

REID ON FICTIONAL OBJECTS AND THE WAY OF IDEAS

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I argue that Reid adopts a form of Meinongianism about fictional objects (to be anachronistic) because of, not in spite of, his commonsense philosophical intuitions. According to the Way of Ideas, thoughts take representational states as their immediate intentional objects. In contrast Reid endorses a direct theory of conception and a heady thesis of first-person privileged access about the contents of our thoughts. Reid claims that thoughts about centaurs are thoughts of genuinely non-existent objects—not thoughts about mental intermediaries, adverbial states or general concepts—in part because of the commonsense semantics he adopts for fictional object terms. I show that Reid is rational to endorse Meinongianism (even if it is false) given his epistemological priorities. For Reid took the Way of Ideas to imply that his view about first-person privileged access to our mental contents is false.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our criticisms of historical philosophers, when not of a constructive nature, typically fall into one of two classes. First, one might say of an historical theory that it is incoherent, which I take to indicate not mere inconsistency, but rather unmitigated inconsistency at the conceptual heart of a theory. On occasion this type of criticism is said to apply not merely to a theory but to an historical philosopher's entire system, an accusation Catherine Wilson

brings against Leibniz, for example.¹ Second, one might say that an historical theory is false, even though coherent. While we may have good reason to think that some of Reid's theories are false, one rarely sees criticisms alleging that they are not understandable or that his philosophical system is confused. In part this is because Reid thinks systematically and keeps himself apprised of the logical relations one theory bears to others he adopts. But if S.A. Grave is correct, then a large portion of Reid's work will be incoherent. Grave rhetorically asks,

What does Reid mean when he says that a centaur is the direct object of the conception of a centaur and that there are no centaurs, that the circle does not exist and is the direct object of the conception of it? One would like to be quite sure that Reid himself knew even vaguely. He goes on to speak of our conception of objects that do not exist as if he had said something perfectly straightforward, as though there was no appearance of self-contradiction in it which needed to be explained away.²

Grave thinks Reid fails to understand his own theory of conception, or, less provocatively, Reid's theory of conception as applied to fictional objects is incoherent.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Reid's analysis of the mind's ability to conceive of fictional objects coheres with his other philosophical commitments. I will show that Reid's analysis of the mind's relation to fictional objects may be false, but it is not

¹ 'The Illusory Nature of Leibniz's System', in R. Gennaro and C. Huenemann (eds), *New Essays on the Rationalists* (Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 372-388.

² *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Clarendon, 1960), p. 36.

guilty of the more damning charge of incoherence. This necessitates (a) showing that, to be anachronistic, Reid is a Meinongian. Reid believes that we can conceive of and predicate of genuinely non-existent objects—objects which are not names, general concepts, properties or mental *ficta*. Part of the interest in this thesis lies in the reaction that I expect many will have to it: ‘Reid, standard-bearer of the commonsense tradition, champion of empirical methods in philosophy, a Meinongian?’ This is why I will (b) show that endorsing Meinongianism makes perfect sense for Reid once we fully appreciate the extent of his rejection of the Way of Ideas. In addition to illuminating what Reid himself regarded as a keystone of his response to the Way of Ideas and showing that he is not the prosaic commonsense philosopher we often think he is, a further motivation of this project arises from a desire to defend Reid against Grave’s allegation.

II. DEFLATIONISM, INFLATIONISM AND MEINONGIANISM

Richard Cartwright has presented a clever argument that we can use to elucidate negative existential claims.³ Where ‘S’ refers to a person’s belief *that unicorns do not exist*, the following paradoxical argument results:

- (1) S is about unicorns.
- (2) Unicorns must exist in some sense in order for S to be about them.
- (3) If unicorns exist in any sense, S is false.

³ ‘Negative Existentials’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (1960), pp. 629-39. His argument was originally about sentences, but my adaptation is about beliefs.

(4) Therefore, S is false.

Cartwright identifies possible responses to the argument on the basis of which premise we deny. There are inflationist, deflationist and Meinongian responses to this argument. Each position must choose between conflicting intuitions. On the one hand, we seem to have the ability to predicate of fictional creatures ('Pegasus is white') and individuate them (Pegasus from his offspring). On the other hand, unicorns and winged horses do not exist and to predicate of them seems to require maintaining at least that they have some type of intentional or mental existence.

Inflationists claim that to predicate anything at all—even negative existential claims—of unicorns, unicorns must have some measure of existence, thus affirming (2). They also claim that S is about unicorns. They thus deny (3) and argue that unicorns subsist or have some other mode of existence. What is lost by the inflationist in increasing his ontological commitments is gained by being able to explain our linguistic ability to individuate and predicate of unicorns. But spelling out what these different levels of predication are has been an intractable problem from Frege onwards.

Deflationists instead argue that there is, properly speaking, no type of existence we can attribute to unicorns. They might argue that the inflationist equivocates on 'exist' by believing that unicorns do not exist, and by denying (3). Deflationists hold that S is not about unicorns, but about something else entirely. Most commonly S is thought to be about a mental representation, e.g. one's idea of a unicorn. Alternatively one might say that S is about a property of the speaker affirming S. In either case, the deflationist keeps his ontology parsimonious at the expense of premise (1) and the privileged access to our mental

states that (1) presumes. It follows that people who think that they are talking about unicorns when uttering propositions about unicorns do not know what they are talking about. Deflationism necessitates an explanatory artifice (a theory of definite descriptions, for example) to account for the common tendency to predicate in these ways of fictional objects.

