# The Reality of Knowing: The Status of Ideas in Aquinas and Reid

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Abstract:

Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Reid are philosophers who, while writing from very different historical and intellectual contexts, both share a common conviction as epistemological realists. This paper will argue that, despite any initial appearances of conflict, their arguments and conclusions are both compatible and complementary, and that through such an agreement we can come to a richer understanding of the realist tradition. At the heart of this unity lie the shared principles that:

• Knowledge involves a direct apprehension of things themselves.

• Ideas are not themselves objects or intermediaries, but the active means by which the intellect understands.

• The relationship between the mind and its object is not one of a material likeness, but of a formal likeness.

• The existence of external objects of knowledge is not demonstrable, but is a self-evident first principle.

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*For there shall be a time when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires they will heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears: And they will turn away indeed their hearing from the truth, but will be turned to fables.*

2 Timothy, 4.3-4

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## Chapter 1: The Emperor Has No Clothes

> *If we mean to be philosophical our main concern will be that our beliefs should be true; we shall care very little whether they happen to be popular with the intellectual proletarians of the moment, and if we can get back to truth we shall not mind having to go back a long way after it.*[1]

It only takes an honest man to tell the truth, a dishonest man to tell a lie; but it takes a misguided philosopher to confuse the difference. For while the honest man describes things as they are, the dishonest man as they are not, the philosopher casts into doubt the very possibility of what is or is not: with Pilate he cries "what is truth?" and washes his hands of the consequences. Gifted with intelligence and the best of intentions, the philosopher is readily drawn to a love of intellectual novelty, inventive musings, and false progress, building elaborate structures of thought which either draw all truth into the idealist and solipsistic realm of the mind alone, or seek to cast it beyond our reach in a frenzy of skepticism.

In either case, what is so easily lost are the ties that bind the mind to things in the act of knowing, and if man is indeed a rational animal, confusion on the nature of that rationality is a serious matter indeed. If we see the intellect as the means by which man is directly able to understand the nature of an external reality, the measure of the true and the good will consequently be found in the equation of the mind to things themselves. Hence the human intellect is not a measure, but a thing measured, and the true and the

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[1] A. E. Taylor, *Recent Developments in European Thought*, p. 48, as cited in Fulton J. Sheen, *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*, New York, Image Books, 1958, p. 22.

good have an objective foundation.[2] If, on the other hand, we see the operation of the intellect as prior to or independent of any external reality, the measure of the true and the good rests upon the subjective foundation of the mind alone. In the first case, truth is the conformity of the intellect to things, the priority of being over mind; in the second case, it becomes the conformity of things to the intellect, the priority of mind over being. The first is the philosophy of objective realism, the second the philosophy of subjective idealism.

Nothing less than the very sources and principles of all human judgment and action, the normative standards of life itself, whether practical or theoretical, hang in the balance here. Do we proceed from things to thought, or from thought to things? The student of philosophy is well aware of the various answers to this question throughout the ages, but is most familiar with its modern formulations, as evident in the prevailing tendency of philosophical thought from Descartes to the present. What invariably distinguishes the main thrust of modernity, and its inevitable offspring, post-modernity, from the rest of the history of philosophy is its nearly unanimous support of various forms of subjective idealism. This dominance has a profound effect not only in the intellectual or academic arena, but also in the most immediate social and cultural norms of everyday life.

Under such conditions, a defense of realism may appear nostalgic or reactionary; but more importantly, it may appear as hopelessly naïve. A classical model of epistemology, we are told, fails to employ a suitably critical method, in that it assumes

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[2] See St. Thomas Aquinas, (trans. Robert W. Mulligan), *On Truth / De Veritate*, Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1952, Question 1, Article 2.

the very existence of things themselves as proper and immediate objects of awareness. A critical model, however, takes no such thing for granted; it claims, by a careful and systematic method, to examine the given conditions of thinking itself, to analyze the content of our ideas, and then to determine how and why we might demonstrate a corresponding external reality. An idealist conclusion is, of course, the unavoidable outcome of such a critical method, since one is expected to begin with thought alone as that which is most clear, distinct, and self-evident, only then to proceed onward to things themselves.

Whether it be the *cogito* of Descartes, the solipsism of Berkeley, the habitual belief of Hume, the transcendental idealism of Kant, or the dialectic of Hegel, the root principles are the same. Wilhemsen's classic account serves to highlight the distinction between the critical and the non-critical:

> The critical philosophers—following the program of Descartes—attempt to subject the instruments of knowing to a searching analysis in order that they might establish (if possible) the reliability of human knowledge itself; once they have established this reliability to their satisfaction, they turn to other philosophical issues; they begin with the evidence of thought; they terminate (perhaps) in the evidence of being. The non-critical philosophers—the metaphysical realists—begin with things, and in the course of their speculations, they explain knowledge in terms of what they know about the being of the things that are. The first principle of critical epistemology is the truth that "thought is," either thinking in general or my

> own thinking. The first principle of non-critical epistemology—of metaphysical realism—is the truth that "being is" or "beings are."[3]

The critical approach seems tempting in its striving for a thorough rebuilding of epistemology, taking nothing for granted, applying strict requirements of evidence and proof to explain the act of knowing. Yet the model begs the question, presuming its own conclusion as a premise in its argument. In accepting thought alone as the only measure of truth, and ordering an external reality as secondary to it, the idealist already begins with what he wishes to prove; it is a bitter irony that what at first appears as a modern critical method ends up not being very critical at all.

The question becomes whether it is realism that is naïve in taking things themselves as given, or idealism that is naïve in taking thought alone as given? A defense of realism must give an account of the act of awareness, while at the same time avoiding the trap of considering the act separately from its object. While the realist and idealist will both surely agree that knowing is an operation of the mind, the act of a subject who knows, it is the proper content of that operation that is in dispute. In other words, what precisely is that we think *about*, and how are we to understand the *relation* of subject and object in this action?

The idealist asserts that subjective thought or feeling has priority in the act of knowing, and therefore treats thoughts and feelings as if they are themselves primary objects. The realist, however, counters that the very action of feeling or thought already presupposes as prior the thing itself as felt or known; hence the thing itself is primary.

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[3] Wilhemsen, Frederick D., *Man's Knowledge of Reality*, Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1956, Ch. 3, p. 17.

We must therefore see whether we can even start with knowing and then proceed to being, or whether we must start with being and then proceed to knowing. This, in turn, will determine whether thought or being are the grounds of our first principles, and whether epistemology or metaphysics is the queen of the sciences.

In a general sense, we often speak of having *ideas* as somehow defining this relationship of knowing. But an appeal to such a word leaves much to be desired, for the term itself is often vague and unclear. How are we to define an idea? Is an idea in itself the object of thought, or some sort of intermediary for the object? If it serves as an intermediary, is it, in fact, a necessary element in our account of knowing, or simply an extraneous addition? If it itself an object, are we willing to embrace the awkward and puzzling conclusion that the act of thinking somehow becomes its own content? And finally, do we merely grasp at ideas, in place of something more real and substantial, in an attempt to avoid actually defining what knowing really means? Are we passing the buck on getting to the heart of the matter by introducing meaningless abstractions?

To say, for example, that philosophy is about the history of ideas is a perfect example of this ambiguity. In the end, this says nothing except that philosophy is somehow about thinking, though what we think about and in what manner we proceed is left entirely unanswered. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, such an approach brackets any possibility of genuine truth, content, and purpose, reducing all meaning and value to an ill-defined realm of free-floating thought and feeling.

While the man on the street may know exactly what he means by having an idea, even if he is unable to put his intuitive awareness into precise words, a philosopher is readily tempted to provide a string of seemingly precise words while forgetting what he

really means. It is, of course, entirely possible, as well as desirable, to be both intuitive and reflective, and any self-respecting thinker should be willing to face the challenge.

It should come as no surprise that the objective, non-critical realist and the subjective, critical idealist models have correspondingly different views on the role of ideas. While the former sees the idea only as something relative to the thing itself, or seeks to dispose of ideas entirely, the latter sees the idea as the sole or the primary object of knowing. Taking its cue from the idea as a purely internal representation, the idealist doctrine concerning ideas is often termed *representationalism*; Haldane, for example, offers the following definitions:

> Let ontological realism be the thesis that there is a pre-existing structured world independent of consciousness. Relative to this idea, epistemological realism may be introduced as the doctrine that in thought we are capable of direct awareness of this world and of knowledge of its structure. . .
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> . . . The essential character of epistemological representationalism. . . is the view that the immediate objects of cognitive acts or states are internal entities: species, ideas, images, sentential formulae and the such like, which may or may not stand in some further referential relation to objects and features in the world; and that it is the former, inner relational attitudes which constitute the essential object-oriented, or intentional character of cognitive states.[4]

[4] Haldane, John J., "Reid, Scholasticism and Current Philosophy of Mind," in Dalgarno, Melvin and Eric Matthews (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, Philosophical Studies Series 42, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, pp. 285-286.

The measure and primary objects of knowledge may, therefore, be things independent of and external to the mind, or things dependent upon and within the mind, highlighting the crucial difference between an objective and a subjective model. This is certainly a helpful start in isolating the true nature of ideas, but such a general distinction in kind admits of a wide range of degrees which can easily further confuse the issue.

To what extent is it even possible for a representationalist model to admit of external objects as further or secondary referential relations? If we begin with intramental ideas as a first principle, is it even possible to speak of the objective through a purely subjective measure? If, after all, we have only our ideas as references, we have no means of judging beyond them.

Conversely, to what extent can a realist model genuinely allow ideas as intermediaries, if our knowledge of the world and its structure is to be direct? Does not the introduction of the idea even as an intermediate representation of the real compromise the very foundation of realism? If we introduce ideas into the equation, any immediate relation between knower and known is drawn into question.

It may seem that any inclusion of ideas, impressions, concepts or species into the mind inherently presumes a representationalist and idealist conclusion. Can realism, therefore, have any place for ideas, or is it best to dispose of their structure entirely? In other words, we must ask ourselves whether the acceptance of ideas is an all or nothing, either/or proposition, where a yea or a nay leaves us irretrievably in the camp of the real or the ideal.

The epistemological doctrines of St. Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Reid offer an intriguing and productive opportunity for examining these questions, thanks to an unusual

tension of both agreement as well as some apparent opposition between their respective arguments. Both Aquinas and Reid are staunch and unwavering defenders of realism, each fully aware, despite their differing historical contexts, of the dire consequences of a idealist model; if we allow knowing to be reduced to a purely subjective and intramental consciousness, they insist, philosophy is reduced to an unintelligible skepticism and relativism.

Likewise, both philosophers indicate how and why realism is a philosophy of common-sense first principles, grounded not upon vague or abstract concepts, but upon the basic foundation of existence itself; as such, they reject any critical attempts to argue from thought to things, but rather remind us of the fact that it is an external reality itself which is primarily and essentially given in the act of experience, and it is this reality of things themselves that must be our starting point in science and understanding.

Aquinas and Reid, therefore, have great faith in the direct and immediate validity of our experience in knowing the nature of our world, a world of real things, not merely of obscure thought. Such faith, however, is not a matter of blind or naïve acceptance, but rather a self-evident necessity of knowing itself. Again, as children of a modern age, we readily assume that the act of knowing must be itself examined before we are able to consider its proper content. Aquinas and Reid, however, remind us that the act of knowing inherently presupposes, and is first and foremost grounded upon, the real existence of what is known; we cannot, in itself, separate the former from the latter, and pursue the logically absurd if we insist upon the actual priority of an operation devoid of an agent or of content. Being must precede knowing, and knowing cannot precede being.

While idealist and skeptical philosophers feel they are able to think in one world and live in another, Aquinas and Reid point to the impossibility of such a state of affairs.

Nevertheless, while sharing this common ground, Aquinas and Reid might also appear to have irreconcilable differences, and a certain degree of such a seeming incompatibility is surely the result of style and context. The technical, scholastic language and compact argumentation of Aquinas stand in sharp contrast to the almost conversational, no-nonsense tone of Reid, while the markedly different environments and concerns of 13th and 18th century philosophy only seem to broaden the gap. Each thinker is, of course, speaking in a different philosophical language, and the divide may well be both perplexing and frustrating. Can Aquinas' attention to the medieval problems of nominalism and the status of universals have any genuine relevance to Reid's common sense response to Enlightenment idealism and skepticism?

If Aquinas and Reid are to be genuine realists, in practice and not just in theory, it is critical to overcome such differences. If thinking and living are to share the same real-world objective measures, then it is not beyond our means to look beyond circumstances alone toward common facts and arguments; the realist, after all, should never be willing to reduce all meaning to the merely relative conditions of historicism. Such differences in origin can and should be put in their proper place, being, as it were, like two observers standing in different positions, but pointing to the same thing. Accidental differences are thereby seen within the larger context of essential truth, where two philosophers in different times and places are describing and explaining one and the same world and human condition.

Given such a situation, there seems to be a remarkable unity of thought and principle between these two philosophers. One might note, for example, how Aquinas' prophetic warnings of the inherent dangers of skepticism and subjectivism almost seem to be echoed by the finger-wagging "I told you so" of Reid, or how their mutual insistence on the measure of real things as the objective foundation of truth have a universal and timeless quality. Indeed, the followers of Aquinas often refer to the teachings of his philosophy as *perennial*, eminently suited for the situations and conditions of all times and places, informing and enlightening past, present, and future with a sense of universal truth. If becoming familiar or fluent with his currently unfashionable mode of expression is required to grasp this truth, it is certainly a worthwhile price to pay.

