; however, it does not follow from this that believing that x exists is entailed by perceiving x .²³ So, it is ordinarily inappropriate to assert that one perceives x while denying or withholding belief that x exists, but nothing follows from this about the appropriateness of denying or withholding belief that x exists while perceiving x . The oasis and unattended perception cases reveal that some perceptions are attended neither by belief in the existence of the perceptual object, nor by belief (nor assertion) that one is having a veridical perceptual experience.

This observation reveals the important difference between the oasis case, of which Reid addresses no analogue, and cases of illusion, which Reid does address (see *IP* II xxii). In cases of illusion (e.g., phantom limb cases) the would-be perceiver does have a conception and belief as of a physical object, but there is no physical object causing the sensation that, in turn, occasions the conception and belief. Hence, something like a truth or causal condition for perception (i.e., a condition according to which there must be a physical object in the world that is appropriately causally related to the sensation that occasions the perception) allows Reid to escape the problem of illusion. The so-called ‘fallacies of the senses’ are not problems with the senses at all, but rather they are due to misguided judgments on the part of our cognitive operations. In the oasis case, however, all such causal conditions are satisfied; the oasis really is there and is the cause of the sensation.

3.2 “But There is a Belief!”

A second strategy for replying to the above counterexamples is to attempt to explain how it is that, far from being non-doxastic, they do, in fact, all involve beliefs constitutive of

perception. One might think, for instance, that in the oasis case the desert traveler, upon having the sensation as of an oasis, immediately forms a belief in water vapor or chemical misfiring in the brain as the cause of the sensation. In such a case, so goes the objection, the traveler would be perceiving, but would be doing so inaccurately, the inaccuracy being explicable in terms of the misfiring of acquired perceptions as described by Reid in *IP* II xxii. Or, according to a stronger version of this reply, perhaps her sensation of the oasis immediately suggests a belief in an unknown extra-mental cause of a known sensation—“Something (out there) is causing this oasis sensation.” Here, her belief is not inaccurate, but rather cautious (perhaps overly so). She believes herself to have a defeater for the would-be perceptual belief that there is an oasis in her visual field—in Michael Bergmann’s terminology, she has a “believed defeater”²⁴—but that defeater is, unbeknownst to her, misleading.

The problem with the weaker version of this objection (i.e., that according to which the traveler forms a belief in some distinct physical cause of the sensation, e.g., water vapor or neurological events) is that it results in an unwelcome dilemma for the defender of the doxastic analysis; that is, in such a case either the object of perception is not the object of perceptual belief, or the object of perception is not the extra-mental cause of the sensation occasioning the perception. Either the traveler’s perception is of the oasis, despite the fact that the belief constitutive of her perception is about non-existent water vapor or neurological events, or her perception is of water vapor or neurological events, despite the fact that the cause of the sensation occasioning her perception is an oasis.

The stronger version of the reply (i.e., that according to which the traveler forms a belief in the existence of an unknown cause of her known sensation) seems to lend itself more readily to the claim that the traveler believes in the existence of the oasis under a conception that is

merely less complete or information-rich than is warranted by her perceptual experience. For, were our traveler to form a belief in the unknown cause of her sensation as of an oasis, this would be tantamount to believing in the existence of the material object cause of her perception, despite her lack of knowledge that the cause of her sensation is the oasis she seems to (and in fact does) see. In other words, to borrow Todd Buras' helpful terminology, while the conception involved in her belief is not about an oasis with respect to its *descriptive* content, it is about the oasis with respect to its *referential* content and this is sufficient to satisfy the belief condition of Reid's analysis.²⁵ So, while she might hold the inconsistent beliefs that the unknown cause of her sensation exists and that no oasis exists in her visual field, this is not the same as holding the obviously contradictory conjunctive belief: there both exists and does not exist an oasis in my visual field.