While Cartwright does not identify the third option with Meinong, James Van Cleve does.⁴ (I concur with Van Cleve that, contrary to popular belief, this—not inflationism—is Meinong’s mature position.) On the third option, *Meinongianism*, one denies (2). This is perhaps the most surprising of the three options due to the prevalence of the intuition that, to predicate of any object, it must exist under some description—whether physically, mentally or in a third realm. This is why Meinong seems scarcely coherent when writing that “There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects.”⁵ The Meinongianist does not need equivocal senses of ‘exist’ like the inflationist does, and so can affirm (3). But unlike the deflationist, the Meinongianist does not forsake privileged access to our mental states by denying (1).

Inflationism allegedly sacrifices ontology for epistemology, while deflationism allegedly sacrifices epistemology for ontology. It is not clear just how the advocate of the

⁴ ‘If Meinong is wrong, is McTaggart Right?’ *Philosophical Topics*, 24 (1996), pp. 231-254.

⁵ ‘A Theory of Objects’, in Roderick Chisholm (ed), *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology* (Free Press, 1960), pp. 76-117, at p. 83. (This is a translation of his ‘Über Gegenstandstheorie’, in *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie* (Barth, 1904).)

third position understands the stakes of the debate. As a result, one might well think that the Meinongian position is implausible. I will not defend the intrinsic plausibility of Meinongianism, nor the controversial assumption that denying (1) impugns any important variety of privileged access. Instead I will argue that this Meinongian position is actually Reid's position and I will explain why Reid adopts it. With this taxonomy, we will now look at how Reid describes our apprehension of fictional objects.

III. WHY REID IS A MEINONGIAN

When we “barely conceive,” says Reid, “the ingredients of that conception must either be things with which we were before acquainted by some other original power of the mind, or they must be parts of attributes of such things” (IP 367a).⁶ Reid is aware that this doctrine is not new. He explains his accord with Locke on the matter then argues that Hume's missing shade of blue is a red herring (IP 367b). The key difference between Reid and Locke is that, for Locke, sensations provide us all our ingredients for conceptions (for Hume, impressions fill this role), but Reid holds that we can be acquainted with objects directly, not through sensations, in virtue of the ability of objects to cause concepts in us

⁶ Abbreviations of references to the *Intellectual Powers* and the *Inquiry* are as follows: IP = *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* and INQ = *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, both in Sir William Hamilton (ed), *The Works of Thomas Reid* (Thoemmes Press, 1994). References to Hamilton's edition of the *Inquiry* will be followed by corresponding references to the new critical edition, Derek Brookes (ed), (Pennsylvania State UP, 1997), abbreviated 'B'.

formally. Strictly speaking, sensations, though physically necessary, are not sufficient for the production of our concepts of bodies. That Reid endorses a direct, non-representational theory of cognition serves as an assumption for the present study. I'll say something more about this at the conclusion of this paper.

Let's first consider Reid's affirmation of (1) and (3). Reid's affirmation of (3), *that if unicorns exist in any sense, S is false*, is not nearly as explicit as his affirmation of (1), but it does not have to be. Of course, when I say Reid affirms (3) I mean that Reid affirms the schematic proposition under which (3) falls, namely the proposition that if a fictional object exists in any sense, then the proposition in which its existence is denied is false.

There are difficulties in showing that Reid affirms (3). First, there are difficulties of interpretation (e.g., as what type of conditional is (3) best construed?). Second, it does not seem as though Reid has a conceptual repertoire imbued with various concepts of existence, which is needed to articulate (3). The only distinction with which he seems familiar in this context is the crude formal/objective distinction as presented by Descartes; Reid shows no awareness of Avicenna or Aquinas on this topic. Rather than take this as a difficulty in showing that Reid affirms (3), it is actually a telling difficulty in showing he denies (3). For I doubt Reid ever seriously considered reasons for which one would deny (3). His plain-spoken philosophical vocabulary, which lays atop his equally commonsensical methodology, militates against any attempt to find distinctions between uses of 'existence' in Reid. But doing just that would be required to show that Reid denies (3). The only option within Reid's purview is to claim that our thoughts of unicorns are thoughts of other thoughts, i.e. of

unicorns objectively in thought. But it will become apparent presently, in our consideration of Reid's affirmation of (1), that Reid rejects this option.

Reid's affirmation of (1)—*that S is about unicorns*—is more detailed because (1) is of considerably more philosophical importance than (3). Reid affirms that our thoughts of fictional objects are of non-existent objects and not of something else. He says, "I conceive a centaur. This conception is an operation of the mind, of which I am conscious, and to which I can attend. The sole object of it is a centaur, an animal which, I believe, never existed. I see no contradiction in this" (IP 373a). The object of the act of conception is a non-existent, fictional being, an imaginary creature with the head and torso of a human and the body of a horse.

He continues by saying, "The philosopher says, I cannot conceive a centaur without having an idea of it in my mind. ... Perhaps he will say, that the idea is an image of the animal, and is the immediate object of my conception, and that the animal is the mediate or remote object." To this Reid first responds by arguing that upon inspection of the content of his thought, there appears to be only one object of conception, not two. Second, the single object of conception "is not the image of an animal—it is an animal. I know what it is to conceive an image of an animal, and what it is to conceive an animal; and I can distinguish the one of these from the other without any danger or mistake" (IP 373a-b). This marks a gratuitously simplistic semantics for fictional object terms, one that I hesitate to attribute to any advocate of the Ideal Theory. (I will follow Reid in referring to the Way of Ideas as the 'Ideal Theory' for ease of use.) Leaving Reid's abilities as an historian of philosophy to one side, though, this comment marks an unequivocal affirmation of premise (1), that an agent's

belief *that unicorns do not exist* is about unicorns, and a corresponding denial of the deflationist position.