Though Reid is a writer and thinker of quite a different sort, it might not be far from the truth to say that his arguments are also perennial in their range and scope. The philosophy of Aquinas, of course, is one of profound reflection, precise definition, and subtle distinction, while that of Reid, though no less refined, speaks in the voice of everyman; it appeals to our common sense need for seeing things as they are in a no-nonsense way, without sophistical qualifications and second-guessing. But being sophistical is not the same as being sophisticated, and while Aquinas speaks to the head, Reid speaks to the heart; there is quite enough room to see the necessity of both schools of thought. In either case, and under whatever philosophical conditions, a philosophy of realism can be *both* thoroughly sublime *and* clearly grounded in common sense. The perennial status of each school shines forth in this way, as there is now, has always been, and will always be a pressing need to stand tall and look far while keeping one's feet firmly on the ground.

Despite sharing the common bond of realism, there may well be some difficulty in harmonizing the two schools, and the difficulty is found precisely in the troubling status of ideas. What precisely is the role of the elusive and troublesome idea in their theories of knowledge? While Aquinas and Reid both proclaim the direct knowledge of things themselves, we must be wary of missing the proverbial trees for the forest.

In particular, Aquinas offers a model which claims to unequivocally ground all knowledge in things themselves, yet at the same time argues that while things are that which is primarily understood, the intelligible species are the means by which the intellect, understands, or that which is secondarily understood. Such an explanation at first seems clear enough, for while firmly grounding knowledge in an external world, it also posits the species as the medium or intermediary of knowing between mind and thing; an idea, therefore, serves the purpose of binding and defining the relationship between the knower and the known. If knowing involves a subject who understands and an object that is understood, the species serve necessarily as a kind of bridge between the two, that by which the identity of the known is received into the mind of the knower.

Aquinas further argues that the intelligible species is a *likeness* of the thing understood, and that the formal identity of the thing known becomes a formal identity in the mind through such a likeness. This seeks to explain how it is that the form exists both in the thing and in the mind in a similar or like manner, while the existence of the thing and the mind are nevertheless separate and distinct. In other words, if knowing is the act of the intellect receiving the form of the thing known, and a thing is received proportionately or according to its actual identity, then the manner in which this form is received must be a likeness of that thing.

Reid, however, bases his entire realist approach upon the critique of ideas themselves in any form, arguing that, throughout the history of philosophy, the dominance of what he terms the ideal system, or the ideal hypothesis, has introduced the unnecessary addition of impressions or ideas as objects or as intermediaries. In the case of positing ideas as direct objects, the doctrine of representationalism, Aquinas and Reid do not seem to be in disagreement; Aquinas himself, after all, denies that the species can be considered that which is primarily understood. Yet Reid broadens his criticism to include any and all appeal to ideas, whether as direct objects or even as intermediate representations; the Thomistic theory would seem to be included in this critique. Indeed, Reid argues that the Aristotelian and Scholastic theories of epistemology, while not nearly as flawed as modern theories, are subject to his condemnation. Whether ideas serve as direct objects or as intermediaries, Reid is convinced that they are damaging to the very fabric of understanding itself, leading invariably to an absurd theoretical philosophy of destructive skepticism.

Furthermore, Reid is similarly critical of the claim that sensation and perception in any way, shape, or form are likenesses or resemblances of existing, a claim he sees as equally central to the ideal system. While he is in no doubt that our perception is directly of real bodies, he seriously questions arguments that seek to justify the existence of internal ideas by causally linking them to external bodies. Concerned that such an approach merely encourages the false postulation of ideas as objects of thought, Reid wishes to scrap the extraneous intermediary entirely, and accept the given nature of things to the act of perception without the burden of causal or representational

distractions. Once more, it would appear that Aquinas' formulation of the intelligible species as the likeness of the thing known is subject to this criticism.

Hence, while Aquinas argues the need for the intelligible species as the means of understanding, Reid rejects them outright. Does Aquinas, therefore, introduce ideas into the operation of understanding unnecessarily, thereby compromising the genuine realism of his arguments? Are his claims of the relationship of likeness between thing and species fatally flawed concessions to idealism?

Conversely, can Reid's rejection of impressions and ideas in any form still offer a thorough and convincing account of the relationship of knower and known? If Reid insists upon a model of direct realism, while at the same time denying that the feelings of sensation have no direct likeness to the objects themselves perceived, can his argument fully account for how and why such an awareness is in fact real and objective?

Do these two models, which at first appear generally to be in agreement, in fact contradict and oppose one another, or is there a possibility for showing a true harmony and complementarity?

A careful contrast of the two sets of arguments can, therefore, serve to illuminate not only the theory of both thinkers in particular, but also the larger matter of the status of ideas in general. Part of the problem is, of course, what Aquinas and Reid truly mean by their use if the terms "intelligible species" or "idea," and whether those definitions, despite their differing philosophical contexts, are inclusive or exclusive of one another. Only in this way can it become clear whether Reid's rejection of ideas and likenesses properly includes Aquinas' intelligible species, or whether Aquinas' insistence on the likeness of the species as a medium of understanding between the intellect and thing

reveals a weakness in Reid's theory. Finally, a thorough examination of the real and ideal in the act of knowing is ultimately only possible if we reduce each set of arguments to their first principles; if Aquinas and Reid are grounding their systems on different foundations, there clearly cannot be any meaningful or common bond between them.

It will be argued that a thorough examination of the epistemology of Aquinas and Reid does, in the end, reveal a remarkable unity of principle and purpose, despite these seeming contradictions. If we are willing to understand the differing intentions, language and historical circumstances of both arguments, it becomes evident that these respective models strengthen and support one another, and that any appearance of opposition arises only from a hasty or incomplete interpretation. In this way, the harmony and complementarity of Aquinas' sublime theory and Reid's common-sense practice remains intact; getting at the heart of their meaning will, in fact, only strengthen this mutual support. Each approach will point out and stress certain necessary elements in the realist argument, and in turn offer greater support for realism as a whole, a shared and common doctrine that can move beyond the limited context of this or that philosophical school.

Working from the difficulties already observed, three overall issues stand out as warranting special attention:

*First*, Aquinas' definition of the intelligible species does not fall under Reid's rejection of the ideal system, since the species are in no way or manner presented as having substantial existence, but are rather forms of action; a reading of Aquinas which treats the species as things or objects is a misinterpretation based upon the assumptions of later, representationalist models. Indeed, Reid is actually more than willing to accept the common use of the term "idea", as long as it refers to the act of perception, not a passive,

intermediary object. Despite differences of terminology, Aquinas and Reid are actually in agreement on the essentially active nature of knowing, as distinct from the passive nature of the ideal system.

Any presentation of ideas, species or concepts as objects in themselves, whether primary or intermediate, does indeed, as Reid argues, result in representationalism; Aquinas does not do so, but rather views the species as a mode of direct action and relation between knower and known.

*Second*, Aquinas' definition of the species as likeness does not contradict Reid's rejection of resemblances in the act of perception. Reid is specifically concerned with opposing the use of a resemblance between the feeling of sensation and the object in a material and sensible manner, and of perception as a means of demonstrating the existence of things themselves. Aquinas, however, does not argue for a sensible likeness, makes no such critical attempt to thereby prove and external reality, and is here entirely in agreement with Reid that things themselves are the given, self-evident objects of awareness.

Furthermore, when Aquinas introduces the theory of likenesses, he is not referring to the weak analogical use of the term that Reid rejects. Rather, Aquinas is discussing how and why our awareness of things is direct and accurate, a matter that Reid, out of an understandable motivation, simply does not choose to address.

Accordingly, a first appearance of disagreement is, in the end, Aquinas' more extensive explanation of the process of knowing, even as Reid does not find it suitable to pursue such a path; the accounts do not contradict, but rather the former serves as a clarification and elaboration of the latter.

*Third*, a first reading of Aquinas and Reid on the self-evident or first principles of knowing poses some obstacles to comparing their claims, since the two sets of epistemological axioms do not seem to directly correspond. But if we carefully contrast Aquinas' definition of common conceptions with Reid's common sense principles, we see that while each thinker means something rather different in his use of the terms, they are based upon the same foundations. While Aquinas' common conceptions are more properly logically self-evident propositions, Reid's common sense principles are practical and intuitive assumptions. While all of Aquinas' common conceptions are included in Reid's common sense principles, not all common sense principles are necessarily common conceptions.

The matter of first principles is by no means tangential to the status of ideas, but rather essential to it, since we must determine what we accept as inherently given in knowing if we are to determine the proper role of ideas in that operation. In both arguments, we do not have a direct correspondence, but rather a differing yet fully compatible set of complementary definitions.

In all three of the issues introduced above, it is critical to define and explain each set of terms and arguments with great care. For some, the mere fact that Aquinas and Reid are both realists in a broad sense is sufficient ground to presume their overall agreement; this, however, is deceptive, since it avoids and ignores several points of seeming conflict. A slightly more involved reading may, in fact, convince us otherwise, that the differences between them are tantamount to disagreement. Only an even closer look reveals the ultimate balance between the two philosophies, and while they are by no means identical, the strengths of each can serve to elucidate and support the other. The

common sense grounding of the real in Reid, for example, is a suitable warning for the Thomist to avoid the all-too-tempting theoretical trappings of idealism and representationalism, just as Aquinas' insights on formal content in the act of knowing reminds the philosopher of common sense that he cannot neglect to address the causal relation of sensation and perception.

This examination makes no claims to covering the full scope of the nature of knowing in Aquinas and Reid; rather, it seeks to pay attention to the specific problem of the status of ideas, and to do so by a careful reading of relevant texts on this topic.

Chapter 2, "The Real Over the Ideal," will seek to explicate Aquinas' position by closely examining *Summa Theologica,* 1a, Question 85, Article 2, as well as corresponding texts such as *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 53, II, 75, II, 98 and IV, 11, *De Veritate* Question 1, Articles 1-3, and *Commentary on the De Anima* Book 3, Lectio 8. Further insights will be drawn from the Neo-Thomist writings of Gilson and Maritain to help explain Aquinas' meaning.

Chapter 3, "Reid's Razor," will, in turn seek to explicate Reid's position by closely examining select passages from *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, while additionally using the philosophy of Hume, in particular, as a representationalist contrast to Reid's realism.

Chapter 4, "Whither Ideas?" will consider how Aquinas' doctrine of the intelligible species is to be understood in relation to Reid's rejection of the ideal system, and more specifically why Reid's critique does not properly apply to Aquinas' teachings. It will be argued that Aquinas' use of the species closely corresponds to Reid's appeal to

conception as an active operation, not merely a passive reception. Aquinas' model can benefit from the common sense grounding of Reid's arguments, just as Reid's model can benefit from the more refined explanations of the content of knowing in Aquinas. Additional reference will be made to Pasnau's recent critique of Aquinas in this light, as well as a selection of contemporary considerations of Reid's theory.

Chapter 5, "One of These Things Is Not Like the Other. . ." will address the problem of likenesses or resemblances in Aquinas and Reid. While Reid's rejection of an extreme analogical approach to resemblance is well taken, we should not view Aquinas' argument as being reducible to this error. Just as this should encourage use to read Aquinas free of such misconceptions, so too Aquinas' careful explanation of the action, causality and formal content of knowing fill an unfortunate void in Reid's account. A fuller grasp of this truth can actually help us to avoid reducing Reid's model itself to a form of representationalism and skepticism.

Chapter 6, "Brushes and Ladders," will examine the differing yet partially overlapping senses of first principles in Aquinas' common conceptions and Reid's common sense assumptions. If either model is to be genuinely realist, it must stand or fall on what is given as self-evident in the act of knowing; a system that takes only thought itself as given, or seeks to proceed from thought to things, fails to meet the criteria of realism. A fuller understanding of how and why we take certain propositions for granted follows from this comparison, specifically in relating the status of logical principles with intuitive assumptions.

Chapter 7, "Eggs Are Eggs," will offer some conclusions on the status of ideas in particular, and its relevance to the problem of truth in general. It is crucial to remember

precisely what is at stake when we reflect upon the operations of the mind: the very nature of knowing, the order and priority of evidence, and the fundamental relation of mind and being. While modernity and post-modernity have engaged in a critical re-invention of the intellect, realism, whether classical or contemporary, is called to rise to the defense of objectivity by restoring mind to its conformity with being. The study of Aquinas and Reid on the role of ideas is an opportunity to confirm how the idealist alteration of the intellect radically damages culture, science, and morality. As Aquinas and Reid themselves explain, the rejection of realism can lead only to skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism.

It is no exaggeration to say that contemporary philosophy, crippled by the prevalence of the critical method, allows little room for a genuinely realist movement. The prevalent schools of analytic and continental thought bracket or reject the reality of knowing, either through a reduction of philosophy to the structure of language on the one hand, or a reduction of philosophy to the structure of subjective psychology on the other. Whether language and psychology have their proper and noble place is not in question; whether they are all we should consider is quite another. While the practice of passing over in silence or deconstruction could serve admirably to limit the arrogance of human reason, they have, in their isolation from the genuine true and the good, achieved quite the contrary. The perennial wisdom of Aquinas and the common sense of Reid are ready-made cures in stopping the insanity of close-minded scholarship and politically correct nihilism.

The study of Aquinas, despite regular spurts of renewed interest in every generation, remains largely limited to orthodox Roman Catholics, medievalists, and

supporters of a classical, liberal arts education. Even in these scattered communities, however, little serious attention is paid to his theory of knowledge, such that students at both the graduate and undergraduate level have little or no context for relating classical realism to the Cartesian critique.

Under such unfortunate circumstances, it should come as no surprise that Thomist realism is condemned as naïve. The pursuit of an open mind and of academic freedom can only be strengthened by encouraging the philosophically curious to understand an argument before committing it to the dustbin of history, and as such, the neglect of Thomist realism, arguably the zenith of medieval thought, does a great disservice to a rounded philosophical education. Just as critical idealism already presumes its own conclusion in proceeding from thought to things, so too the explicit rejection of the classical realist arguments prejudices philosophy to modern idealism from the very start; it does not even permit the much-praised openness to dialogue supposedly characteristic of post-modern sensibilities.