In response, we can set up the thought experiment so that the traveler, having the sensation of an oasis, forms no belief in any (even unknown) extra-mental cause of her sensation. Perhaps she believes that mirages are caused, not by mind-independent objects or phenomena, but by purely mental events alone, say by imagination.²⁶ In such a case the traveler would form no belief in the existence of an unknown (material object) cause of her sensation. She would, rather, maintain her negative belief about the external world—"there is no oasis over there"—and perhaps form the introspective belief—"I'm just imagining an oasis." It nevertheless seems that our traveler perceives the oasis even without any corresponding belief in an extra-mental cause.

Another version of the 'but there is a belief' reply might go like this. The desert traveler does have a belief relevant to the perceptual object and about the objects in her perceptual field; namely, that they do not include an oasis.²⁷ Once again, however, such a belief fails to satisfy the

belief condition of perception for Reid because it is not a belief of the right sort. The belief, assuming there is one, that her visual field does not include an oasis is not caused by the traveler's sensation of the oasis. Such a belief cannot therefore be constitutive of the traveler's *perception* of the oasis. What about the fact that the desert traveler likely would have believed in the existence of the oasis, as many novice desert travelers do, had she not been aware of defeaters for such a belief? One might think that Reid could argue simply, as David Armstrong has, that perception is always an inclination toward belief (i.e., perception is "essentially belief-inducing"), even in those fringe cases in which the belief normally accompanying perception is not formed due to other overriding beliefs.²⁸ For Reid to do so, however, would be to concede my point, modifying his view by making (occurrent) belief a non-essential ingredient in perception. Moreover, the background beliefs of the desert traveler in the oasis case not only preclude belief; they also plausibly preclude any inclination to believe.

Another response that Reid might have taken to this line of argument is to claim that in cases like the oasis case, there is an immediate belief, but that belief is quickly overridden by conflicting beliefs. If this were the case, while we might say that perception involves belief in the sense that a belief is always formed at some point in the process of perceiving an object, it would not be right to claim with Reid that perception involves belief as an essential ingredient or concomitant. For, one could continue perceiving without continuing to believe in the existence of the perceptual object.

3.3 Heil on Seeing and Believing

Finally, consider John Heil's arguments for his thesis that "seeing is always a matter of belief-acquisition."²⁹ Heil's main argument is two-pronged. First, he considers and offers reasons to reject what he takes to be the two most fundamental types of cases offered by 'non-epistemic

theorists' in support of their view. He then offers some suggestions concerning the nature of belief, specifically concerning its connection to intelligent behavior, in an attempt to show that all seeing is connected with intelligent behavior in the way uniquely characteristic of belief and, hence, that all seeing is believing.

The two fundamental cases of purportedly non-doxastic (or, in Heil's terminology, 'non-epistemic') seeing are (1) cases in which X looks P to S , but S does not believe that X is P and (2) cases of unattended, or 'unnoticed,' visual perceptions. Concerning cases of the first type, Heil argues that even in such cases S believes something about X , though the particular belief that X is P is only contingently connected to the particular visual experience of X 's appearing to be P . Concerning seeing-without-noticing, Heil contends that some such cases seem to involve belief, as evidenced by the intelligent behavior we exhibit in response to our environments (e.g., when we avoid 'unnoticed' obstacles while driving and talking), while other such cases (e.g., Dretske-style simple-seeing cases) do not seem to involve belief, but neither does it seem right to call these cases of seeing—"we routinely speak of things unnoticed as *unseen*."³⁰

Heil roughly characterizes perceptual experiences as "those experiences that arise in the process of one's extracting information about one's surroundings (that is, acquiring beliefs about those surroundings) by means of the senses."³¹ He suggests that the role of the senses in perception might be contingent, as evidenced by the apparent perception without perceptual experience that occurs in the phenomenon of blind-sight. By contrast, he argues that the extracting of information from one's environment, which is logically tied to behavior that is appropriate, or 'intelligent,' given such information, is essentially constitutive of all seeing. Hence, where one fails to extract information concerning, or 'take account' of, some object in one's environment, one cannot be said to have seen it.