Of course, Reid might affirm (1) and (3) without denying (2) if he had some other means to escape the conclusion of the argument but, as I will now show, his denial of (2) is quite explicit. Reid remarks flatly that “conception is often employed about objects that neither do, nor did, nor will exist” (IP 368a; cf. IP 292a). In fact, Reid sees the deflationary way out of the paradox as one of the Ideal Theory’s most far-reaching philosophical errors. The Ideal Theory falsely assumed that “in all the operations of understanding, there must be an object of thought, which really exists while we think of it; or, as some philosophers have expressed it, that which is not cannot be intelligible” (IP 368b). Not only does this comment imply the falsity of (2), its truth is inconsistent with deflationism. The deflationist claims that my thought of a unicorn is about something else that does exist. But Reid is quite clear that such conceptions are not about anything that exists. So the deflationist move that switches the object of thought from something that does not exist, a unicorn, to something that does exist, an idea, is not open to Reid. In fact, Reid makes the further claim, of his belief that we can think of items that do not exist in any way at all, that he knows “no truth more evident to the common sense and to the experience of mankind” (IP 368a-b).

Deflationism is committed to an ontology with mental representations, like ideas. Reid has given many reasons to think that ideas are not the direct objects of our other faculties. Perceptions do not take ideas as intentional objects, but rather take physical bodies

and physical qualities as their intentional objects.⁷ He says the same about memory beliefs and about conceptions. To think that there is a mental entity lurking within an act of imagination, i.e. “to infer from this that there is really an image in the mind, ... is to be misled by an analogical expression; as if, from the phrases of deliberating and balancing things in the mind, we should infer that there is really a balance existing in the mind...” (373b). Reid’s rejection of this kind of deflationism is of a piece with his desire to ferret out the Ideal Theory’s philosophical corruptions.

We can directly conceive of creatures that have never existed just as we can directly conceive of structures that no longer exist, or events that have passed. Indeed, Reid claims that we can conceive of an object that will never exist, a circle:

What is the idea of a circle? I answer, it is the conception of a circle. What is the immediate object of this conception? The immediate and the only object of it is a circle. But where is this circle? It is nowhere. If it was an individual, and had real existence, it must have a place; but, being an universal, it has no existence, and therefore no place. (IP 374a)

Reid gives no indication that he is attempting to be subtle here by employing finely-grained senses of ‘existence’.

As a result of Reid’s affirmation of (1) and (3) and his denial of (2), I infer that Reid adopts what I have described as the Meinongian position. We can predicate of non-existent objects, which implies that existence is a property in roughly the same sense that this phrase

⁷ I develop Reid’s analysis of this process in my ‘Learning and Conceptual Content in Reid’s Theory of Perception’, forthcoming in *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.

is given in ontological arguments. (For the sake of completeness I have attempted to determine whether, in a philosophy of religion context, Reid commits himself to a view about existence sympathetic to the present interpretation. Unfortunately Reid does not discuss ontological arguments. He does say that necessary existence is “an attribute belonging to the deity,” but that is equivocal, as are his other statements in his discussion of God’s nature.⁸) I want to proceed by examining possible interpretations that do not attribute Meinongianism to Reid.

IV. TWO ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

There are two noteworthy interpretations that might be put forward as better representing Reid’s views on the non-existent than the one I favor. Naturally, a host of contemporary ways of analyzing negative existential claims may be used to salvage Reid’s theory, but I am restricting my attention to interpretive options open to Reid. Both of these options are deflationist. The first is inspired by Reid’s adverbial construal of sensations, while the second draws from Reid’s analysis of universals. Crucial to both attempts is showing that Reid links his analysis of fictional objects to his analysis of sensations or general concepts. I will argue that Reid does not do so.

First, Reid’s theory of sensation may be used here to ground an interpretation on which our conception of non-existent objects is adverbial in nature. An adverbial theory of

⁸ E. Duncan (ed.), *Thomas Reid’s Lectures on Natural Theology (1780)* (University Press of America, 1981), p. 63.

sensation is a theory according to which sensory states are best analyzed not as sense-data (as on the Ideal Theory) or representational states, but as purely qualitative states, i.e. as ways in which we are aware. Paradigmatically, the sensory experience of seeing a red chair is more accurately redescribed as seeing the chair by sensing redly. Avoiding problems associated with representational theories of sensation principally motivates the adoption of an adverbial analysis.

There is abundant textual evidence for such a construal of Reid's theory of sensations in both major works. Reid claims that a sensation "can have no existence but when it is perceived, and can only be in a sentient being or mind" (INQ 114; B 43). Furthermore, sensation does not have an intentional object—though the perceptual event of which the sensation is a part is directed at an object. He says that "in sensation, there is no object distinct from that act of mind by which it is felt..." (IP 310a) and, "I can attend to what I feel, and the sensation is nothing else, nor has any other qualities than what I feel it to have. Its *esse* is *sentiri*, and nothing can be in it that is not felt" (B 258).⁹ Sensations do not exist independently of being apprehended or felt.

If we believe that Reid adopts an adverbial theory of sensation, then the way seems open to extend this interpretation to non-existent objects. According to this analysis, one's apprehension of a unicorn would become, not a matter of taking a fictional object as the intentional object of a thought, but rather a manner of thinking. The primary advantage of an adverbial theory of the conception of non-existent objects lies in the way in which it

⁹ This is drawn from an undated abstract of the Inquiry prepared by Reid for Hume's review. It is addressed to Reid's intermediary, 'The Revd Doctor Blair'.

moves such objects into the mental realm. This move largely nullifies the perplexity of their ontological status. Reid no longer needs to deny (2). In order to escape the conclusion of our argument, the adverbial interpretation has Reid deny (1).