If we must speak the language of post-modernity, then let us employ it in the best possible way; a mind remains forever closed in prejudice and *logophobia* when it ignores, at its own peril, the fullness of a philosophical tradition. Thomist realism has far more to offer than sweeping generalizations or historical footnotes; it is not inherently primitive or outdated. Our judgment about any conclusion, whether we support or reject it, is only as good as the evidence and arguments we bring to the table. In this way, a disservice is done to all of philosophy when a position is cast out for its awkward inconvenience to the intellectual status quo, or is reinvented and re-imagined through the limited perspective of philosophical fashion. The presence of ideological tyranny merely confirms the

common prejudice against philosophical reflection, and does nothing to restore a common love of truth.

Considering the contemporary obsession with the reification of thought, a re-examination of the status of ideas in Aquinas can be a humble beginning in restoring the sanity of realism. This is not a matter of blind dogmatic piety (for authority, as Aquinas himself tells us, is the weakest of philosophical measures), but rather of carefully and accurately presenting the arguments on their own terms. These arguments should rightly stand or fall on their merits, not on the presumption and bias of opinion. The realist can ask nothing else but that the idealist approach them with an open mind, and then sincerely ask himself whether it is even possible for ideas themselves to be considered objects of thought, and whether his very own system already takes for granted the content of a reality it wishes to replace with thought alone.

The renewed interest in the philosophy of Thomas Reid may offer further hope for a sincere reappraisal of the realist tradition. Reid's status is, of course, especially interesting, in that he stands out from his contemporaries by questioning the very premises of Enlightenment thought. Indeed, his brash rejection of the ideal system, which he sees at the root of the philosophical confusion, extends far beyond the context of his own times. Reid seems convinced that the fiction of the ideal has, to varying degrees, permeated philosophy throughout its history, and his account of the progression of this error would seem to go against the grain of conventional history.

In this sense, Reid takes a guiding principle of the Enlightenment and turns it on its head with an ironic twist. In constantly seeking to reject the authority of given tradition and reinvent the first principles of philosophy based upon new scientific notions

of progress, the Enlightenment turned to the ideal system. Reid, himself is dubious of the traditions of thinkers, but also further rejects the newer status quo of the moderns; in his estimation, the confusion of philosophers, whether ancient or modern, is a case of six-of-one, half-dozen of the other. Instead, he points not to the written wisdom of philosophers, but to the common sense wisdom of the vulgar, the indemonstrable yet certain assumptions of everyday life which we cannot help but employ in all our choices and actions. As such, Reid is a thoroughly modern Enlightenment philosopher who wants little to do with Enlightenment philosophy.

The well-known anecdote from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* has much in common, both in its style and its substance, with Reid's refutation of the ideal system:

> After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non- existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it THUS."[5]

Like Johnson, a man of both common sense as well as profound wisdom, Reid wants nothing to do with the fractured thinking of the idealists. Boswell perhaps wonders, like any self-respecting modern, whether any demonstration can be offered to refute Berkeley; what he fails to see, and what Johnson grasps immediately, is that no demonstration is necessary to prove what is self-evident. Whereas Berkeley or Hume

[5] Boswell, James (ed. Christopher Hibbert), *The Life of Samuel Johnso*n, London, Penguin Books, 1986, p. 122.

might begin only with the feeling of pain, and then attempt in vain to prove the existence of a stone from that feeling, Johnson and Reid have the common sense to seize the opposite course: the stone does not exist because I feel it, rather I feel the stone because it exists.

Reid blames the abstract elevation of the idea to an object of perception for the confusion of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and insists upon a turn to the real over the ideal as the only possibility for philosophical redemption. By directly engaging the assumptions of the Enlightenment philosophers, Reid provides us with a thoroughly contemporary view of these errors, and offers a unique perspective for recovering an epistemological realism.

For all the excellent work done on Reid in the last few decades, one nevertheless wonders why so many accounts, as we shall see, miss the central tenet of his realism. Indeed, a number of commentators on Reid only seem willing or able to view his arguments through the assumptions of idealism; this symptom may well have much to do with the similar bias and prejudice against the realism of Aquinas. In either case, the cure lies in presenting the arguments on their own terms, not upon those of their opponents.

In all, therefore, while Aquinas and Reid approach the problem from very different directions, the combined positions provide a sort of triangulation to help locate the weaknesses of idealism and representationalism. We need not forcibly contort their views to find a common trust in the direct and immediate knowledge of nature.

We have all heard the story of the young boy who, upon seeing his emperor parading down the street in all his naked splendor, is willing to violate all customs of blind obedience and deference to speak the obvious:

> . . . So off went the Emperor in procession under his splendid canopy. Everyone in the streets and the windows said, "Oh, how fine are the Emperor's new clothes! Don't they fit him to perfection? And see his long train!" Nobody would confess that he couldn't see anything, for that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool. No costume the Emperor had worn before was ever such a complete success.
> "But he hasn't got anything on," a little child said.
> "Did you ever hear such innocent prattle?" said its father. And one person whispered to another what the child had said, "He hasn't anything on. A child says he hasn't anything on."
> "But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last.
> The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.[6]

Ideas are not things, despite the insistence of any tailor, courtier, emperor, or philosopher. Unless we too wish to succumb to the blinders of fashion, philosophers should rise to the challenge of describing things as they are. Like the child who cries out that the emperor has no clothes, the philosopher must also become child-like, not in being naïve, but in being honest. To be like little children, open, willing, and curious, is, after all, something to be praised. Only then do we return to the wisdom of the ages, that the truth is something discovered, not something created.

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[6] Andersen, Hans Christian (ed. Lily Owens), *Complete Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales*, New York, Gramercy, 1981, p. 440.

## Chapter 2: The Real Over the Ideal

> *For arts and sciences were discovered for the purpose of knowing things as existing in their own natures.*[7]

For Aquinas, all knowledge must begin with sensible experience, for awareness must start with actual things for its content. The external sense powers receive as phantasms, or sense impressions, the forms of things in their particular and material conditions, while the internal sense powers process and retain these impressions. In turn, it is through its immaterial operation that the agent intellect is able to abstract, and the passive intellect receive, the forms of things drawn out from material conditions, and to make them universally intelligible. The intelligible species, or ideas, are not themselves objects of knowledge, but are rather the active means by which the forms in material things are abstracted and received in the intellect according to its own immaterial nature. It is therefore being itself, whether proximate or ultimate, which is the measure of knowledge.

It is no accident that the sublime structure of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* begins and ends with God as the ultimate measure of all things, the *alpha* and the *omega*, that from which all things come and to which they must return. To the modern reader, however, accustomed to a mode of inquiry that begins and ends with the self, the attitude seems foreign. While Aquinas orders his inquiry around God, the absolute measure of being itself, the idealist orders his inquiry around the human mind, an absolute measure

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[7] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Anton C. Pegis), *Summa Contra Gentiles: On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, New York, Doubleday, 1955, II, 75.

of thought itself. Aquinas, a metaphysical and epistemological realist, avoids the trappings of the critical method by starting with what *is* in an unqualified sense, and presents our thought as dependent upon it in a qualified sense.

To grasp this requires a shift in position, from understanding things as they are in themselves, as opposed to how they are relative to us. The rich opening section of Aristotle's *Physics* serves as an excellent introduction, which highlights the crucial distinction between the order of knowing and the order of being, a distinction which, in turn, is at the root of all metaphysical and epistemological realism:

> In every line of inquiry into something that has principles or causes or elements, we achieve knowledge—that is, scientific knowledge—by knowing them; for we think we know a thing when we know its primary causes and primary principles, all the way to its elements. Clearly, then, it is also true that in the science of nature that our first task is to determine the principles.
>
> The natural path is to start from what is better known and clearer to us, and to advance to what clearer and better known by nature; for what is better known to us is not the same as what is better known without qualification. We must advance in this way, then, from what is less clear by nature and clearer to us, to what clearer and better known by nature.
>
> The things that, most of all, are initially clear to us are inarticulate wholes; later, as we articulate them, the elements and principles come to be known from them. We must, then, advance from universals to particulars; for the whole is better known in perception, and the universal is a sort of whole, since it includes many things as parts.

> The same is true, in a way, of names in relation to their accounts. For a name—for instance, "circle"—signifies a sort of whole and signified indefinitely, whereas the definition of a circle articulates it by stating the particular properties. Again, children begin by calling all men "father" and all women "mother"; only later do they distinguish different men and different women.[8]

Knowing, Aristotle tells us, is not merely the descriptive awareness of the existence of a thing, but the ability to grasp what a thing is and why it is, its principles, causes, and elements. It is in this light that we must understand the Aristotelian and Thomist claim that the mind receives the form, the very identity or quiddity, of a thing, and, in a sense, becomes the thing it knows, formally but not materially. Genuine knowledge, therefore, apprehends and judges about the objective nature of things, not merely subjective appearances.

The shift from what is clearer to us to what is clearer by nature highlights the relation of knower and known, of subject and object, in the act of understanding. A representationalist model would, of course, never allow for such an openness to being, since the representation rests entirely and solely on what is clearer to us, without any reference to what is clearer in itself. Aristotle and Aquinas' common-sense point, however, is that in nature itself, causes and parts always necessarily precede effects and wholes, even while the order of our experience and learning usually perceives the effect and the whole unclearly and imprecisely before understanding the cause and the part more completely.

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[8] Aristotle (trans. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine) *Selections*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1995**,** *Physics*, Book 1, Chapter 1, 184a10-184b5 (pp. 83-84).

Note how this approach to science self-evidently presumes that knowledge, as an action, must be the operation of a knower, about or concerning the content of what is known; it is in the meeting and convergence of the former and the latter that genuine understanding is achieved, when the mode of awareness in the mind, what is relative to us, comes to correspond with the mode of existence in things, what is absolute in itself.

Appearance and reality are here not two separated realms, where the critical problematic of moving from thought to things becomes the central question of epistemology; rather, we already begin with the elements of knower and known united by the relation of truth, which occurs when we fully *see* things as they *are*. Aquinas offers the following account:

> We must consider that our intellect proceeds from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality; and every power thus proceeding from potentiality to actuality comes first to an incomplete act, which is the medium between potentiality and actuality, before accomplishing the perfect act. The perfect act of the intellect is complete knowledge, when the object is distinctly and determinately known; whereas the incomplete act is imperfect knowledge, when the object is known indistinctly, and as it were confusedly. A thing thus imperfectly known, is known partly in act and partly in potentiality. . .[9]

Understanding progresses by learning or discovery, and this involves a change in the intellect, from ignorance to knowledge, or from potency to act. It is in the knowledge of the object that the intellect is perfectly actualized, since the reduction from potency to

[9] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), *Summa Theologica*, London, Benziger Brothers, 1948, 1a Q. 85, art. 3.

act in the intellect derives from that which is prior in act, the thing itself. While the mind knows a thing only vaguely or incompletely, it is hence still only partially actualized, while when it knows the thing fully and completely, it is fully actualized. The causal relationship of action and object is made clear in this model, as the act of knowing depends upon and presupposes something actual as known; the former can only itself become actual through the awareness of the latter. It is for this reason that Aquinas repeatedly tells us that "a thing is not known according as it is in potentiality, but only according as it is in act."[10]

Knowledge, therefore, is only potential until there is something actual to be known, and the intellect itself is more fully actualized the more perfectly it knows the object. In simpler terms, this means that knowing must, by definition, always be about something, and that knowing becomes richer as our grasp of the thing known is more complete.

In addressing the thought of Aquinas to a modern reader on matters of epistemology, it is tempting to begin as the critical idealists do, by starting with the operations of the mind alone. But Aquinas builds his entire system around *esse*, "being" not as a concept or an abstraction, but as the concrete and particular act of existence; it is only through this that we understand his realist definition of truth as the conformity of the intellect to being, the agreement of thought with thing.

How are we to explain this conformity? Aquinas tells us that, in the investigation of truth, it is necessary to arrive at the first self-evident principles, and "that which the intellect first conceives as, in a way, the most evident, and to which it reduces all its

[10] *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 85, art. 2.

concepts, is being."[11] It is, however, obviously insufficient to reduce truth to being itself alone, since this fails to include the necessary relation of the mind to being; rather, to additionally predicate anything, such as truth, of being is not to essentially add a difference to or alter being itself ("for nothing can be added to being as though it were something not included in being"[12]) but rather to express some mode, property or relation of being. In the relation of truth, for example, the being of the knower and known are not only conceived as being separate and distinct things, but as one actively corresponding or agreeing with the other:

> . . .This is possible only if there is something which is such that it agrees with every being. Such a being is the soul, which, as is said in *The Soul*, "in some ways is all things." The soul, however, has both knowing and appetitive powers. *Good* expresses the correspondence of being to the appetitive power, for, and so we note in the *Ethics*, the good is "that which all desire." *True* expresses the correspondence of being to the knowing power, for all knowing is produced by an assimilation of the knower to the thing known, so that assimilation is said to be the cause of knowledge. Similarly, the sense of sight knows a color by being informed with a species of the color.[13]

Whether we call it a conformity, agreement, or equation, such a relation presents the being of the thing known as the primary measure, by means of which the intellect is, in turn, itself informed. The act of the intellect can, therefore, not be fully considered

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[11] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Robert W. Mulligan), *On Truth / De Veritate*, Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1952, Q. 1, Art. 1.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

except as following from and secondary to the priority of thing known, indicating how knowing is inherently directed toward and dependent upon that which is known. In other words, to even speak of knowing itself as actual presupposes the formal content of something else as known.