In response, it is worth noting that Heil does not consider any parallel of the oasis case I offer here. Concerning the related case he does consider, I agree with Heil, as with Reid, that cases in which we do not believe things to be the way they appear, but nevertheless believe something about them, at the very least that they exist, are not counterexamples to doxastic analyses of perception. Moreover, I have already argued in agreement with Heil that Dretske-style simple-seeing is not perception, but rather mere sensation absent the additional cognitive component of perception.

Concerning Heil's example of unnoticed perceptions that involve belief, namely, those that occur when one avoids obstacles in the road while driving distracted by conversation, I contend that these are not truly unnoticed perceptions. Were the obstacles in the road really unnoticed by the driver, she would not intentionally avoid them. In fact, as explained above, I take it that the primary evidence of unattended perception is behavior that is not 'intelligent,' to use Heil's terminology, given the informational content of the perception, coupled with the ability to recall the perceived image to mind later. I am, indeed, sympathetic with Heil's claim that all seeing (and, by extension, all perception) essentially involves the extracting of information from and 'taking account' of one's environment. I simply disagree that such cognitive activity is logically tied, in the way Heil takes belief to be, to 'intelligent' behavior in keeping with the informational content of perception. I contend that belief is thus neither the only, nor the most plausible, mental state that we can identify with this cognitive aspect of perception. In other words, I agree with Heil's thesis that all seeing is epistemic in the sense that perception essentially involves informational content, but, *pace* Heil, this does not entail that all seeing is believing since, as I will argue in the following section, there is another mental state

operative in perception that can account equally well for the informational (propositional) content of perception.

§4. Modifying Reid's Dual-component Theory

4.1 Perception as Construal

In order to account for cases of apparent perception without belief, such as those catalogued above, Reid could have modified his theory of perception by excluding belief from his formal definition, adopting instead a definition according to which construal of a physical object is the essential cognitive component of perception. This analysis substitutes a different mental state—construal—for belief as the cognitive component of perception caused by sensation, thereby preserving the dual-component structure of Reid's theory. The present analysis also allows for an intimate relationship between perception and belief. For, this analysis is compatible with the addendum that construal naturally, immediately, and normally suggests belief in the existence and qualities of a physical object—given the principles of the constitution of our nature.

A sense perceptual construal is an apprehension, a 'seeing as,' or a 'taking' of a physical object in terms of certain (material object) concepts that is connected causally to concurrent sensations.³² Consider, for example, the famous duck-rabbit Gestalt figure. Without gaining any new sensations, one who initially can see the drawing only as a duck can learn to construe the duck-rabbit drawing as a rabbit. Moreover, once one believes that the drawing is a duck-rabbit, one gains no new beliefs when one switches between construals. That it is possible to switch between construals without a change in sensation and without the generation of any new beliefs reveals that there is another mental state operative in perception besides belief and sensation.

This is the mental state I am calling construal and which I identify as the essential cognitive component of perception.

Although construals do not always generate beliefs, construals are *presentations* of their objects or aspects thereof. In the language of recent defenders of phenomenal conservatism, construals are a subclass of propositionally structured ‘appearances’ or ‘seemings.’³³ Perceptual construals are thus true or false or, perhaps more precisely, apt or inapt insofar as they present their objects accurately. On this analysis then, perceptions, while not to be confused with the beliefs to which they give rise, are propositionally structured and characterized by a kind of inherent alethic affirmation or denial.

Construals thus resemble the sort of conceptions that Reid refers to as ‘copies.’ About copies, Reid explains, “they have an original or archetype to which they refer, and with which they are believed to agree: and we call them true or false conceptions, according as they agree or disagree with the standard to which they are referred” (*IP* IV i, 392). Notice that Reid does not say that it is the beliefs corresponding to copies that are said to be true or false, but that the conceptions themselves are said to be true or false. The same can be said of construals. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that construals are copies. Construals differ from Reid’s copies in the sense that construals are propositionally structured, whereas copies need not be, and construals present their objects with a kind of forcefulness or assertiveness that copies may lack. Given the propositional structure of construals and the way that they present their objects (i.e., the way that they affirm or deny things about their objects), it is not difficult to see the intimate relationship between construals and beliefs. Perceptual belief just is assent to the affirmation or denial inherent in perceptual construal.