Despite the *prima facie* circumstantial case for such an interpretation, this is not Reid's analysis. While Reid recognizes that the act of conceiving is a mental activity, for this interpretation to succeed it must be shown that conceiving of non-existent objects is not an intentional state that takes an object. However, first, there are no explicit textual sources for believing that Reid applies his doctrine of adverbial sensation to the objects of conception in general, nor any evidence that he applies this doctrine to non-existent objects of conception in particular. Since he is clear that pain is a state of the mind that does not take an object, we are warranted in expecting a similar measure of forthrightness about any application of an adverbial analysis to the conception of non-existent objects.

There are further reasons against endorsing this interpretation in addition to this textual point. The adverbial theory of conception must hold that conceptions are purely qualitative, like sensations. By taking this route, the adverbialist claims that S is not *about* anything, therefore S is not about unicorns. Two points show this is implausible.

First, consider Reid's distinction between sensations and conceptions. According to Reid's adverbial analysis of sensation, sensory states are nothing over and above their qualitative properties. But according to Reid what distinguishes conceptions from sensations is that once we remove all the phenomenal properties associated with a conception, something remains, viz. the mental content. Reid's discussion of conception is not often lucid, but one point about which he is clear is that conceptual states take objects and are not

merely phenomenal states. Given his distinction between conception and sensation, this interpretation of fictional objects is implausible.

The second reason against the adverbialist's attempt to replace the propositional content in conceptions with phenomenological content is straightforwardly philosophical. The notion that conceptual states are purely phenomenal is not obviously coherent, which is to say that Reid's distinction between sensory and conceptual states is a good one. We tend to give Chisholm and other advocates of adverbial theories of sensation some latitude in their creative redescriptions of sensory states. Certain facets of a philosophical account of sensory experience will be elusive, which we may attribute to the ineffable qualities of phenomenological experience. But in the case of accounting for propositional contents, we are entitled to raise our expectations. The adverbialist fails to meet these expectations because it is difficult to understand what it means to say, for example, that I conceive that-Reid-was-a-Meinongian-ly, or that-Pegasus-is-white,-flies,-and-has-four-legs-ly. Such a state does not seem comprehensible. Thus, to deny that conceptions are about anything at all fails as a strategy to show that Reid does not endorse a Meinongian position.

The second alternative interpretation draws upon Reid's description of what he refers to as 'general conceptions'. This strategy would also require two steps. The first would be to show that Reid endorses a non-Meinongian account of general concepts (which Reid also calls 'universals'). This could be either a form of inflationism—that universals exist in a third realm, or a form of deflationism—that there is no sense in which they exist or can be predicated of independent of real particulars. The second step would involve showing that Reid applies what he says about general concepts to fictional individuals. I will present some

reasons for thinking that what Reid says about universals tends to sound very much like what we have already observed him to say about fictional objects, and thus that this strategy cannot progress beyond the first step just described. Reid's considered view on this matter, though, is perplexing.

Reid explains that we form general conceptions in three steps: first we analyze an object's attributes and name the them; then we observe one attribute's presence in many objects; and third, we combine "into one whole a certain number of those attributes of which we have formed abstract notions, and [give] a name to that combination" (IP 394b). Reid repeatedly denies that these names name anything that exists (see IP, V, ii). He says that if a universal were to exist, "then it would be an individual; but it is a thing that is conceived without regard to existence" (IP 398a). More forthrightly, Reid says "universals have no real existence" (IP 407a). Or, if one would like to talk of them as 'existing', one must know that "Their existence is nothing but predicability, or the capacity of being attributed to a subject. The name of predicables, which was given them in ancient philosophy, is that which most properly expresses their nature" (IP 407a-b). This is because we do not attribute to universals "an existence in time or place, but existence in some individual subject; and this existence means no more but that they are truly attributes of such a subject" (IP 407a).

It seems that these passages allow us to conclude that Reid is not an inflationist (a 'realist') about universals. While he is struggling to find a way to articulate his view in common language, we know that, in whatever curious form universals do 'exist' for Reid, they do not exist independently of real particulars.

In fact, these passages seem to point toward a Meinongian interpretation of Reid on

universals, for it seems as though Reid claims that they do not exist, even though we can talk about them. Keith Lehrer and Vann McGee see Reid as endorsing some type of view in this neighborhood, even though they are not primarily concerned with making a textual case for this attribution. They say, “Reid himself was unequivocal. *Universals do not exist*. We conceive of universals—that is, according to Reid, we know the meanings of general terms—but when we conceive of universals, as when we conceive of centaurs, we are conceiving of something that does not exist” (my italics).¹⁰ For Reid the claim that ‘universals do not exist’ seems to mean that universals do not exist on any of the following three options: as ideas or mental entities, as Platonic entities in a third realm, or as exemplifications in particular things. Thus, when Reid does discuss universals, he takes them to be something like Meinongian entities: items that, though they do not exist, can nonetheless be predicated of.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has also addressed this issue, and he says just the opposite: “it’s clear that Reid, in spite of linguistic appearances, was not a nominalist: *there are universals*” (my italics).¹¹ He claims that because Reid thinks that universals exist at all, Reid must not be a

¹⁰ ‘Particulars, Individual Qualities and Universals’, in K. Mulligan (ed), *Language, Truth and Ontology* (Kluwer, 1992), pp. 37-47, at p. 41.