In this way, Aquinas tells us that we might speak of this conformity in three different senses: First, insofar as truth depends upon being as what is prior in the relation, in which case we speak of the being itself of things known as the basis for truth, e.g. "the truth is that which is"; Second, in terms of the relation by which truth is completed, e.g. "truth is the conformity of thing and intellect"; Third, in terms of the effect or consequence of the relation, which in this case is the possibility of true judgment itself, e.g. "truth is that by which that which is, is shown."[14]

Aquinas' explanation of the difference between the true and the good, as relations of the soul to objects of knowledge and desire, reveals the vitality and depth of his account of the person in relation to his world:

> Now, the fulfillment of any motion is found in the term of the motion; and, since the term of the motion of a cognitive power is the soul, the known must be in the knower after the manner of the knower. But the motion of an appetitive power terminates in things. For this reason the Philosopher speaks of a sort of circle formed by the acts of the soul: for a thing outside the soul moves the intellect, and the thing known moves the appetite, which tends to reach the thing from which the motion originally started. Since good, as mentioned previously, expresses a relation to appetite, and true, a relation to the intellect, the Philosopher says that good and evil are

[14] Ibid.

> in things, but good and false are in the mind. A thing is not called true, unless it conforms to an intellect. The true, therefore, is found secondarily in things and primarily in intellect.[15]

If the truth is the conformity of the intellect to things, and the good the conformity of the appetite to things, we begin to see what Aquinas means by the "circular" operation that motivates all human understanding and action. First, the intellect receives, possesses, and judges the identity of the thing known, and as such truth is primarily *within* the mind insofar as the act of knowing rests in the conformity of the intellect itself. Second, the appetite desires the good in the thing as known by the intellect, and accordingly is directed *outward* back to the thing itself. Hence truth is properly in the mind's act of conformity, the good in the nature of things themselves as understood. Each power of the soul, intellect and appetite, mind and will, the head and the heart, move and operate upon each other in different ways with regard to the being of their proper object.[16]

Aquinas further explains that truth is not merely in the act of apprehending the identity of things, but in the act of making judgments about things apprehended:

> In forming the quiddities of things, the intellect merely has a likeness of a thing existing outside the soul, as a sense has a likeness when it receives the species of a sensible thing. But when the intellect begins to judge about the thing it has apprehended, then its judgment is something proper to itself—not something found outside in the thing. And the judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality. Moreover, the

[15] Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q. 1, art. 2.
[16] see also *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 16, Art. 1, Q. 16, Art. 3, Q. 16, Art. 4.

> intellect judges about the thing it has apprehended at the moment when it says that something is or is not. This is the role of the intellect composing and dividing.[17]

It is when the mind actively asserts an affirmative or negative judgment, by composing or dividing the predicates of "is" or "is not", that truth is properly found; simply to apprehend a quiddity says nothing reflectively about the mode of its existence or non-existence, and accordingly does not directly conform to what is or is not in an external reality. It is in the affirmation of judgment, therefore, that the intellect most fully reflects what is real, and it does so in a manner that adds something not to the thing itself, but to the intellect in its act of agreement. This act of affirmation and agreement further explains why truth rests in the mind primarily, for the act of judgment modifies the knower in relation to an external reality. This fact also reminds us that the operation of the intellect in its conformity is essentially active, not merely passive, for the act of judgment affirms through its own power, and the measure of truth is whether that affirmation within us conforms to what is real without.

Judgment elevates the intellect beyond the levels of sensation and apprehension alone to a level of conscious and specific agreement and correspondence. As Gilson explains:

> In order that this conformity of the concept to the object becomes something known and takes the form of truth in consciousness, the intellect must add something of its own to the exterior reality which it has just assimilated. Such an addition begins when, not content just to

[17] Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q. 1, Art. 3.

> apprehend a thing, it makes a judgment upon it and says: this is a man, this is a tree. Hence the intellect brings something new—an affirmation which exists in it alone and not in things. Of such an affirmation we can ask whether it corresponds with reality or not. The definition of truth as an adequation between the thing and the intellect, *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, is a simple expression of the fact that the problem of truth can have no meaning unless the intellect is regarded as distinct from its object.[18]

We have already seen that truth involves judgments that assert the existence or non-existence of things themselves, and that truth is therefore in the mind as the conformity of thought and thing. This, in turn, requires that the relation of conformity proceed according to some means of agreement between the mind and thing, for Aquinas has already said that the intellect is "that which is such that it agrees with every being. Such a being is the soul, which, as is said in *The Soul*, 'in some ways is all things,' and that 'the known must be in the knower after the manner of the knower.' " Clearly, the being of the intellect is such that it is able to receive and possess within itself the nature of things known, and that this reception and possession must involve some sort of modification of the intellect according to its own nature.

To know, then, involves the intellect grasping what is real, and in doing so, understanding *what* things are. To say, as Aristotle and Aquinas do, that the mind in a sense becomes what it knows may seem odd to the modern reader, but it gets right to the point: the form of things is received into the nature of the mind, which thereby possesses the nature of *other* things. How is it possible for this process to take place? A thorough

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[18] Gilson, Etienne (trans. L.K. Shook), *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, Chapter 7 ("Knowledge and Truth"), p. 221.

account must consider not only the mere presence of a knower and known, but the nature of each, and the form of the relation between them.

The difficulties of the question become apparent when Aquinas reflects upon the proper object of the intellect: in reacting to a purely materialist approach to knowing, which slips into a skepticism through the negation of universality and necessity, a Platonic model argues that the subject and object of knowing, on the premise that like is known by like, must both exist incorporeally. The proper object of the mind is not, according to Plato, the world of material things, but the realm of the subsistent Ideas or Forms:

> Having observed that all knowledge takes place through some kind of similitude, he thought that the form of the thing known must of necessity be in the knower in the same manner as in the thing known. Then he observed that the form of the thing understood is in the intellect under conditions of universality, immateriality, and immobility: which is apparent from the very operation of the intellect, whose act of understanding has a universal extension, and is subject to a certain amount of necessity: for the mode of action corresponds to the mode of the agent's form. Wherefore he concluded that the things which we understand must have in themselves an existence under the same conditions of immateriality and immobility.[19]

If the mind operates in an immaterial manner concerning universal and necessary principles, the implicit assumption is that the intelligible reality subsists in a similar manner, thereby leading to the theory that Ideas or Forms as that which is known exist separately from sensible bodies. Now while Aquinas accepts with Plato that the mind

[19] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 1.

does indeed know in terms of universality and necessity, he claims it is not necessary to posit an additional reality of subsistent Ideas as its proper object. A form may be fully and completely present in different things in different modes or degrees, which does not necessitate positing Ideas themselves as direct and proportionate objects of the intellect:

> . . . the sensible form is conditioned differently in the thing which is external to the soul, and in the senses which receive the forms of sensible things without receiving matter, such as the color of gold without receiving gold. So also the intellect, according to its own mode, receives under conditions of immateriality and immobility, the species of material and mobile bodies: for the received is in the receiver according to the mode of the receiver. We must conclude, therefore, that through the intellect the soul knows bodies by a knowledge which is immaterial, universal, and necessary.[20]

Out of a perfectly understandable desire to defend a genuine scientific account of knowing, a strict Platonism duplicates the material world of things into an intelligible realm of Ideas, so as to maintain the correspondence of thought and thing. This only succeeds, however, in treating the ideal itself as the objectively real, separating it from the actual existence of particular things; forms are not things existing themselves, but rather the forms of existing things. Given that the intellect is itself only actualized through what is prior in act, it negates the immediate reality of sensible bodies as the immediate object of awareness. Since the very fact of our awareness, as beings of both mind and body, proceeds from sense experience of what is in act, the supposed reification

[20] Ibid.

of ideas as objects themselves would end up removing the actual as a proper and necessary content, reducing thought to an impossible intramental realm alone.

Furthermore, there is no necessity in saying that the objects of knowing must exist in the same mode as they do in the knower; the forms of things are present in the mind and in bodies under different conditions, received into the former according to its own nature through an act of abstraction from the latter. This is the very basis of the Aristotelian and Thomist distinction between the passive and active intellect, for while the mind is clearly able to receive the forms of sensible things, an evident fact of our awareness, such an operation is not only a passive reception; we must also posit an active principle which achieves abstraction of form from sensible bodies, so as to allow the intellect to receive the form of bodies according to its own immaterial mode of existence:

> Now nothing is reduced from potentiality to act except by something in act; as the senses are made actual by what is actually sensible. We must therefore assign on the part of the intellect some power to make things actually intelligible, by abstraction of the species from material conditions. And such is the necessity for an active intellect.[21]

The intellect, therefore, does not merely receive the form passively, but also actively draws out that form from the actual objects of sensible experience.[22] For lack of a better term, we might say that the process of knowing involves a sort of *transition* of the form from material things, where the form exists in a particular, contingent, and

[21] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 79, Art. 3.
[22] see also *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 6.

changeable mode, to the intellect itself, where the same form exists in a universal, necessary, and unchangeable mode:

> We must conclude, therefore, that material things known must needs exist in the knower, not materially, but immaterially. The reason of this is, because the act of knowledge extends to things outside the knower: for we know things even that are external to us. Now by matter the form of a thing is determined to some one thing. Wherefore it is clear that knowledge is in inverse ratio of materiality. And consequently things that are not receptive of forms save materially, have no power of knowledge whatever---such as plants, as the Philosopher says (De Anima ii, 12). But the more immaterially a thing receives the form of the thing known, the more perfect is its knowledge. Therefore the intellect which abstracts the species not only from matter, but also from the individuating conditions of matter, has more perfect knowledge than the senses, which receive the form of the thing known, without matter indeed, but subject to material conditions.[23]

As we shall see, this relation between the intellect and bodies, possessing the same form but in different modes, is the key to arguing for the necessity of ideas or intelligible species as the means of this relation. By this is not meant as an idea in the Platonic sense, which treats an idea as a universal object of awareness itself, but rather an idea as a form of action between knower and known. Since knowing evidently requires something actual as known, and the actual is made present to the mind by means of the senses, we cannot speak of ideas as being innately within the mind:

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[23] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* 1a Q. 84, Art. 2.

> Since form is the principle of action, a thing must be related to the form which is the principle of an action, as it is to that action: for instance, if upward motion is from lightness, then that which only potentially moves upwards must needs be only potentially light, but that which actually moves upwards must needs be actually light. Now we observe that man sometimes is only a potential knower, both as to sense and as to intellect. And he is reduced from such potentiality to act---through the action of sensible objects on his senses, to the act of sensation---by instruction or discovery, to the act of understanding. Wherefore we must say that the cognitive soul is in potentiality both to the images which are the principles of sensing, and to those which are the principles of understanding. For this reason Aristotle (De Anima iii, 4) held that the intellect by which the soul understands has no innate species, but is at first in potentiality to all such species.[24]

The intellect, as a *tabula rasa* which has no formal content until written upon, is itself only potentially knowing, as we have seen, until informed by something prior in act. In saying that "form is the principle of action," Aquinas is observing that any action or operation exists only out of and in proportion to the formal identity or nature of the thing, such that it is the nature of "lightness" which causes "upward motion", and an action is in turn only actual if the thing itself is actual. In simpler terms, what a thing *does* is a direct reflection of what a thing *is*; actions and operations are always *of* real things, and are in turn the likenesses of those things. In itself, the mind is only potentially knowing, and comes to be actually knowing through the content of what is actual.

Given the fact that the form of the material and particular thing known is abstracted, received in the intellect in an immaterial and universal manner, and that the

[24] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 3.

operation of knowing that form proceeds according to the nature of the thing known, Aquinas argues that the species are the *means* by which the intellect knows things. As previously noted, the relation of knower and known must account for the existence of the same form in the different modes of bodies and intellect, and must be able to explain the presence of one nature within another.

While the senses perceive objects in their particular existence, and apprehend by means of sensible images, the operation of the mind rises above this material state by grasping things in their very quiddity, independent of particular conditions. The very presence of such universal awareness is self-evident in the mind's ability to consider things in a universal and necessary manner, such that asking the question, "does the intellect operate with universal and necessary principles?" already contains its own answer, since the question is already formulated in universal and necessary terms.

Awareness begins with sense experience of the actual, but is not limited to it, for all knowing is a cooperation, and not an opposition, between the sensitive and intellectual powers, where the particular impressions of the former, the phantasms or sensible species, become the data from which the active intellect informs the passive intellect through an abstraction of the ideas or intelligible species. In this relationship, the intellect serves as the efficient cause of knowing through its act of abstraction, the data of the senses as the material cause out of which an awareness of things themselves is drawn:

> According to this opinion, then, on the part of the phantasms, intellectual knowledge is caused by the senses. But since the phantasms cannot of themselves affect the passive intellect, and require to be made actually intelligible by the active intellect, it cannot be said that sensible

> knowledge is the total and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge, but rather that it is in a way the material cause.[25]

The act of knowing is not simply a passive mirroring of meaningless images, but an active awareness that draws a formal identity from the very nature of things as made present through the senses. If we are willing to see that truth, as the conformity of mind and being, involves the formal presence of beings within the mind, proceeding according to the nature and likeness of those beings, we can only respond with wonder and amazement at the fullness and perfection of this act. When the mind knows something, it is not merely present as something external; the very act of knowing draws the quiddity of the thing within the mind. This is the true reality that is present in knowing, not some distant or incomplete picture. In his usually insightful and engaging style, Gilson says:

> To know is to be in a new and richer way than before, since it is essentially to cause to enter into a thing which is in the first place for itself alone what another thing is in the first place for itself alone. This fact is expressed by the statement that to know a thing is a kind of becoming that thing.[26]

The intelligible species serve as the bridge between these two natures, not as an intermediate object or thing, but as the form of the action proceeding from one into the other. Hence, when Gilson asks "under what condition can the knowing subject become the object known without ceasing to be itself?"[27], he responds that the intelligible species

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[25] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 6.
[26] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 224.
[27] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 227.

provide the answer, permitting the presence of the natural form itself, the very identity of what is known, within the mind. Once again, this is no mere representation, for if the very fact of knowledge is to be affirmed at all, as our every awareness confirms, then it must be through a real presence of what is actual. After all, the reduction from potency to act in knowing is only possible through the knowledge of what is prior in act, and an idea as image, representation, or symbol is by no means an actual "thing" at all; the relation is direct, and by its action the form proceeds from thing to mind by means of the species, an "intermediary between object and the subject":

> . . . We have to conceive of an intermediary which, without ceasing to be the object, would be capable of becoming the subject. Under this condition, the thing known would not encroach upon thought—as we know it does not do in fact—and it would still be known through the presence of its species in the thought which knows it.[28]

A danger of interpreting this claim in the light of representationalism should become apparent, not only because of its overwhelming dominance in contemporary thought, but also because of the more general tendency to oversimplify our understanding of any abstract operation by means of sensible analogies. The very use of the term idea or intelligible species might suggest "something" that stands in between the knower and known, and our imagination's dependence upon sensible images might lead us to view the likeness of the species as a duplicate or copy of the original thing. This is an inaccurate and misleading picture. Rather, the species as intermediary is *itself* the form of the thing known made present in the intellect through the act of understanding. If we

[28] Ibid.

must appeal to sensible analogy, then let us at least imagine this not as an object, but as the action of objects upon one another. Just as one billiard ball in motion causes the motion of another, without using some "third thing" as a means of transference, so too the act of knowing directly abstracts the intelligibility of the thing known.