Whereas Reid claims that perception is essentially accompanied or constituted by belief, the counterexamples to doxastic analyses catalogued above provide reason to think that it is possible to have construals (e.g., of the oasis, or of the objects of unattended perception) without corresponding beliefs in the existence of their objects. In other words, one cannot account for the full range of human perception without allowing for cases in which we do not believe our eyes, so to speak. It is worth noting here, however, that my construal analysis might not account for Reid's cases of dim or infant perception better than Reid's own theory. In other words, I remain open to the view that construal is no more present in such cases than belief. I am thus willing to deny that such cases are perceptions, as opposed to mere sensations, without belief. However, I take the Reid-inspired cases of unattended perception and oasis-type cases to be decisive. I contend that Reid could have allowed for such cases, thereby treating the full range of human perception with his analysis, by identifying construal, rather than belief, as the cognitive component of perception.

4.2 Construal Analysis and Reid's Anti-Skepticism

The foregoing statement of a Reidian construal analysis of perception, while brief and in need of further development, is sufficient for my present purpose of demonstrating that Reid could have enjoyed the primary philosophical benefits of his DCT while avoiding the counterexamples to doxastic analyses of perception considered herein. Reid, in fact, could have revised the cognitive component of his DCT in the way I am suggesting while maintaining his primary argument against the skepticism-motivating Theory of Ideas—his *experimentum crucis*. In a brief passage in *Inquiry* V Reid boldly risked his entire case against the Theory of Ideas (or 'ideal system') on the success of one thought experiment:

This I would therefore humbly propose as an *experimentum crucis* by which the ideal system must stand or fall; and it brings the matter to a short issue: Extension, figure, motion, may, any one, or all of them, be taken for the subject of this experiment. Either they are ideas of sensation, or they are not. If any one of them can be shown to be an ideas of sensation, or to have the least resemblance to any sensation, I lay my hand upon my mouth, and give up all pretence to reconcile reason to common sense in this matter, and must suffer the ideal skepticism to triumph. But if, on the other hand, they are not ideas of sensation, nor like to any sensation, then the ideal system is a rope of sand, and all the laboured arguments of the skeptical philosophy against a material world, and against the existence of every thing but impressions and ideas, proceeds upon a false hypothesis. (*Inq* V vii, 70)

As Buras explains, “Reid’s target in the *experimentum*...is the claim that all our conceptions of material things are ideas of sensation or like sensation.”³⁴ Reid’s aim was to pull up by the roots the central claim of the Theory of Ideas that all of our ideas/conceptions in perception must resemble what they are about. As Berkeley famously argued in his *Dialogues*, ideas obviously cannot resemble material objects. It follows that belief in material objects is not possible, since we can form no conception of material objects.³⁵ Moreover, since all of our immediate knowledge of material objects must, on this account, be of sensations, it follows that belief in the existence of (extra-mental) material objects is grounded in irrational inferences from our ideas of sensations.³⁶ Reid refutes the resemblance thesis that underlies such skepticism with a thought experiment—his *experimentum*—in which he demonstrates that our concepts of primary qualities (e.g., extension, figure, and motion) are neither of sensations, nor do they resemble sensations. Reid encourages us to reflect on the sensation we experience when we press

against a hard surface and compare that to our conception of hardness. Reflection reveals that the conception in no way resembles the sensation that causes it. Reid thus rejects the resemblance thesis, together with the Theory of Ideas that all of our ideas/conceptions and, hence, immediate knowledge, in perception are of sensations.

The relevance of this for our present discussion is that the neo-Reidian construal analysis of perception proposed herein does nothing to undermine the anti-skeptical force of Reid's *experimentum crucis*. Even if we fail to believe in the existence of the material objects we form ideas/conceptions of in perception, Reid's *experimentum* loses none of its force against the skepticism he sought to refute. Hence, removing belief from the analysis of perception does not undermine Reid's primary argument against the Theory of Ideas and the correlative resemblance thesis.