¹¹ *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 73. Wolterstorff claims explicitly that Reid was not a Meinongian. However, his account of Meinongianism resembles a form of what we have been calling ‘inflationism’. Wolterstorff says, “Reid was not a Meinongian; I see no evidence that he even so much as entertained the thought that the substances that exist might constitute a subset of those that have being” (74). That is true, for Reid clearly does not utilize concepts of *existence*, *being* and *subsistence* to explain

nominalist. Thus, perhaps he could alight upon Reid saying that “universals have no *real* existence” (my italics) and argue that, since Reid modifies ‘existence’ with ‘real’, there must be a sense of ‘existence’ appropriately predicated of universals. This, however, is not sufficient to think that Reid is not a nominalist. Reid might adopt a form of nominalism and contend that universals exist *only* in the sense that there are particulars that share attributes. Evidently, though, Wolterstorff believes Reid does not endorse such a sense of nominalism since he says that Reid “was not a nominalist”. Hence, given the persuasive evidence that Reid does not think universals exist in any Platonic sense, the most charitable way to understand Wolterstorff is by reading him as claiming that universals exist in a mental realm of ideas. But if that is what he means, then the texts do not give much succor to his interpretation.

The principal barrier in understanding Reid’s position—and the interpretations of his commentators on this topic—is that these uses of ‘exist’ and ‘are’ are equivocal. When two of Reid’s foremost commentators, Lehrer and Wolterstorff, come to diametrically opposed positions it is likely that there is either some serious ambiguity about the meanings of key terms, or that there is simply no clear truth to the matter, in this case, of what Reid’s analysis

fictional objects. But I have shown that Reid commits himself to another form of Meinongianism, no less worthy of the appellation. At different points in his career Meinong endorsed both the ‘subsistence’ theory Wolterstorff identifies as ‘Meinongianism’ and the ‘non-existence, non-subsistence’ view I have identified with that term. Though this point may be important for determining priority issues with respect to the development of theories of fictional objects, settling the matter is wholly irrelevant to my interpretation of Reid.

of universals is—or both. We've seen evidence to think that some fundamental ambiguities run through Reid's discussion of universals, but in addition (which none of the disputants mention) Reid himself indicates that he does not know what universals are. He remarks, "As to the manner of how we conceive universals, I confess my ignorance" (IP 407b). Hence, we need to recognize the strong possibility that Reid has no determinate view on universals. In fact, in a much more thorough study of Reid on universals than either of the two discussed thus far, Susan Castagnetto gets us no further. After her analysis she concludes, "But there is still something odd about maintaining that there are universals even though universals don't really exist."¹² This, of course, sounds just like what Reid says about fictional particulars, which brings us full circle.

We have more evidence for interpreting Reidian universals as Meinongian non-existent objects than we do to interpret them as either mental entities, Platonic entities or sets of real particulars. However, I remain skeptical about finding out just what Reid's theory is. Whatever view about universals it is that we conclude Reid adopts, it is sure to be significantly underdetermined. Such being the case, we cannot use what Reid says about universals to illuminate what he says about fictional objects.

Earlier I mentioned that if one seeks to use Reid's discussion of universals to refute my interpretation of Reid as a Meinongian about fictional objects, then one could show that he endorses a non-Meinongian theory of universals, then show that, for Reid, fictional objects have the same ontological status as universals. Even if we were to assume that Reid

¹² 'Reid's Answer to Abstract Ideas', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 17 (1992), pp. 39-60, at p. 46.

endorses an inflationist or deflationist view about universals, that would still only bring my interlocutor to the end of the first stage of the process. In order to vindicate this interpretation, one must then show that Reid believes that fictional individuals like Pegasus have the same status as universals. But Reid does not explicitly give succor to such a move.

There are philosophical reasons against this position. Suppose Reid endorses a deflationist, nominalist interpretation. Then ‘centaur’ and ‘horse’ might refer to classes of instantiated properties in roughly the same way. However, it is not clear this makes any sense. ‘Horse’ refers to the set of objects that are members of the class of objects that are properly called ‘horses’. But the property of being a centaur has no instantiations, thus we cannot interpret Reid’s use of fictional object kind terms as being relevantly similar to his use of general concept terms. Even if it were possible to analyze fictional object kind terms in accord with general concepts, fictional object particular terms like ‘Pegasus’ cannot refer to a set of property instantiations. This is for the same reasons that ‘Secretariat’ cannot refer to a set of property instantiations. ‘Secretariat’ refers to the particular bearer or, as Reid puts it, ‘subject’ of properties because Secretariat is an individual and we can individuate him from other thoroughbreds. Given a commonsense semantics for fictional object terms, the same is said of Pegasus, which is also an individual. Likewise, then, Reid will be unable to preserve the individuality of Pegasus and explain how it is that my thought of Pegasus is about Pegasus and not something else, if he were to hold that Pegasus is a set of property instantiations.

More important than these reasons, though, is that any non-Meinongian construal of universals will fail to preserve Reid’s commonsense epistemic intuitions. He says that when thinking of a centaur the object of that act “is a centaur, an animal which, I believe, never

existed.” The Ideal Theory implies this commonsense commitment is incorrect, and that instead I am thinking of an *idea* of a centaur, to which Reid asks, “What then is this idea? Is it an animal, half horse and half man? No. Then I am certain it is not the thing I conceive” (IP 373a). This commonsense semantics would produce the very same result were we to suppose that fictional object terms like ‘centaur’ refer either to mental representations of centaurs or to a set of property instantiations. For I know that an animal that is half horse and half man is not merely a set of property instantiations, just as I know that a horse or a man is not merely a set of property instantiations. They are rather subjects of predication.

I wish to explore Reid’s allegiance to these commonsense epistemic intuitions presently in order to uncover the deeper reasons for which Reid adopts Meinongianism. Why, after all, is Reid drawn to such naïve commonsense intuitions in the first place?