A further tendency of the representational model is to place the intermediary, as that which is most proximate to the mind, as that which is first or directly understood, even if the idea in turn points to the thing known. Yet Aquinas' realist model also easily refutes this claim.

First, to speak of the ideas as pointing to things themselves reduces the idea to an instrumental sign alone, and we have seen that the act of knowing is far more than the act of such signification, but is rather the possession of the form itself in the intellect. In this sense, a true realist epistemology is not simply a correspondence theory, where the idea signifies or resembles the thing, but an identity theory, where the mind possesses the form of the thing itself.

Second, to say that the idea is more proximate to the mind than the thing itself is misleading, for it once again treats the idea as subsistent, another object in a chain of awareness. But if the idea is the form of action between knower and known, no such proximate intervention of the idea takes place, for it is itself the form of the known present to the knower. Similarly, to say that the idea is that which is first understood neglects the necessary logical and causal necessity that knowing presupposes what is prior in act, the thing itself, and that the idea is of the thing, not the thing of the idea. The thing as actual is prior and first as the object known, and any further reflective awareness

of the idea as the means of that knowledge follows from this first relation; in other words, first I think about something, only then can I think about my thinking about something.

Gilson's account of the issue warrants inclusion here, for it summarizes the root problems and solutions in a brief yet precise manner. Here we learn that the realist epistemology of Aquinas, despite its appeal to the intelligible species as the means of knowing, is far from being a system that appeals to levels upon levels of intermediary representations. The intermediary is instead the thing itself as made intelligible:

> In order to conceive of such an intermediary, which the very fact of knowledge forces us to posit, we must try not to represent it to ourselves. It is indeed dangerous to think of sensible species as of sensations being conveyed off into space. But, when it is a question of an intelligible form, its extension toward our thought can only be conceived as of an intelligible nature. We should not speak here of extension, for we have left the physical and entered the metaphysical. . . the imagination is a deadly obstacle in the way of understanding such a problem. It is only a matter here of conceding to thought and to things what they require in order to be able to do what they do; that is, of assigning them something by which the object can coincide with our intellect without being itself destroyed, and without our intellect ceasing to be what it is.

> The species has to play this role. Hence it is conceived, first, as being only the intelligible or the sensible aspect of the object itself under another mode of existence. Practically speaking, it is almost impossible to speak of it except as if the species were an image, an equivalent or substitute for the object; and St. Thomas himself so speaks. But it is important to understand that the species of an object is not one being and the object

> another. It is the very object under the mode of species; that is, it is still the object considered in action and in the efficacy it exerts over a subject. Under this one condition only can we say that it is not the species of the object that is present in thought, but the object through its species. And as it is the form of the object which is its active and determining principle, so it is the form of the object which the intellect which knows it, through its species, becomes. The whole objectivity of human knowledge depends in the last analysis upon the fact that it is not a superadded intermediary, or a distinct substitute which is introduced into our thought in place of a thing. It is rather, the sensible species of the thing itself which, rendered intelligible by the agent intellect, becomes the form of our possible intellect.[29]

The definition of species as "the object considered in action" is certainly helpful, for it prohibits us from imagining the species as a subsistent thing, itself nothing more than an ideal substitute for the real, but stresses a dynamic rather than a static role of the form of the object as intelligible. Furthermore, while we cannot help but employ sensible images in our language, the realization that we are now considering the metaphysical, and not just the physical, realm encourages a diligent adherence to precise philosophical language; while such language can be difficult to grasp, it is, in the end, far more accurate and enlightening for the purposes of explaining the reality of knowing.

As Gilson says, the fact that ideas are not mere things but things as intelligible is crucial to the maintenance of objective realism; Aquinas himself, as we shall see, is just as aware of this importance, even as he lacked the benefit of seeing the historical rise of representationalism and idealism. If we confuse or tinker with the proper role of the idea

[29] Ibid.

as intelligible form, we either separate the direct relation of knower and known, thereby making objective knowledge impossible, and ending in skepticism, or we make ideas themselves the objects of thought, thereby making truth dependent on the self alone, and ending in subjectivism and relativism. In both cases, the end result is not only undesirable, but also a world-view that is based on immediate logical contradictions.

The status of the idea, which at first appears a minor matter of technical definition, becomes central to the definition of truth in general, and the state of modern and contemporary philosophy in particular. In this case, little things do indeed mean a lot. At stake is nothing less than an objective or subjective approach of knowing, for the idea, as the formal content of the action of knowing, is what binds mind and being in a direct relation. Remove the formal means of this relation, and thought and things are irrevocably separated. No matter that it is in itself impossible to think at all without this necessary bond, or to reflect upon ideas themselves without first apprehending and judging about an objective reality through those ideas; the idealist philosopher, a skeptical, subjective, and relativist philosopher, is not the first to dream the impossible dream of admitting contraries.

If, therefore, we admit that there is knowledge, we implicitly and self-evidently admit that this must presuppose the actual as what is known; otherwise, knowledge is purely potential. The presence of thought does not prove the existence of the thing, but the existence of the thing grounds the presence of thought, such that the act of knowing is always of and about being-as-known. Since the relationship of the knower and the known is not only the presence of something to the mind, but the presence of its very quiddity, such a relation of conformity and agreement must involve action that permits

the intellect to receive and possess the identity of what is known. Further, since the intelligible form is present under different modes of existence in the intellect and in the thing, this means of relation must involve an active operation of abstraction by the intellect from the sensible.

Aquinas specifically addresses the crucial role of the intelligible species in 1a Question 85, Article 2 of the *Summa Theologica*, and it is no exaggeration to say that this single article is one of the most important in relating Thomist realism to modern idealism. This is not, however, because Aquinas, like the idealist, seeks to begin a critical philosophy from the existence of ideas, and thereby demonstrate a corresponding reality as known. Rather, its relevance is as a response to precisely this claim, and as such the idealist seeking a critical method in Thomism will be sorely disappointed; whether this disappointment reveals a flaw in the writing of Aquinas or in the assumption of critical idealism is another matter.

To say that 1a Question 85, Article 2 plays such a role is also not to imply that the Thomist model employs epistemology as the foundation of all philosophy; the relevance of the article is, once again, as a refutation of that claim, by confirming metaphysics as the root of all science. Hence the importance of this section is for us, in our contemporary philosophical dilemma, somewhat different from what it may have been for Aquinas himself, even as the self-same truths guide the response.

Strictly speaking, we must not even assume in Aquinas a conscious response to idealism, since the theory as such was something yet to come, and Aquinas does not, therefore, present his arguments in response to it. As Maritain says:

> It is perfectly true that neither Aristotle nor St. Thomas, thorough-going and conscious "realists" in *actu exercito* as they were, felt the need of characterizing themselves as "realists," in the sense we give the term today, for the very reason that the error to which realism is opposed had not yet arisen in the West; I mean it had achieved the status of a doctrine and a system. But the realism that Thomists profess today merely represents a transition from the implicit to the explicit.[30]

While the idealist model begins with thinking and proceeds to being, the implicit assumption of an idealist view would require Aquinas to do the same. When he does not do so, the position is accused of being dogmatic and naïve. But there is nothing dogmatic or naïve in taking for granted what is self-evident in knowing, that the thing known is independent of and precedes its intelligibility. If Aquinas were to accept the ideal as being prior in awareness, his model would, of course, seek to be realist. Again, Maritain argues that:

> The critical problem is not: "how do we pass from *percipi* to *esse*? Since mind is the only object attained in a way that is beyond doubt, can it be demonstrated that mind also reaches things, a reality that measures it?" No! It is, rather, to be stated in these terms: "On the different levels of elaborating knowledge, what value must be assigned to *percipere* and what to *judicare*? Since the mind, from the very start, reveals itself as warranted in its certitude by things and measured by an *esse* independent of itself, how are we to judge if, how, on what conditions, and to what extent it is so both in principle and in the various moments of human knowledge?" It is absurd to demand that philosophical thought begin,

[30] Maritain, Jacques (trans. Gerald B. Phelan), *The Degrees of Knowledge*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, Chapter 3, p. 73.

> even before it knows anything validly, by proving that it can know (for it could only do so if it did know). It is absurd to suppose at the very start that anything which cannot help but be judged true by the mind can, as a result of some evil genius, not be true, so that then that self-same mind might be asked to show that, as a matter of fact, it is not so. It is absurd to admit that the mind could only attain phenomenal objects and then ask it to prove that such objects are extramental realities.[31]

The approach of critical idealism, in starting with thought as given, ends up being contradictory on a number of levels. As Maritain says, we cannot presume knowing, which already has as implicit the objective content of things known, and then proceed to question that very content that makes knowing possible, nor can we claim to seek what is objectively real while at the same time assuming that the only possible measure of awareness is the subjectively ideal. The problem is not one of confirming whether or not we can know being, but rather how and by what means we must do so to judge with truth. 1a Question 85, Article 2 highlights precisely these points of consistency, indicating why idealism is not merely undesirable or unlikely, but inherently impossible.

In asking "whether the intelligible species abstracted from the phantasms is related to our intellect as that which is understood?", Aquinas seeks to determine whether ideas are themselves objects of knowledge:

> Some have asserted that our intellectual faculties know only the impression made on them; as, for example, that sense is cognizant only of the impression made on its own organ. According to this theory, the

[31] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 77.

> intellect understands only its own impression, namely, the intelligible species which it has received, so that this species is what is understood.[32]

Though clearly directed toward various types of ancient skepticism, and medieval nominalism, as well as certain aspects of Platonism, the position Aquinas describes is precisely that of the modern idealist and representationalist. Again, it argues that the senses or intellect are only aware of their own impressions and ideas, and therefore that knowledge is limited to what is within the mind, not what is external.

In a pattern common to many of Aquinas' articles, the response involves two parts: first a negative refutation of the false position that the intelligible species are themselves objects, second, a positive defense of the true position that the intelligible species are the means by which the mind knows things. Each of these parts of the argument can, in turn, also be divided into two parts: the negative refutation includes a critique of both the a) skeptical and b) relativist consequences of idealism, while the positive defense includes a) an account of the principle of action in knowing, and b) why this action proceeds in the form of a likeness.

First, the negative refutation considers how the idealist theory reduces to the impossibility of science. We should note once again that Aquinas is not merely arguing for the troubling or undesirable nature of this claim, but rather that it is in itself, contradictory and therefore absurd:

> This is, however, manifestly false for two reasons. First, because the things we understand are the objects of science; therefore if what we

[32] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 85, Art. 2.

> understand is merely the intelligible species in the soul, it would follow that every science would not be concerned with objects outside the soul, but only with the intelligible species within the soul; thus, according to the teaching of the Platonists all science is about ideas, which they held to be actually understood [Question 84, Article 1]. [33]

To the cultural, historical, and philosophical relativist, who views all positions only as equally valid sets of different viewpoints or options, this seems an entirely non-judgmental account of the difference between the claims that science is about the mind or about things. But we must look more closely. To say that science, which is limited not simply to the natural sciences but to all universal and necessary knowledge, becomes about ideas within the mind alone is akin to saying that science itself is impossible, for ideas can never be proper objects or things-in-themselves as known. Hence Aquinas relates this point to the flawed Platonic model of subsistent ideas. Such an "awareness", even if granted as possible, would be entirely intramental and subjective; since knowing inherently requires the actual as known, and ideas are only potencies until actualized by experience, any objective science of things themselves is denied.

By removing things themselves, one closes knowing to objectivity, and by denying objectivity, the science of nature, as contrasted to a fictional and truncated science of ideas, ceases to be. If science is the understanding the causes and principles of things, as Aristotle argued above, then the reification of ideas negates its very possibility.

What can remain standing in these ruins? Only a purely subjective skepticism that excludes objective knowledge. The necessary consequence of withdrawing into the

[33] Ibid.

subject alone is, ultimately, that "nothing can be known," and it surely is no accident that philosophers like Hume embrace this claim wholeheartedly, separating the mind from objective truth and replacing it with subjective beliefs or structures of thought.

The contradiction in such a skeptical and subjective model becomes readily apparent, for however hard the representationalist tries to deny an objective reality, he must unwittingly draw from the very content he rejects. As such, the claim that "nothing can be known" is itself a claim of objective knowledge, leading us to the absurd conclusion that "it can be known that nothing can be known." The treatment of ideas as objects, which in turn denies objective facts, ends up making assertions of objective fact while simultaneously proposing their impossibility.