Of course, Reid's *experimentum* does not yet explain the justification of perceptual belief in the material world. Reid thus offers a further anti-skeptical argument that (non-inferential) perceptual belief in the existence of material objects is justified since it is natural and, in some sense, irresistible—a 'principle of common sense.' Reid argued that, as a principle of common sense, perceptual belief in the external world is of equal epistemic authority with the deliverances of reason and other epistemic sources, having come as they did "out of the same shop" and having been made as they were "by the same artist" (*Inq* VI xx, 169).³⁷ Along with his *experimentum*, Reid could maintain this argument on the modified theory of perception I propose by demonstrating that although belief is not a constituent element of perception, belief in the existence of material objects nevertheless follows immediately (i.e., non-inferentially) upon perceptual construal in most cases and this by an original principle of our constitution. On this account, therefore, while belief in material objects may be resistible in some particular instances

of perception, it is not wholly resistible. In fact, an analysis of perception in terms of construal provides a compelling explanation of the intimate relationship between belief and perception since, as explained above, perceptual construals have propositional content and contain within their very structure a kind of affirmation or denial.³⁸

4.3 Reid's Rejection of Non-doxastic Analyses

In light of plausible counterexamples to a strict doxastic DCT, some less convincing analogues of which Reid himself seems to have been aware of and perhaps even mildly troubled by, and in light of the consistency with his philosophical program of a construal-only cognitive component of perception, one might wonder why Reid did not opt for the modification of his view I here propose. He was not, after all, unaware of non-doxastic alternatives to his view. In fact, he identifies Descartes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume as defenders of a conception-only analysis of the cognitive component of perception and criticizes them harshly for it:

Mr. Locke has followed the example given by Des Cartes, Gassendi, and other Cartesians, in giving the name of *perception* to the bare conception of things; and he has been followed in this by bishop Berkeley, Mr. Hume, and many late philosophers, when they treat of ideas. They have probably been led into this impropriety, by the common doctrine concerning ideas, which teaches us, that conception, perception by the senses, and memory, are only different ways of perceiving ideas in our own minds. If that theory be well founded, it will indeed be very difficult to find any specific distinction between conception and perception. (*IP IV i*, 387)

Reid rebuts this view by setting it against the deliverance of common sense that conception and perception are distinct operations of the mind. He concludes his discussion in the following way: "To return from this digression, into which the abuse of the word *perception*, by

philosophers, has led me, it appears evident, that the bare conception of an object, which includes no opinion or judgment, can neither be true nor false” (*IP* IV i, 388-9). I hope it is apparent by now that the view Reid criticizes in these passages, while appropriately labeled a non-doxastic analysis of perception, is not my own. A construal is not what Reid refers to as ‘bare conception.’ Reid explains that “In bare conception, there can neither be truth nor falsehood, because it neither affirms nor denies” (*IP* IV i, 385). Unlike bare conception, construal involves a kind of inherent propositionally-structured affirmation or denial, a ‘seeing-as’ that typically inclines its possessor to assent one way or the other in belief. The belief-inclining power of construals is indeed strong, but, as I have argued, it can be resisted.

Of course, oasis-type cases and unattended perceptions are not paradigmatic perceptual experiences and, as explained above, dim and infant ‘seeings’ arguably are not perceptions at all. Perhaps Reid was not interested in devising a theory of perception that would account for all human mental activity that might legitimately fall under the name *perception*, but rather sought an analysis that simply covered all paradigmatic adult human perception. Reid’s refusal to take up the question of whether infants are capable of perception is indicative of such a circumscribed methodological purpose (see *IP* II v, 117, and IV i, 536). It might be that we have multiple conceptions of perception³⁹ and that Reid, given his polemical purposes, is focusing in on one—perhaps the archetypical—conception, to the exclusion of others. While this suggestion might have some merit, I have already argued how it is that Reid could have satisfied his polemical purposes while adopting the analysis of perception proposed herein. Without compromising his critique of idealist skepticism, Reid could have defended a DCT according to which construal, rather than belief, is necessary for perception. By doing so Reid could have included unattended

as well as fringe oasis-type cases, in his analysis, thus accounting for a fuller range of human perception than his doxastic DCT allows.