V. REJECTING THE IDEAL THEORY

Rather than conclude that Reid’s endorsement of Meinongianism is a blunder on his part, I will show that Reid exercises some measure of good judgment and an attention to internal consistency in arriving at this surprising conclusion. To do this, I will explain Reid’s central, epistemological motivation for adopting Meinongianism and I will analyze how it arises from Reid’s rejection of the Ideal Theory.

Reid writes to James Gregory, “The merit of what you are pleased to call my philosophy, lies, I think, chiefly in having called in question the common theory of ideas.”¹³

¹³ Reprinted in Hamilton (ed), *Op. Cit.*, p. 88b. (The date of writing is not supplied.)

Reid is not merely being self-effacing; he's being honest, and his dictum is especially apropos to the present discussion. Reid's arrival at Meinongianism follows from his examination of what he takes to be the two key commitments of the Ideal Theory. He writes,

There are two prejudices which seem to me to have given rise to the theory of ideas in all the various forms in which it has appeared in the course of above two thousand years... . The first is—That, in all the operations of the understanding, there must be some immediate intercourse between the mind and its object, so that the one may act upon the other. The second, That, in all the operations of the understanding, there must be an object of thought, which really exists while we think of it; or, as some philosophers have expressed it, that which is not cannot be intelligible. (IP 368b, cf. IP 274a)

To clarify Reid's attributions, we can say that the Ideal Theory is committed to (a) and (b):

(a) For all intentional states of the mind, their immediate objects are mental representations.

This is a principle of cognitive contact. And secondly,

(b) That which does not exist cannot be the object of intentional states of the mind.

In (a) Reid attributes to the Ideal Theory the thesis that our mental states take representations as their immediate objects. I understand Reid's (b) to be equivalent to the statement that, since we are immediately aware of representational intermediaries, they must exist under some description. It does not matter for Reid's purposes whether these representations allegedly exist in mental form (as ideas) or physical form (as brain states) for Reid explicitly rejects both construals of representations.

By underappreciating the force of these two commitments S.A. Grave insinuates, in the *bon not* above (p. 2), that Reid does not know the contours of his own account of fictional objects. It will help us avoid Grave's error to understand Reid's analysis in light of (a) and (b). (An added point of interest in this discussion is the fact that (a) resembles the central commitment of what some, Laurence Bonjour for example, identify as the predominant contemporary theory of cognition.¹⁴)

Reid believes that, amongst the advocates of the Ideal Theory, Hume and Locke in particular are committed to (a) and (b). Furthermore, Reid thinks that any such commitments will render implausible one's theory of cognition. I want to motivate Reid's attribution of (a) and (b) to an historical proponent of the Ideal Theory, so let us look briefly at Hume. Hume's assent to (b), if not already obvious, can be inferred from comments like this:

To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoined with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form.

(T 67)¹⁵

Ideas and impressions must exist because, by conceiving them, we call them into existence.

Thesis (a) may be broken down into two parts, one that affirms the immediacy of

¹⁴ 'Is Thought a Symbolic Process?', *Synthese* 89 (1991), pp. 331-352, at p. 336. (He does not draw any connection to Reid.)

¹⁵ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, P. Nidditch (ed), (Oxford UP, 1978), hereafter 'T'.

representations, and another that affirms the representative features of mental intermediaries. Hume affirms both portions of (a). As to the immediacy of representations, he says that the

only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness, command our strongest assent, and are the first foundation of all our conclusions... . [A]s no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions; it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. (T 212; cf. T 193)

He also affirms that ideas are representational. Hume explains that “all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent” (T 4). Ideas represent, though they can only represent impressions (T 241; cf. 67, 188), not external objects.

By this admittedly brief case on behalf of Reid's attribution of (a) and (b) to Hume I only intend to show that Reid does have some reason to think that his predecessors fit the mold he casts for them. (A sound case can be made for Locke's adoption of (a) and (b), although we cannot squeeze Berkeley into these conceptual confines since Berkeley does not assent to (b).)

Let us now turn to showing how Reid's Meinongianism stems from his repudiation of (a) and (b). Reid's empirical method in his analysis of the operation of our mental faculties leads him to conclude that (a) and (b) imply we generally do not know what we are thinking

about. This marks the failure of the Ideal Theory to account for what Reid takes to be an epistemological datum. Assume (a) and we can coax out of Reid the following argument:

(5) ‘Centaur’ refers to non-existent beasts that are half-man, half-horse. (definition)

(6) Since nothing that does not exist can be the object of thought, person P cannot think of centaurs. (from (a) and (5))

(7) P believes that he can and does think of centaurs. (premise)

Reid believes he speaks in the name of commonsense when saying, “I conceive a centaur. This conception is an operation of the mind, of which I am conscious, and to which I can attend. The sole object of it is a centaur, an animal which, I believe, never existed” (IP 373a). This and like-minded passages clearly warrant attributing (7) to Reid. It follows that:

(8) When P tokens a thought P thinks is about centaurs, P is mistaken in his identification of the content of his thought. (from (6) and (7))

Now Reid seeks to generalize the result achieved in (8). P fails to have privileged access to his mental contents not only in cases in which P tokens thoughts about centaurs and other fictional objects, but in most other cases as well. Since (a) is a universal generalization,

(9) P is mistaken in identifying the content of his thought T whenever P believes that T’s content is about anything other than a mental representation. (from (8) and (a))

Reid draws the line here: commonsense epistemological principles must hold sway over implications of the Ideal Theory.