The second negative refutation is closely linked to the first, for just as the rejection of science results in the contradiction of skepticism, so too the supposed reduction of knowing to subjective awareness results in the contradiction of relativism:

> Secondly, it is untrue, because it would lead to the opinion of the ancients who maintained that "whatever seems, is true" [Aristotle, Metaph. iii. 5], and that consequently contradictories are true simultaneously. For if the faculty knows its own impression only, it can judge of that only. Now a thing seems according to the impression made on the cognitive faculty. Consequently the cognitive faculty will always judge of its own impression as such; and so every judgment will be true: for instance, if taste perceived only its own impression, when anyone with a healthy taste perceives that honey is sweet, he would judge truly; and if anyone with a corrupt taste perceives that honey is bitter, this would be equally true; for

> each would judge according to the impression on his taste. Thus every opinion would be equally true; in fact, every sort of apprehension.[34]

If truth is measured in ideas alone, then truth can only be determined by the act of apprehension and judgment alone. Without any objective conformity or agreement with things, any appearance is real simply by being perceived, any judgment is true simply by being affirmed. If it seems so to us, or is believed by us, it is therefore the case, since the subjective standards of seeming and believing are the only standards open to us, all external objectivity being closed to our awareness.

Such a claim of relativism states, therefore, that "all propositions are equally true." As odd as this sounds, it is the guiding principle of all modern subjectivism, where truth and falsehood, we are told, are outdated and restrictive concepts. The only truth, it seems, is that there is no truth. The realist, who still hopes to know things, need not feel ignorant in the face of such sophomoric claims; out of a love of truth and consistency, he is quite right to point out the inherent contradiction in claiming that opposites are true at the same time and in the same sense. Hence it is true that there is not truth, and while "all propositions are equally true," it follows that "all propositions are equally false" as well.

We will see more of this cult of opinion later, but it is fascinating to note how Aquinas, in a few brief sentences, is able to both describe and then refute the basic claims of modern skepticism, relativism, and subjectivism. In denying that nothing can be known, it presumes to make a claim of knowledge, and in stating that all appearance and opinions are equally true, it admits that they are all equally false. In all, both these claims

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[34] Ibid.

are forms of subjectivism, which tries to claim that it is an objective truth that all truth is subjective. This is the philosophical equivalent of having one's cake and eating it too.

What is just as important as describing these errors, however, is explaining their origins, and Aquinas has clearly shown the link between an epistemological representationalism and subjectivism. While there may be manifold motives for such a model, they must all, explicitly or implicitly, share a common conception of the ideal itself as the object of awareness. Remove the actual as the object of knowledge, and there is literally "no thing" to be known, which leads us to the contradictory claim that there is an action of knowing without anything being acted upon. Ideas or intelligible species can, therefore, never be considered things, but the means by which we know things. It is no exaggeration to say that the way we conceive of the idea, whether as a thing itself or as the active means of knowing things, determines whether we conceive of the true and the good subjectively or objectively. The following parallel argument from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* confirms this claim:

> The species received into the possible intellect is not that which is understood; for, since all arts and sciences have to do with things understood, it would follow that all sciences are about species existing in the possible intellect. And this is patently false, because no science, except logic and metaphysics, is concerned with such things. And yet, in all the sciences, whatever is known is known through those species. Consequently, in the act of understanding, the intelligible species received into the possible intellect functions as the thing by which one understands, and not as that which is understood, even as the species of color in the eye is not that which is seen, but that by which we see. And that which is understood is the very intelligible essence of things existing outside the

> soul, just as things outside the soul are seen by corporeal sight. For arts and sciences were discovered for the purpose of knowing things as existing in their own natures.[35]

While the negative refutation of the species as object offers ample evidence for the inherently contradictory model of skeptical, relativist, and subjective representationalism, Aquinas goes further by explaining the causal necessity of a likeness in the act of knowing. Though brief and compact, and often neglected or glossed over by contemporary commentators, this positive defense of realism should, especially given the current intellectual fashion, be required reading in any study of epistemology. It is by no means a proof of an external world, or an argument that demonstrates the existence of the objective from subjective premises; it presumes, rather, the self-evident axiom that any action or relation requires subject and object which act or are acted upon, and that actions or relations are not things, but of things. In this context, Aquinas explains how and why the action of knowing proceeds as a likeness of the thing known. Again, the argument has two parts: the definition of cause and effect in action, and the explanation of the effect being the likeness of the cause:

> Therefore it must be said that the intelligible species is related to the intellect as that by which it understands: which is proved thus. There is a twofold action [Metaph. ix, Did. viii, 8], one which remains in the agent; for instance, to see and to understand; and another which passes into an external object; for instance, to heat and to cut; and each of these actions proceeds in virtue of some form.[36]

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[35] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 75.
[36] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 85, Art. 2.

Knowing is, first and foremost, an action of the intellectual power, and as such Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of action in general: action where the effect of the activity remains in the agent, and action where the effect passes into something external. It is the latter type with which we might be more immediately familiar (e.g. heating or cutting), where one thing acts upon another and effects a change in it. The action of knowing, as well as of sensing, is different, however, in that the effect of the action does not pass into something else, but remains within the agent; knowing, therefore, effects a change in the knower himself about the thing known, just as sensing effects a change in the one sensing about the thing sensed.

It is well worth noting here that this model of the action of knowing goes counter to any assumption that the senses and intellect as merely passive powers; indeed, this is a point that Reid will also directly address. It is the agent intellect that acts, not the thing, allowing the form of the material thing to be received in the mind according to its immaterial mode. As we saw earlier, when Aquinas asks whether sense experience is the cause of knowledge, he is careful to point out that the efficient agent is the intellect, and the thing made present through the senses is the material cause out of which, so to speak, knowledge arises. [37]

Aquinas now further states that action proceeds in virtue of some form, for the manner in which an action takes place is in direct proportion to the identity of the object of action; a thing operates according as it is actual, not as it is potential, and therefore the way a thing acts is a reflection of what that thing is:

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[37] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 6.

> And as the form from which proceeds an act tending to something external is the likeness of the object of the action, as heat in the heater is a likeness of the thing heated; so the form from which proceeds an action remaining in the agent is the likeness of the object. Hence that by which the sight sees is the likeness of the visible thing; and the likeness of the thing understood, that is, the intelligible species, is the form by which the intellect understands.[38]

Here Aquinas introduces the concept of *likeness* into the relation of action, arguing that just as the effect of an action proceeding outward must be a likeness of the object, as when heating follows from that which is actually heated, so too action where the effect remains in the agent is also a likeness of the object. In the case of knowing, the intellect is the agent, the thing known is the object, and the means by which intellect abstracts and receives the form of the thing is the likeness of its form.

In other words, any effect, whether passing into something external or remaining in the agent, is by its very definition a likeness of the object from which it proceeds, just as any action "must be related to the form which is the principle of an action."[39] We need not over-analyze this point, for it is nothing less than the logical principle of causality, that any change proceeds *from* and *according to* what is prior in act, a principle which is itself drawn from our self-evident knowledge of beings themselves.

Aquinas offers a similar explanation in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, further elaborating on how the relation of the likeness in the species is the means by which the form of the thing known is received within the intellect:

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[38] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 85, Art. 2.
[39] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 2.

> . . . Let us consider the fact that an external thing understood by us does not exist in our intellect according to its own nature; rather, it is necessary that its species be in our intellect, and through this species the intellect comes to be in act. Once in act through this species as through its own form, the intellect knows the thing itself. This is not to be understood in the sense that the act itself of understanding is an action proceeding to the thing understood, as heating proceeds to the heated thing. Understanding remains in the one understanding, but it is related to the thing understood because of the abovementioned species, which is a principle of intellectual operation as a form, is the likeness of the thing understood.[40]

It would be insufficient to simply say that the intellect "knows" the thing without accounting for the manner in which the formal nature of the material thing passes into the intellect through the mode of its action. The intelligible species, therefore, are not an extraneous addition to the action of knowing, but a necessary medium of the known being present in the knower. Likewise, the species as likeness are not representational objects themselves, but constitute the very form of the action of knowing itself, not a "third thing" interposed between intellect and thing but the nature of the direct relation between them.

Given that the intellect is itself only actual through what is actual as known, it follows that the species, or idea, is not that which is known but that by which the mind primarily knows things. In other words, the act of knowing itself can be considered as that which is secondarily known, for the intellect can reflect on its own action only through its knowledge of sensible things. Even in this case of reflection and self-

[40] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 53.

awareness, the species are not objects themselves, but an awareness of the action of the intellect concerning objects, as is made clear in the following:

> Now the human intellect is only a potentiality in the genus of intelligible beings, just as primary matter is a potentiality as regards sensible beings; and hence it is called "possible". Therefore in its essence the human mind is potentially understanding. Hence it has in itself the power to understand, but not to be understood, except as it is made actual. . . But as in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object, as stated above (Question 84, Article 7), it understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things, through the light of the active intellect, which not only actuates the intelligible things themselves, but also, by their instrumentality, actuates the passive intellect. Therefore the intellect knows itself not by its essence, but by its act.[41]

Returning to Question 85, Article 2, this reflection of the intellect upon its own act as dependent upon and following from the thing as primarily understood brings us to the conclusion that the intelligible species are only the active means of knowing, not the actual object of which the species is a likeness. Finally, it is again made clear through reference to the ancient principle that "like is known by like," for the intellect receives and possesses the form, though obviously not the matter, of the thing known:

> But since the intellect reflects upon itself, by such reflection it understands both its own act of intelligence, and the species by which it understands. Thus the intelligible species is that which is understood secondarily; but

[41] Aquinas, *Summa Theoloigca*, 1a, Q. 87, Art. 1.

> that which is primarily understood is the object, of which the species is the likeness. This also appears from the opinion of the ancient philosophers, who said that "like is known by like." For they said that the soul knows the earth outside itself, by the earth within itself; and so of the rest. If, therefore, we take the species of the earth instead of the earth, according to Aristotle (De Anima iii, 8), who says "that a stone is not in the soul, but only the likeness of the stone"; it follows that the soul knows external things by means of its intelligible species.[42]

In his Commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*, Aquinas argues that the manner in which the intellect receives the form of material things does not in any way imply falsehood or incompleteness in this relation. While the form of things known is itself necessarily bound to matter, and knowledge must therefore always refer to the material and sensible as its measure of apprehension and judgment, the intellect fully grasps the identity of the thing without in any way receiving the matter itself. It is from a misunderstanding of this point, Aquinas further claims, that one might assume that the species or idea must exist in itself in the same way it is known, thereby treating ideas as things, and not the means of action by which the mind knows things. Yet the mode in which the intellect knows things, while derived from the sensible, contains one aspect of the thing, the intelligible form, but not the other, the individuating matter:

> From this text of Aristotle on can go on to show that the intellect's proper object is indeed the essence of things; but not the essence by itself, in separation from things, as the Platonists thought. Hence this 'proper object' of or intellect is not, as the Platonists held, something existing

[42] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 85, Art. 2.

> outside sensible things; it is something intrinsic to sensible things; and this, even though the mode in which essences are grasped by the mind differs from their mode of existence in sensible things; for the mind discerns them apart from the individuating conditions which belong to them in the order of sensible reality. Nor need this involve the mind in any falsehood; for there is no reason why, of two conjoined things, it should not discern one without discerning the other; just as sight perceives color without perceiving odor, though not without perceiving color's necessary ground which is spatial magnitude. In like manner, the intellect can perceive a form apart from its individuating principles, though not apart from the matter required by the nature of the form in question; thus it cannot understand the snub-nosed without thinking of nose. And it was just because the Platonists failed to draw this distinction that they thought that mathematical objects and the essences of things were as separate from matter in reality as they are in mind.[43]

As trite or simplistic as it may seem, Aquinas' reference to noses gets right to the heart of the matter: once can certainly abstractly conceive of the property of being snub-nosed, but only as derived from an awareness of noses themselves, and while the intellect can know forms, it does so only in reference to the concrete material nature of those forms. Species or ideas are therefore not the things we know, but the manner in which the intellect abstracts and receives the forms of material and sensible things, just as in sensation itself the image or impression is not the object sensed, but the means by which it is sensed. One does not, for example see color as such, but the color of bodies, just as

[43] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Kenelm Foster et. al.), *Aristotle's De Anima*, Yale University Press, 1951, Book 3, Lectio 8, §717.

one does not think the snub-nosed except as the property of real noses. Aquinas presents an excellent summation of his entire argument in the following:

> It is clear that the intelligible ideas by which the potential intellect is actualized are not in themselves the intellect's object: for they are not that which, but that by which it understands. For, as with sight the image in the eye is not what is seen, but what gives rise to the act of sight (for what is seen is color which exists in an exterior body), so also what the intellect understands is the essence existing in things; it is not its own intelligible idea, except insofar as the intellect reflects upon itself. Because, obviously, it is what the mind understands that makes up the subject matter, not the ideas. Clearly, then, the intellect's object is not the intelligible idea, but the essence of intelligible realities.[44]

Since any discussion of the act of knowing is hindered by the weakness of any sensible analogy, the presentation and terminology of Aquinas' arguments may at times seem abstract and difficult to grasp. But at their very heart they are incredibly concrete and practical arguments, grounded in the common-sense realization that sensible and intelligible species are in no way things themselves, but the very mode of action by which things are known. While knowing certainly involves awareness through an abstract likeness, that relation of likeness is not itself a *something*; any action, relation, or property is always of and about what is actual.