Conclusion

Reid's doxastic analysis of perception is well-suited to explain most paradigmatic adult human perception; however, unattended perceptions and oasis-type cases provide good reason to modify Reid's theory of perception. I have shown one way that Reid could have modified his theory to account for these cases of perception without belief. Given that Reid could have adopted a non-doxastic construal analysis of perception without jettisoning his commonsense attack on skepticism, I recommend the analysis to all of his contemporary followers. Of course, there are some who reject any dual-component (and, hence, Reidian) theory of perception altogether.⁴⁰ A full defense of a DCT with construal as the essential cognitive component should include a response to such objectors. That task, however, is one for another time. For now, it is enough to have shown that those already sympathetic with Reid's DCT have good reasons, indeed good Reidian reasons, to prefer a modification of Reid's theory according to which construal, rather than belief, is the essential cognitive component of perception.⁴¹

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¹ D.M. Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1961); John Heil, “Seeing is Believing,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 19, 3 (1982), 229-39.

² See, e.g., A.D. Smith, “Perception and Belief,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62.2 (2001), 287. While Smith defends the view that non-doxastic perception is in some sense ontologically dependent on doxastic (i.e., belief-involving) perception, he nonetheless admits that there likely are individual cases of perception that do not involve occurrent belief in the existence of the perceptual object. It is also worth noting here that even Armstrong recognizes the possibility of perception without belief. He maintains that his is a doxastic analysis, however, since he argues that where belief is absent, perception must involve “a thought that *presses towards* being a belief” (pp. 86-87).

³ When citing Reid’s *Inquiry* (*Inq*) I will use capitalized roman numerals to denote chapters and lower case roman numerals to denote sections. All page numbers refer to the following edition: Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed., Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

⁴ When citing Reid’s *Intellectual Powers* (*IP*), I will use capitalized roman numerals to denote essays and lower case roman numerals to denote chapters. All page numbers refer to the following edition: Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969).

⁵ It is important to note that Reid has polemical purposes for insisting that perception involves “irresistible conviction and belief;” that is, he is interested in refuting skeptics and

idealists, especially Berkeley, who argued that his denial of extra-mental objects of perception was consistent with ordinary perceptual beliefs. Reid's purposes are accomplished as long as there are some instances of ordinary perception that involve an irresistible conviction and belief in the existence of a mind-independent object. As I argue in section four, the irresistibility of some (indeed, most) perceptual beliefs is consistent with the neo-Reidian construal analysis of perception I propose there.

⁶ Although I speak of belief here as a mental state, I do not deny that belief can also be understood as a kind of mental act, where the activity is something like continuing in or maintaining affirmation or denial of a proposition.

⁷ I am grateful to Todd Buras, Dan Johnson and an anonymous referee for suggesting this interpretation.

⁸ Cf. James van Cleve's discussion of this issue in "Reid's Theory of Perception," in Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106.

⁹ Smith, *The Problem of Perception*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70.

¹⁰ Smith rightly notes that Reid's theory is thus more akin to Wilfrid Sellars' DCT than to D.M. Armstrong's reductive doxastic analysis of perception. See Smith, *The Problem of Perception*, 69. Cf., Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World*; and Sellars, *The Metaphysics of Epistemology*, Pedro V. Amaral, ed. (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1989), especially lecture two on "Perception and Reality."

¹¹ George Pappas likewise interprets Reid as a dual-component theorist, though Pappas, writing before Smith, refers to this sort of theory as a 'single-tier theory' since it lumps sensation

together with conception and belief/judgment into a single, unified perceptual event. To avoid confusion, I will use Smith's terminology throughout. See Pappas, "Sensation and Perception in Reid," *Noûs*, 23, 2 (1989), 155-167; see also Phillip Cummins' objections to Pappas in "Pappas on the Role of Sensation in Reid's Theory of Perception," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, 4 (June, 1990), 755-62, and Pappas' reply in "Causation and Perception in Reid," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, 4 (June, 1990), 763-66.