(10) It is obvious that P is not systematically mistaken about the contents of thoughts about things other than P’s mental states. (premise)

(11) Therefore, (a) is false. (by reductio from (9) and (10))

The contemporary flair of the argument is obvious for related concerns have been raised about externalist theories of content by a number of philosophers. Like Reid, current defenders of privileged access also take an epistemic principle roughly similar to (10) as philosophically non-negotiable.

The key step in this argument is the inference from (8) and (a) to (9). We are justified in attributing this step to Reid in part on the basis of a passage (which I have already quoted in part) in which Reid describes what he takes to be the deleterious epistemological consequences of a commitment to (a). The object of thought when thinking about a centaur, he says,

is not the image of an animal—it is an animal. I know what it is to conceive an image of an animal, and what it is to conceive an animal; and I can distinguish the one of these from the other without any danger or mistake. The thing I conceive is a body of a certain figure and colour, having life and spontaneous motion. The philosopher says, that the idea is an image of the animal; but that it has neither body, nor colour, nor life, nor spontaneous motion. This I am not able to comprehend. (IP 373a-b)

Reid emphasizes epistemological considerations earlier in the *Intellectual Powers* also. Speaking of a commitment to a representational theory of cognition, Reid says that

the necessary consequence of this seems to be, that there are two objects of this thought—the idea, which is in the mind, and the person represented by that idea; the first, the immediate object of the thought, the last, the object of the same thought, but not the immediate object. This is a hard saying; for it makes every thought of

things external to have a double object. Every man is conscious of his thoughts, and yet, upon attentive reflection, he perceives no such duplicity in the object he thinks about. (IP 278b; cf. IP 369a-b)

I take this passage as a repudiation of (9). Together these passages show that Reid presumes a heady view about the transparency of first-person access. (He is unaware of twin earth cases and other considerations on behalf of externalism about content, as is to be expected).

Let us now consider some possible responses from Hume in order to improve our understanding of Reid's *modus operandi*. Hume would argue that instead of conceiving of something that is half-horse, half-man, humans are actually conceiving of a mental representation of such a thing. He would affirm (5) but deny (7). He might do this by arguing for a semantics of fictional object terms such that our dealings with centaurs come under two concepts—'centaur', the use denoted in (5), and 'centaur₂', which refers to representations of centaurs. Indeed, Reid himself could be seen as *prima facie* engendering such a semantics when he says, "What is meant by conceiving a thing? we should very naturally answer, that it is having an image of it in the mind—and perhaps we could not explain the word better. This shews that conception, and the image of a thing in the mind, are synonymous expressions" (IP 363a). However, despite the fact that Reid allows imagination a role in conceiving, he is quick to observe that talk of images in the mind is strictly analogical. Common usage puts images into the mind, but, in truth, "We know nothing that is properly in the mind but thought; and, when anything else is said to be in the mind, the expression must be figurative and signify some kind of thought" (IP 363a).

Furthermore, one might think this response amounts to the factual claim that humans have two concepts for all non-existent terms. Reid would argue that this does not let Hume off the hook. For (a) and (b) impel Hume to posit equivocal concepts not just for non-existent objects like centaurs, but for all sorts of other non-existent objects, like formerly existent people, and even for existent objects of perception. Of course, Hume does something quite like this in the *Treatise* (at I, ii) when he distinguishes between vulgar and philosophical views about what our senses tell us. But Reid's commonsense commitments prevent him from taking this option—of affirming (5) and denying (7)—seriously.

Secondly, Hume may simply deny outright that we do know what we are thinking about in cases in which the objects of our thoughts are allegedly things other than mental states, i.e. deny (10). We can motivate this response by considering that often one perceives some object and believes that it is one thing but discovers, on closer observation, that the object is something else. This is not merely true of perceptions. Fregean cases of referential opacity indicate that this can be true of what Reid calls 'conceptions' as well.

Reid would respond by arguing that, were Hume to say this, he would conflate two different mental operations. Reid holds that conception is crucially related to other mental faculties, but is not absorbed by them. This leads Reid to make a distinction between 'bare' and 'coordinated' conceptions. Reid calls some acts of conception 'bare' because that which is conceived need not be the object of any other mental faculty (IP 361a). A "bare conception of a thing" is a conception that occurs "without any judgment or belief about it" (IP 360a). He adds, "We may distinctly conceive a proposition, without judging it at all" (IP 375a). It is thus possible that one merely conceives of something, whether a proposition,

image, event or state of affairs. In contrast, ‘coordinated’ conceptions (my term, not Reid’s) are conceptions occurring in tandem with the use of other mental faculties. When (since conception is a component of perception for Reid) I perceive Durham Cathedral, for example, the event of conceiving of the cathedral is coordinated with the perceptual event of seeing the cathedral.

Reid grants that in coordinated conceptions I will on occasion erroneously identify their objects. However, the fact that my coordinated conception is generated by the interaction of my senses with physical objects explains the error in perceptual cases and even in Hesperus/Phosphorus cases (since our conceptions in that case too are dependent on coordination with perceptual experiences). On the other hand, to suppose that I may incorrectly identify the objects of my own bare conceptual acts is a much stronger thesis. This is to say that I might be *imagining* my wife reading Cicero’s *De Domo Sua* and be wrong about that. Reid’s interlocutor here is claiming not simply that it is possible I erroneously omit from my imagistic conception of my wife that she was reading an Oxford Classical Texts edition of Cicero. Reid can allow that my bare conceptions may well be incomplete in various respects. In order to deny (10) Hume must make the significantly stronger objection that I may be in error that I am conceiving of my wife at all, i.e. that it is possible that I am conceiving of my *neighbor’s* wife instead. In contrast, Reid thinks that contents of propositional attitudes in bare conceptions are transparent. By describing bare conceptions as opaque, this response to Reid’s argument repudiates one’s ability to know the content of one’s mental states even when those states are tokened by only using the faculties of bare conception.