Only confused philosophical reflection, which wittingly or unwittingly neglects the real as the grounding of knowledge, begins to conceive of ideas in their own right. Such an error may be understandable, since it seeks to come to terms with the very action

[44] Aquinas, *Aristotle's De Anima*, §718.

of thinking, but misses the necessary point that thinking is primarily directed toward and measured by things known, Hence the idea, as an active relation, can be considered secondarily only through what is primary. This is the priority of the real over the ideal. As Maritain says:

> The position we are defending should be clear. Inasmuch as the intellect primarily bears neither on itself, not on the *ego*, but on being, then the very first evidence (I mean first in the order of nature, I am not talking about the chronological order, in which, what is first in itself is often only implicit), the evidence that is first in itself for the intellect, is that of the principle of identity 'discovered' in the intellectual apprehension of being or of the real.[45]

In one sense, nothing could be simpler and more apparent, but the temptation of separating thought from thing, assuming the former to be more real than the latter, remains great in any philosophical reflection. Even the very terms "idea" or "species" can so easily mislead; indeed, Maritain says "the word species has no equivalent in our modern language, and we feel the most suitable expression to render it would be presentative or objectifying form,"[46] and Gilson suggests simply referring to the thing's "intelligibility" as present in the intellect.[47] Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of different terms, it is crucial to remember that the species are the form of the object itself made intelligible in the action of knowing, and not a duplicate or intermediary.

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[45] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 81.
[46] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge,* p. 122.
[47] Gilson *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 229.

Can one, for example, speak of the species as being a sign of the thing known? This is only possible in terms of a formal, and not merely an instrumental, sign: "An instrumental sign is anything that, being itself first known, makes some other thing known consecutively. . . a formal sign is a sign whose whole essence is to signify. It is not an object which, having, first, its proper value for us as an object, is found, besides, to signify another object."[48] The species are, then, as the intelligibility of the form, indeed formal signs of things, though any treatment of the species as an instrumental sign necessarily slips back into the error of representationalism by granting the species some substantial nature in their own right.

In this context of formal signification it is necessary to consider a final aspect of the status of the idea in Aquinas, particularly the role of what is varyingly referred to as the intention, concept, notion, or interior word:

> We must further consider that the intellect, having been informed by the species of the thing, by an act of understanding forms within itself a certain intention of the thing understood, that is to say, its notion, which the definition signifies. This is a necessary point, because the intellect understands a present and an absent thing indifferently. In this the imagination agrees with the intellect. But the intellect has this characterization in addition, namely, that it understands a thing as separated from material conditions, without which a thing does not exist in reality. But this could not take place unless the intellect formed the abovementioned intention for itself.

[48] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge,* p. 127.

> Now, since this understood intention is, as it were, a terminus of intelligible operation, it is distinct from the intelligible species that actualizes the intellect, and that we must consider the principle of intellectual operation, though both are a likeness of the thing understood. For, by the fact that the intelligible species, which is the form of the intellect and the principle of understanding, is the likeness of the external thing, it follows that the intellect forms an intention like that thing, since such as a thing is, such are its works. And because the understood intention is like some thing, it follows that the intellect, by forming such an intention, knows that thing.[49]

> Now, I mean by the "intention understood" what the intellect conceives in itself of the thing understood. To be sure, in us there is neither the thing which is understood nor is it the very substance of the intellect. But it is a certain likeness of the thing understood conceived in the intellect, and which the exterior words signify. So, the intention itself is named the interior word which is signified by the exterior word. Indeed, that the intention aforesaid is not within us as the thing understood is clear from this: It is one thing to understand a thing, and another to understand the intention itself, yet the intellect does so when it reflects on its own work; accordingly, some sciences are about things, and others are about intention understood. Now that the intention understood is not the very intellect within us is clear from this: The very act of being of the intention understood consists in its very being understood; the being of our intellect does not so consist; its being is not its act of understanding.[50]

While the species, as the "principle of intellectual operation," is the means by which the intellect receives the forms of external things, the intention or concept, as a

[49] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 53.
[50] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* IV, 11.

"terminus of intelligible operation," is the further possession by the mind of an interior likeness of thing known, through which it understands things universally and independently from conditions of sensible matter. Having abstracted the form through the species, the mind now possesses within itself and considers a conceptual awareness; that such a universal and immaterial act of awareness is even possible indicates the existence of interior intentions within the mind that are distinct from the sensible object. As Aquinas says, such intentions are necessary from the fact that the mind can just as easily intend or think about both present and absent things. It is further distinct from the species in that while the mind knows the thing itself through the species, it understands its own action or operation of knowing when it considers its own interior intentions. These, like the species, also take on the form of a similitude, for the manner in which the thing is conceived within the mind corresponds to what the thing itself is (i.e. "such as a thing is, such are its works"), and the intention is, accordingly, the mode of possession in which the intellect conceives of something within itself.

The language of exterior words signifies the interior words of the intentions, and the intentions themselves are the mind's own interior means of conceiving things. As Gilson says, "the concept is the similitude of the object which the intellect brings forth under the action of the species. This time, therefore, we are in the presence of a substitute for the object," though he is quick to clarify that the concept is "an intentional being incapable of existing outside of thought."[51] Being neither the substance of the knower nor of the known, the concept is, so to speak, a universal reflective likeness

[51] Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas,* p. 229.

within the intellect of things known, considered separately from particular, sensible properties

We saw that it is easy to misunderstand the species as things known, and so too it is easy to confuse intentions with innate or internal objects. But if we remember that they 'exist' only as a modification within the intellect in relation to things as known through the species, such confusion is avoided. They are distinct from the species in that they are internal conceptions "separated from material conditions", but conceptions that in turn still arise *from* the actual as experienced. Neither the species nor the intentions are distinct things in themselves, but different aspects and stages in the action of knowing things. Here, too, the real takes priority over the ideal.

Whether we speak of the intelligible species as the medium of knowing, or the consequent intention as the internal conception of external things, the danger lies in the "tendency of the imagination to represent concepts and ideas as material things."[52] When species or intentions are viewed as objects themselves, rather than as forms of action and conception, the problem of representationalism invariably arises, for it becomes problematic how one may move beyond the primary yet limited perception of the intermediary to the thing itself. As Aquinas argued, the treatment of species as objects results in the contradictory conclusion that subjective appearance alone is the measure of truth, and it is precisely this model of thinking that results in the impasse of any critical epistemology. The solution lies not in further examining ideas, but in accepting the reality that ideas are themselves necessarily in relation to and dependent upon things:

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[52] Gilson, Etienne (trans. Philip Trower), *Methodical Realism*, Front Royal VA, Christendom Press, 1990, p. 24.

> The problem of knowledge posited in these words: "How can we be sure that the idea corresponds to reality?" does not exist for St. Thomas. There can be no question of correspondence when there is presence or identity. . .the abstractive intuition of essence is without error. Error can exist only where there is composition, and here there is no composition. The fault of modern idealism is to make the idea a closed object instead of an open relation, and to rest in the consideration of a photograph instead of the thing photographed. A representation which is not the representation of anything is, at the same time, and under the same formal relation, relative and non-relative.[53]

A mere correspondence theory of knowing, however open to being it seeks to be, can never come to an objective measure of truth by purely subjective means. In other words, if we do not already begin with the priority of the real as given in every act of knowing, we can certainly never come to it through the priority of the ideal. The best defense of realism is not, therefore, to seek being through the measure of the mind, but to properly explain how and why any act of thought is itself only possible in the supposition of the relation between a knower to what is known. This is precisely what Aquinas does, and the care with which he addresses the status of ideas indicates his keen awareness of their crucial role in the reality of knowing.

While Aquinas' warnings on the dangers of representationalism went unheeded by the new scientific progress of so many Enlightenment philosophers, Reid, almost

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[53] Sheen, Fulton J., *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*, New York, Image Books, 1958, p. 119.

single-handedly, sought to restore sound realism to a movement dominated by a misunderstanding of the role of ideas. It is to these arguments that we now turn.

## Chapter 3: Reid's Razor

> *The first rule of philosophizing laid down by the great Newton, is this: "No more causes, nor any other causes of natural effects ought to be admitted, but such as are both true, and are sufficient for explaining their appearances." This is a golden rule; it is the true and proper test, by which what is sound and solid in philosophy may be distinguished from what is hollow and vain.*[54]

For Reid, all knowledge must begin with and be immediately grounded upon the sensation and perception of an external object. This includes a conception of the identity of the thing perceived, a necessary conviction in its real existence, and a certainty that such objects are given immediately and directly to our minds, not through any reasoning or demonstration. The very notion of an idea as an object or intermediary is antithetical to this active model of perception, and any attempts to prove the validity of perception through a bodily likeness between the object and its perception succumbs to this difficulty of treating representations as if they were things.

Just as William of Ockham recommended that we not multiply principles beyond necessity, so Reid is a philosopher who rejects the unnecessary complications of intellectual theory. When impressions and ideas become additional intermediaries of knowing, in turn ousting the very reality they supposedly represent, the introduction of unnecessary principles and causes confuses what is simple and real. Innovation and

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[54] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, Essay 1, Chapter 3, p. 51.

abuse in philosophical language, argues Reid, in conjunction with a hopeful yet misguided project of epistemological reconstruction, lead to an entrapment in an ideal system that defies all common sense. His proud and deliberate embrace of the vulgar over this philosophical way of life may seem a world away from the profound reflection and precise differentiation of Aquinas, while his open disdain for the Peripatetics and Scholastics leaves little doubt over his loyalties.

Differences of style and context are indeed obstacles to arguing for a general harmony and agreement between Aquinas and Reid, but of even greater importance are a seeming opposition on the status of ideas and likenesses. As we shall see, however, a careful understanding of each set of arguments will reveal theories that are not only compatible, but also complementary. At the root of each system is the common conviction that knowing is necessarily of the objectively real, and that the objectification of ideas is a fatal blow to any sound philosophy. Likewise, despite a first appearance of absolute disagreement on the role of ideas and likenesses, the two claims actually argue toward the same conclusion, albeit from different directions.

The force of rhetoric and conviction with which Reid assaults the philosophy of his contemporaries moves well beyond any differences of philosophical and technical distinction. Rather, it questions the most fundamental premises of their thinking, and in particular, their willingness to consider thinking as isolated and separated from common sense reality. A case in point is the goal of what he calls the ideal hypothesis to demonstrate, by the use of reason alone, what the human mind, by self-evident principles, must already accept as inherently given:

> Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke, have all employed their genius and skill, to prove the existence of a material world; and with very bad success. Poor untaught mortals believe undoubtedly, that there is a sun, moon, and stars; and earth, which we inhabit; country, friends, and relations, which we enjoy; land, house, and moveables, which we possess. But philosophers, pitying the credulity of the vulgar, resolve to have no faith but what is founded upon reason. They apply to philosophy to furnish them with reasons for the belief of those things which all mankind have believed, without being able to give any reason for it. And surely one would expect, that, in matters of such importance, the proof would not be difficult: but it is the most difficult thing in the world. For these three great men, with the best good will, have not been able, from all the treasures of philosophy, to draw one argument, that is fit to convince a man that can reason, of the existence of any one thing without him. Admired Philosophy! Daughter of light! Parent of wisdom and knowledge! if thou art she! Surely thou hast not yet arisen upon the human mind, nor blessed us with more of thy rays, than are sufficient to shed a darkness visible upon the human faculties, and to disturb that repose and security which happier mortals enjoy, who never approach thine altar, nor felt thine influence! But if indeed thou hast not power to dispel those clouds and phantoms which thou hast discovered or created, withdraw this penurious and malignant ray; I despise Philosophy, and renounce its guidance: let my soul dwell with Common Sense.[55]

While it may seem odd for a philosopher to renounce philosophy, Reid's rejection is not a denial of reason itself; it is rather a denial of the claim that all propositions must be proven through reason, and the consequent neglect of the very self-evident first

[55] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, Chapter 1, Section 3, p. 17-18.

principles of common sense upon which reason itself must depend. The seeking of proof for what is itself apparent, while hoping to ground philosophy with greater certainty, only resolves itself into greater uncertainty by spiraling into an infinite regress of knowing.

The existence of an external world, known to us through the senses and the mind, is an unshakable belief of all men, and as such it is rightly taken for granted that knowing is always the act *of* a mind *about* real objects of experience. But philosophers, says Reid, have absurdly questioned this common sense axiom, and introduced the idea into the operation of knowledge, first as an intermediary representation between the mind and things, then increasingly grasping the ideas themselves as realities. A desire to prove the existence of an external world follows from this, for falsely starting with the ideas as objects, the philosophers deny the very inherent facts which make experience and knowledge possible. It is quite reasonable, for example, to consider the operation of thinking; but it is absurd to consider thinking without granting the inherent subject and object involved. Common sense, which grasps self-evident first principles, should serve as the foundation of philosophical reason, but in the overthrow of the natural order, the roles have been reversed:

> In this unequal contest betwixt Common Sense and Philosophy, the latter will always come off both with dishonor and loss; nor can she ever thrive till this rivalship is dropped, those encroachments given up, and a cordial friendship restored: for, in reality, Common Sense holds nothing of Philosophy, nor needs her aid. But, on the other hand, Philosophy (if I may be permitted to change the metaphor) has no other root but the principles of Common Sense: it grows out of them, and draws its

> nourishment from them; severed from this root, its honors wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots.[56]

What exactly are these common sense principles that philosophy has rejected, and why should we accept them as governing our knowledge and our actions? While the specifics of this question will be more thoroughly addressed in Chapter 6, we might begin by indicating how Reid does not intend such first principles to be objects of mere custom, fantasy, or blind faith. While reason does indeed, by means of demonstration, offer certain proof, the act of reasoning itself depends upon first principles which are the very grounds of certainty itself, though not themselves demonstrable. In other words, reason itself presupposes self-evident facts of awareness and experience, which are by no means irrational, but the very basis of what is rational:

> But there are propositions which are no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of nature, and the result of our original powers. There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another.[57]

> There are, therefore, common principles, which are the foundation of all reasoning, and of all science. Such commonplace principles seldom admit of direct proof, nor do they need it. Men need not be taught them; for they

[56] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 4, p. 19.
[57] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 4, p. 452.

