

1. A disgrace to philosophy

Reid thinks that modern philosophers, beginning with Descartes, made a fundamental mistake, one that led to the most severe and counterintuitive skepticism and disgraced philosophy in the process. We are told that we ought not to trust our senses, that we cannot reasonably draw conclusions about unobserved matters of fact, that the external world does not exist, indeed, that we ourselves do not exist. All of this, Reid points out, is “justly ridiculous, even to those who cannot detect the fallacy of it.” It leaves you with the impression that philosophy “can have no other tendency, than to shew the acuteness of the sophist, at the expense of disgracing reason and human nature, and making mankind Yahoos.”

Reid traces this disgrace back to what he calls “the ideal system,” a system of philosophy common to Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and others, which embodies assumptions that lead inevitably to ridiculous skeptical conclusions. Skepticism is “inlaid” in this system. One main principle of this system, this Way of Ideas is: **Immediacy**: “external objects of sense are too remote to act upon the mind immediately,” and so “there must be some image or shadow of them that is present to the mind, and is the immediate object of perception.” Reid resolves to root out this mistake.

But even before he is able to expose the flaw, he is certain that it is flawed. “A traveler of good judgment may mistake his way, and be unawares led into a wrong track; and, while the road is fair before him, he may go on without suspicion and be followed by others; but, when it ends in a coal pit, it requires no great judgment to know that he hath gone wrong, nor perhaps to find out what misled him.”

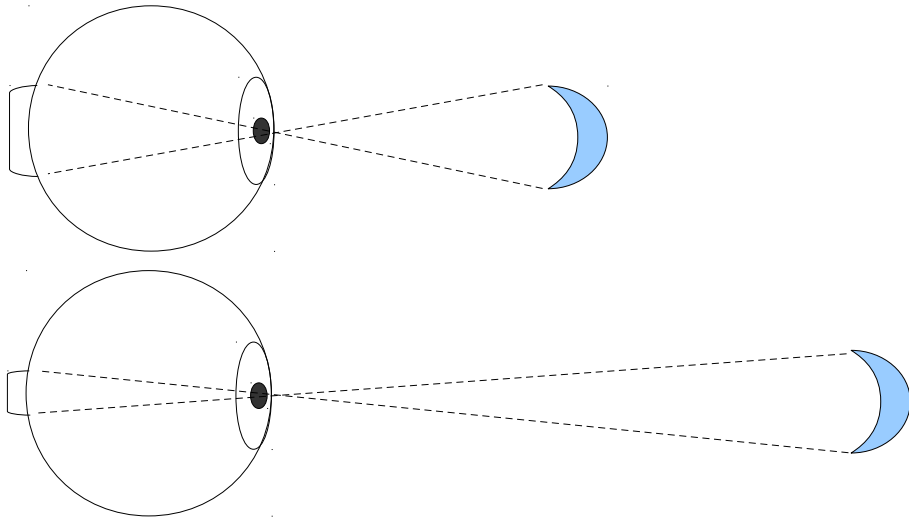
2. Against Hume

Reid discusses an argument of Hume’s, intended to establish Immediacy. Hume recognized that people naively believe that they see ordinary objects. “But,” Hume reasons, “this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us that nothing can ever be present to the mind

but an image or perception; and that the senses are only the inlets through which these images are received, without being ever able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object. The table, which we see, seems to diminish as we remove farther from it: but the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration. It was, therefore, nothing but its image which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man who reflects ever doubted that the existences which we consider, when we say *this house*, and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies and representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent.” Here’s a reconstruction of the argument. Consider an ordinary circumstance in which I direct my gaze at a table.

1. The table does not diminish in magnitude when I recede from it. (Premise)
2. What I see diminishes in magnitude when I recede from it. (Premise)
3. So what I see is not the table. (From 1 and 2)

Reid responds that the argument commits a fallacy of equivocation. We must distinguish between an object’s *real magnitude* and its *apparent magnitude*. **Real magnitude** is measured in meters or feet, and is a constant property of the object, even as we approach or withdraw from it. **Apparent magnitude** is measured by the angle that the object “subtends at the eye.” “Supposing two right lines drawn from the eye to the extremities of the object making an angle, of which the object is the subtense, the apparent magnitude is measured by this angle.” Another way of thinking about it: imagine the eye as a circle; with the object placed directly in front of the eye, draw straight lines from the object’s top and bottom, through the lens’s center, terminating on the retina. This creates an angle that intercepts an arc on the “circle” of the eye. The object’s apparent magnitude can be expressed as the arc’s measure in degrees. An object’s apparent magnitude does not remain constant as we approach or withdraw from it, as demonstrated by the following diagrams:



Thus, the first premise is true if we read ‘magnitude’ as ‘real magnitude’, and the second premise is true if we read ‘magnitude’ as ‘apparent magnitude’, but there’s no single reading of ‘magnitude’ on which both premises turn out true. Thus, Hume’s argument fails.

Indeed, Reid points out that the very facts in question, on which both he and Hume agree, strongly support Reid’s own view that the object of perception is an external object, for the apparent magnitude varies *exactly* as one would expect were it the apparent magnitude of an external object.

3. Against Berkeley

Berkeley’s idealist thesis, that everything that exists is either a mind or an idea, appears absurd. Reid contends that it is a consequence of the Way of Ideas, perhaps along with Descartes’s teaching “that the existence of the objects of sense is not self-evident, but requires to be proved by arguments.” Berkeley’s idealism rests squarely upon the opening sentence of his *Principles*, where he claims that it is just obvious that “the objects of human knowledge” are, one and all, ideas. Reid says that if Berkeley is right about this, then “indeed, the existence of a material world

must be a dream that has imposed upon all mankind from the beginning of the world.” So Reid asks: Is Berkeley right? Reid confesses, “I once believed this doctrine of ideas so firmly as to embrace the whole of Berkeley’s system in consequence; till, finding other consequences to follow from it, which gave me more uneasiness than the want of a material world.” Reid presents three objections to Berkeley’s view.

First objection: it isn’t self-evident. Berkeley *says* that it is self-evident; he doesn’t argue for it. Reid takes exception to this: “Self-evident propositions are those which appear evident to every man of sound understanding who apprehends the meaning of them distinctly, and attends to them without prejudice. Can this be said of this proposition, That all the objects of our knowledge are ideas in our own mind? I believe that, to any man uninstructed in philosophy, this proposition will appear very improbable, if not absurd.” So the proposition is not self-evident.

Second objection: it rules out common objects of perception. Reid believes Berkeley failed to adequately address the following objection. Berkeley says that we perceive our ideas. I perceive my ideas, and you perceive your ideas. But my ideas are not the same things as your ideas. So you and I do not perceive the same things. Surely this is false.

Third objection: it robs us of our loved ones. Reid also objects to Berkeley’s view on the grounds that it leads to solipsism, or something near enough. “What I call a father, a brother, or a friend, is only a parcel of ideas in my own mind; and, being ideas in my mind, they cannot possibly have that relation to another mind which they have to mine, and any more than the pain felt by me can be the individual pain felt by another. I can find no principle in Berkeley’s system, which affords me even probable ground to conclude that there are other intelligent beings, like myself, in the relations of father, brother, friend, or fellow-citizen. I am left alone, as the only creature of God in the universe.”

Main source: EIP 2.10, 2.14