With this examination of two possible objections to Reid's argument I hope not to have defended the argument, but to have given the argument some Reidian texture. The success of Reid's argument relies upon a heady, tacit presumption of first-person privileged access. Reid supposes that I can think of centaurs while knowing that they do not exist. Given Reid's understanding of this assumption, he tacitly affirms the following crude disjunction: either I am mistaken that my thoughts about centaurs are about centaurs (and thus I must deny a robust thesis of privileged access), or I am thinking and predicating of something that does not exist (and thus I must affirm a form of Meinongianism).

VI. THE METAPHILOSOPHY BEHIND REID'S MEINONGIANISM

This is the dilemma Reid faced. The theories in each disjunct represent extreme positions. Those who wish to reject the Ideal Theory's commitment to a representational theory of thought (in (a) above) have many other options. On the one hand, even die-hard internalists about content would deny Reid's naïve thesis of privileged access. Rarely if ever do contemporary internalists claim that *no* content is *external*, but rather only that *some* content is *internal*. On the other hand, we could use any of a number of familiar tools in the philosophy of language to attempt to skirt the problems about predication Reid takes so seriously. These tools include Fregean distinctions between levels of predicates, two-sense theories that distinguish between 'exists' as applied to individuals and to kinds, Wittgensteinian appeals to 'formal concepts', or intensional logics purporting to account for the truth-value and logical form of propositions about fictional objects (or perhaps

combinations of these proposals). Motivating Meinongian commitments about negative existential claims can itself be carried off in a considerably more straightforward manner than via Reid's circuitous epistemological route.

A related option has been developed in this context by Marian David. He uses work of Brentano and Chisholm to make some distinctions between senses of 'exists', then argues that if Reid's theory is to be made plausible, Reid must be "committed to a restricted sense of 'to exist' in which it expresses a property like being-red, i.e. a property in virtue of which objects are distinguished from each other."¹⁶ (David seems to have in mind a use of 'exists' similar to what Roland Hall first called 'excluders'.¹⁷ By describing an object as an excluder, one allegedly excludes certain other descriptions without attributing any properties to the object.) Unfortunately, Reid's uses of 'exists', 'real' and 'object' do not permit an interpretation on which those terms function in the way David (and others of us) wish they did. For David's recommendation comes at the expense of Reid's denial of (2) above—that unicorns must exist in some sense in order for S to be about them. David concludes by saying, "Reid *should have* said 'name' or 'singular term' when he said 'object'... ." ¹⁸ For an unprejudiced ruling on Reid we would need to appraise certain advantages of Meinongianism more fully than is possible here, but I strongly suspect David speaks truly. Were Reid to have

¹⁶ 'Nonexistence and Reid's Conception of Conceiving', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 25-26 (1985-86), pp. 585-599, at p. 595.

¹⁷ 'Excluders', *Analysis* 10 (1959), pp. 1-7.

¹⁸ David, *Op. Cit.*, p. 599; my emphasis.

adopted David's suggestions or Russell's theory of descriptions, his theory of fictional object terms would have been more plausible than the view he does endorse.

Nonetheless, Reid's adoption of Meinongianism is understandable and rational *given his philosophical goals*. Reid is willing to accept untoward ontological commitments under the condition that doing so is necessary to preserve his staunch allegiance to what he considered non-negotiable principles. This underscores the epistemological nature of Reid's rejection of the Ideal Theory.

In fact, Reid adopts a direct theory of cognition for similar epistemological reasons. If John Haldane's work on Reid's theory of cognition¹⁹ is correct, as I believe it is, then Reid seems to endorse a theory similar to Aquinas' on which objects directly and formally cause our thoughts of them. Reid must thus argue that non-existent objects also formally cause our thoughts of them. I have attempted to explicate Reid's direct theory of cognition and account for its connection with his Meinongianism elsewhere.²⁰ Note for now that Laurence Bonjour, in describing his own rejection of contemporary representational theories of cognition, is right to ready himself for an alternative theory that "will have to involve metaphysics of a pretty hard-core kind."²¹ Bonjour seeks a non-representational theory of

¹⁹ See both 'Reid, Scholasticism and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind', in E. Mathews and M. Dalgarno (eds), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, (Kluwer, 1989), pp. 285-304, and 'Reid on the History of Ideas', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (2000), pp. 447-469.

²⁰ In 'Thinking, From Reid's Point of View', forthcoming.

²¹ Bonjour, *Op. Cit.*, p. 346

cognition for reasons in part having to do with first-person access to our contents—the sort of reasons exercising Reid. As this study shows, Reid is indeed prepared to do metaphysics of a ‘pretty hard-core kind’ to preserve his intuitions about privileged access.

Despite pervasive problems with Meinongianism, Reid nonetheless becomes a more interesting and *better* philosopher for endorsing this theory. For the only other textually plausible alternative reconstruction of Reid’s analysis of fictional objects is Grave’s, and by his lights Reid’s view is incoherent (or worse). In contrast, I have argued that Reid’s theory of fictional objects falls straightforwardly from his rejection of the Ideal Theory. While I share some of Grave’s consternation, my misgivings about Reid’s views arise not from the belief that Reid does not understand the contours of his own theory of non-existent objects, but from worries about what ontological positions Reid was willing to accept in the name of a commonsense epistemology.²²

NOTES

²² I have benefited from conversation and correspondence about these matters with Gideon Yaffe, George Pappas, and Jim Van Cleve, and from discussions with fellow participants in the 2000 NEH seminar on Thomas Reid, at which I presented an earlier version of this paper.