¹² Smith, *The Problem of Perception*, 71.

¹³ Cf. Todd Buras, "The Nature of Sensation in Reid," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 22, 3 (July 2005); Pappas, "Sensation and Perception in Reid"; and Pappas, "Causation and Perception in Reid."

¹⁴ Smith, *The Problem of Perception*, 71.

¹⁵ Cf., Buras, "The Nature of Sensation in Reid"; Pappas, "Sensation and Perception in Reid"; and Pappas, "Causation and Perception in Reid."

¹⁶ I will reserve the term 'cognitive' to describe such states as belief and construal; however, I do not mean to imply that sensation is non-cognitive. Though I will not pursue the point here, Buras has offered compelling reasons to reject the view that sensation is for Reid non-cognitive; see Buras, "The Nature of Sensation in Reid."

¹⁷ Cf., Buras' discussion of Reid on attention in "The Problem with Reid's Direct Realism," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 52, 209 (2002), pp. 472-3.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Heil, "Seeing is Believing."

¹⁹ Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 18.

²⁰ Heil, 231.

²¹ See, e.g., A.D. Smith, "Perception and Belief," 287.

²² I say “in the normal case” because, as Jonathan Kvanvig points out in his critique of Timothy Williamson’s knowledge norm of assertion, one might appropriately assert a proposition she does not believe, e.g., someone wishing to be a theist who avows that God exists not because she believes that God exists but because she is following Pascal’s advice of “going to Mass and hoping for the best.” *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23-24.

²³ Dretske makes this argument in *Seeing and Knowing*, 36.

²⁴ Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁵ See Buras, “Three Grades of Immediate Perception: Thomas Reid’s Distinctions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 76, 3 (2008), 603-323.

²⁶ Here it is important to distinguish purely mental causes from the neurological causes discussed above.

²⁷ Smith offers a similar argument in “Perception and Belief.”

²⁸ Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World*, 86-87.

²⁹ Heil, 230.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³² For a very helpful discussion of the nature of construal, see Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An essay in aid of moral psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 69-83.

³³ See, e.g., Michael Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74 (2007): 30-55.

³⁴ Todd Buras, “Thomas Reid’s *Experimentum Crucis*,” (under review), mss. p. 4.

³⁵ John Greco refers to this skeptical argument as the “No Possible Conception” argument in “Reid’s Reply to the Skeptic,” in Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 136-8.

³⁶ Greco refers to this as the “No Good Inference” argument in “Reid’s Reply to the Skeptic,” 141-8.

³⁷ Cf. Greco’s discussion of Reid’s theory of evidence in “Reid’s Reply to the Skeptic,” 148f.

³⁸ Although it would be a digression to develop the point here, it is worth noting that this Reidian view need not be externalist with respect to perceptual justification, but is, rather, compatible with a kind of internalist evidentialism (or ‘mentalism’), such as that defended by Earl Conee and Richard Feldman since the construals constitutive of perception, while bearing a contingent relation to sensations, bear a necessary relation to the beliefs to which they give rise by virtue of sharing the same propositional content. Daniel Johnson presents a compelling case for such a Reidian evidentialist theory of justification in his “Reidian Internalism” (unpublished). Cf., Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, “Internalism Defended,” in Hilary Kornblith, ed., *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 231-60.

³⁹ Cf. Dretske’s distinction between multiple senses of the verb ‘to see’ in *Seeing and Knowing* (1969) and *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief* (2000), esp. ch. 6.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Smith, *The Problem of Perception*.

⁴¹ I am very grateful to Todd Buras, Dan Johnson, and Gregory Poore for helpful discussions of earlier drafts. I also benefitted from the insightful comments of Seishu Nishimura

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