> are such as all men of common understanding know; or such, at least, as they give a ready assent to, as soon as they are proposed and understood.[58]

No proof, Reid argues, can or should be sought for what is already given in experience, and is grasped with simplicity and immediacy. These are practical principles, the result not of reflection or of philosophizing, but of acting and living itself. The bitter irony of the ideal hypothesis, which fragments thinking and acting by objectifying ideas, is that the thinker who questions or denies common sense principles at the same time assumes them in his act of defiance. Hence:

> It is a bold philosophy that rejects, without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind in the common concerns of life; and to which the philosopher himself must yield, after he imagines he hath confuted them. Such principles are older, and of more authority, than Philosophy: she rests upon them as her basis, not they upon her. If she could overturn them, she must be buried in their ruins; but all the engines of philosophical subtlety are too weak for this purpose; and the attempt is no less ridiculous, than if a mechanic should contrive an *axis in peritrochio* to remove the earth out of its place; or if a mathematician should pretend to demonstrate, that things equal to the same thing are not equal to one another.[59]

Reid offers a number of varying listings of such principles throughout his writings, and is more than willing to admit of differences in the means of ordering and

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[58] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 39.
[59] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense,* Chapter 1, Section 4, p. 21.

classifying them.[60] An excellent foundation for our purposes can, however, be found in the opening sections of the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, where Reid offers five general principles which he takes for granted in all his examinations.

Their range is certainly broad, and while each may have a common sense foundation in different ways or degrees, they all share the conviction that our actions and relations must of necessity have a real and objective foundation, unhindered by the intermediary of thought itself as a substantial object. In the simplest terms, they remind us that experience and understanding are not about ideas, but about real things, and that this given fact must, in turn, be granted when determining what we should truly mean by an impression or idea.

First, "I shall take it for granted, that I think, that I remember, that I reason, and, in general, that I really perform all these operations of mind of which I am conscious."[61] Reid is assuming that the operations of the mind are real operations, not deceptive or illusory, and that the very conscious experience of these acts is a self-evident indication of their reliability. In other words, the operation itself is the evidence of its real presence.

Second, "that every act or operation, therefore, supposes an agent, that every quality supposes a subject, are things which I do not attempt to prove, but take for granted."[62] The distinction between attributes and substances is given to clarify that actions and qualities are never themselves things, but always of things, and that there can be no motion or property without a subject.

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[60] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 4, p. 453.
[61] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 41.
[62] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 44.

Third, "I take it for granted that, in most operations of the mind, there must be an object distinct from the operation itself."[63] To see, know, or remember necessarily requires something that is seen, known, or remembered; a clear indication of this fact that operations of the mind are represented in language by transitive verbs, which require both an agent and an object.

Fourth, "we ought likewise to take for granted, as first principles, things wherein we find an universal agreement, among the learned and unlearned, in the different nations and ages of the world."[64] Given that all human experience, regardless of particular circumstances, shares a common world of experience, it rightly follows that truths universally and equally accepted should hold great authority.

Fifth, "I shall also take for granted such facts as are attested by the conviction of all sober and reasonable men, either by our senses, by memory, or by human testimony."[65] It is reasonable to assume that the evidence of experience, whether that of oneself or of others, is reliable and trustworthy. A clear indication of this is the manner in which even skeptical philosophers implicitly trust the evidence of sense, memory, and testimony in practice, while rejecting it in theory.

These five principles are not carelessly or haphazardly assembled, but show a clear fundamental connection with one another. Every person in practice does, and by necessity must, accept that his actions are real actions, that those actions are not things themselves but operations of a subject, and that such operations presume not only a subject acting but an object acted upon. To do otherwise reduces consciousness to the

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 46.

level of the absurd, by claiming to experience while not experiencing, thinking while not being a thinker, and sensing or knowing without anything sensed or known.

Furthermore, if we rightly assume the reliability, subject, and objects of experience, we also rightly assume that those principles universally accepted by all those without prejudice do indeed reflect truths of a reality held in common by all men. Hence Reid says that "truth is one, but error is infinite,"[66] explaining that the shared objective facts of experience are one and the same for all, whatever the accidental circumstances. Finally, as much as our philosophizing tendencies might lead us astray, an overall acceptance of the reliability of all human experience is the very *sine qua non* of living itself.

Reid offers no doctrine of being, no account of the actual, no theoretical metaphysics of any sort, in explanation of these principles. His disdain for such reflection derives from a concrete and practical conviction, that any attempt to rationalize what is simply and clearly given for all, in the act of experiencing and living, leads us away from those principles. A rose is a rose, operations are of things, things are what they are, and we will come no closer to them by dwelling upon them needlessly:

> Let scholastic sophisters entangle themselves in their own cobwebs; I am resolved to take my own existence, and the existence of other things, upon trust; and to believe that snow is cold, and honey sweet, whatever they may say to the contrary. He must either be a fool, or want to make a fool of me, that would reason me out of my reason and senses.[67]

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[66] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 44.
[67] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 7, p. 24.

The mind, Reid argues, by a natural and common sense belief, accepts the existence of external bodies as given in the very act of knowing. The intrusion of intermediate impressions and ideas as representative likenesses is an unnecessary and purely philosophical tendency which, out of a misguided desire to reason about what is prior to all reasoning, serves as the most fundamental error of philosophy, both ancient and modern. While its original intent may appear harmless, it begins by degrees to treat ideas as likenesses of things, and ultimately places a priority of ideas over things. As such, it can lead only to skepticism by placing the weight of truth in the ideas and not in things given. The way of ideas, the hope of the philosopher to provide unerring certainty, leads to precisely the opposite.

It may seem simplistic to reduce the problems of philosophy to but a single error, or extreme to argue for the expulsion of ideas from philosophy to provide a cure. But Reid makes a compelling case on how and why this occurs, and his observations on the dire consequences, both theoretical and practical, have surely stood the test of time. The philosopher, quite rightly, wishes to examine the operations of the understanding, but unwittingly loses sight of the very truth he seeks by separating the realm of the ideal from the real. What should rightly be considered an active power of understanding, necessarily grounded in things known, mutates into a representational system where ideas become themselves extraneous intermediaries, and then, in turn, are transformed into direct objects. In reference to Reid's second first principle, actions and qualities are confused with things themselves. While the way of ideas may have seemed to offer an

account of knowing, they slip thought into an absurd skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism:

> If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd.
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> Indeed, if it is true, and to be received as a principle of philosophy, that sensation and thought may be without a thinking being; it must be acknowledged to be the most wonderful discovery that this or any other age has produced. The received doctrine of ideas is the principle from which it is deduced, and of which indeed it seems to be a just and natural consequence. And it is probable, that it would not have been so late a discovery, but that it is so shocking and repugnant to the common apprehensions of mankind, that it required an uncommon degree of philosophical intrepidity to usher it into the world. It is a fundamental principle of the ideal system, that every object of thought must have an impression, or an idea, that is, a faint copy of some preceding impression. This is a principle so commonly received, that the author above mentioned [Hume], although his whole system is built upon it, never offers the least proof of it. It is upon this principle, as a fixed point, that he erects his metaphysical engines, to overturn heaven and earth, body and spirit. And indeed, in my apprehension, it is altogether sufficient for the purpose. For if impressions and ideas are the only objects of thought, then heaven and earth, and body and spirit, and every thing you please, must signify only impressions and ideas, or they must be words without any meaning. It seems, therefore, that this notion, however strange, is closely connected

with the received doctrine of ideas, and we must either admit the conclusion, or call in question the premises.

Ideas seem to have something in their nature unfriendly to other existences. They were first introduced into philosophy, in the humble character of images or representatives of things; and in this character they seemed no only to be inoffensive, but to swerve admirably well for explaining the operations of the human understanding. But since men began to reason clearly and distinctly about them, they have by degrees supplanted their constituents, and undermined the existence of every thing but themselves. First, they discarded all secondary qualities of bodies; and it was found out by their means, that fire is not hot, nor snow cold, nor honey sweet; and, in a word, that heat and cold, sound, color, taste, and smell, are nothing but ideas and impressions. Bishop Berkeley advanced them a step higher, and found out, by just reasoning, from the same principles, that extension, solidity, space, figure, and body, are ideas, and that there is nothing in nature but ideas and spirits. But the triumph of ideas was completed by the *Treatise of Human Nature*, which discards spirit also, and leaves ideas and impressions as the sole existences in the universe. What if at last, having nothing else to contend with, they should fall foul of one another, and leave no existence in nature at all? This would surely bring philosophy into danger; for what should we have left to talk or to dispute about?[68]

While one may well take issue with some of Reid's generalizations about the role of ideas in the history of philosophy, he argues for a gradual progression of withdrawal from genuine conception and understanding. The Platonist theory of Ideas, of course,

[68] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 2, Section 6, p. 34.

seems an ideal candidate for critique, in its attempt to posit intelligible objects as prior to sensible realities. Reid, however, further argues that Aristotle and the Peripatetics, while seeking to base knowledge upon sense experience, make a similar error by imposing images and species as intermediaries of awareness.[69] The intelligible species of Aristotle, we are told, are somehow "shot forth from the object", leading Reid to ask "why should we seek to compare them with any thing, since there is nothing in nature but themselves?"[70]

Descartes's *cogito* of clear and distinct ideas, or Locke's formulation of ideas as "nothing but the immediate objects of the mind in thinking"[71] and the consequent differentiation between primary and secondary qualities, merely exacerbate the problem. The philosophy of Berekeley, which displaces a material reality in favor of the purely ideal, is only a natural development of this tendency. Finally, however, Hume's complete denial of any objective nature, whether material or spiritual, is the fulfillment of the ideal hypothesis, which leaves only images without any corresponding subject as knower or object known, and thereby he "undoes the world of spirits, and leaves nothing to nature but ideas and impressions, without any subject on which they may be impressed."[72]

When Reid boldly says that "all philosophers, from Plato to Hume, agree in this, that we do not perceive external objects immediately, and that the immediate object of

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[69] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 4, p. 91.
[70] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 2, Section 6, p. 34.
[71] Locke, John (ed. P.H. Nidditch), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, I.i.8, p. 47.
[72] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 5, p. 20.

perception must be some image present to the mind,"[73] we may well question whether Reid is the first genuine realist in the history of philosophy. Indeed, we will see that he is not, and that his rejection of the intelligible species of Aristotle and Aquinas arises from a misreading of their claims. But he is certainly correct in arguing the absolute predominance of the ideal system in modern thought, if not its absolute universality. The special attention he pays to Hume's type of representationalism is an indication of the increasing degrees of separation and abstraction, and consequent skepticism, to which this movement must inevitably lead. When Reid claims that Hume's model leaves us with nothing at all to talk or dispute about, he points to nothing less that a complete negation of nature and reality.

It is ironic that Hume's stress on "man as born for action," rather than "man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being"[74] would seem to share much in common with Reid's notion of common sense. Yet these two appeals to the practical could not be more opposed, for Hume's system is already grounded upon a purely subjective mode of apprehension: "when we analyze our thoughts or ideas, however compound or sublime, we always find, that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment."[75] In case there is any doubt that impressions and ideas, and not things, are the objects of our awareness, Hume later adds that "the mind never has anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience

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[73] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 7, p. 105.
[74] Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis (2nd ed.), Hackett Publishing, 1993, p. 1.
[75] Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis (2nd ed.), Hackett Publishing, 1993, p. 11.

of their connection with objects. The supposition of such a connection is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning."[76]

Reid, of course, agrees entirely that such a supposition cannot be reasoned to, but opposes Hume precisely on the claim that it should even be subject to such criteria. If Hume is indeed correct that our mind only perceives impressions and ideas, then he is also correct that the mind can never apprehend things themselves, but is limited to its own subjective awareness and belief. The very claim that impressions and ideas are objects is the primary and essential point of difference between Hume and Reid, and the point of divergence between a philosophy that starts with thinking and perceiving alone, or a philosophy which starts with the thinking and perceiving about things. In the former case, as with Hume's doctrine of habitual belief, there are no truly objective facts whatsoever, while in the latter, as with Reid's common-sense realism, we cannot even speak of knowing without the objective foundation of things known.

Hence Reid's critique of Hume is not merely a matter of distaste for the skepticism, agnosticism, and moral relativism of his contemporary: it is a rejection of these conclusions through a refutation of the very ideal system that Hume embraces. What Hume attempts is an analysis of the act of perceiving and thinking, while in the process entirely removing any real content of what is perceived or thought. We therefore have knowledge without a mind knowing or things known, an action or relation without substances acting or being acted upon. Man is not a living being reflecting on a world of

[76] Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis (2nd ed.), Hackett Publishing, 1993, p. 105.

things, but merely a loose bundle of conjoined impressions and inexplicable instincts. White summarizes this perfectly:

> It would seem that Hume's preoccupation with problems of logical analysis led him to forget that, while logic does have a certain legitimate autonomy of its own, ultimately the laws of thought follow the laws of being; they are founded on the structure of things. Reasoning is not only a matter of the coherence of ideas. It is primarily based on the mind's recognition of the necessary connection between a thing's properties. . . in short, logic ultimately depends upon metaphysics—that is, a realist metaphysics. This is, of course is not Hume's metaphysics.[77]

Reid quite rightly sees that any opposition to Hume's skeptical theory must at all costs avoid presuming ideas as objects of awareness, or trying to proceed from such subjective impressions to objective realities. He therefore realizes that the very acceptance of ideal intermediaries, to whatever degree, unwittingly falls into the very trap he is seeking to escape. Given these circumstances, it becomes clear why Reid is so insistent on opposing all forms of representationalism, for any and all acceptance of ideas as objects must invariably place the priority of knowing in entirely fictitious constructs. Common sense must begin with what is inherently given, rather than reasoning toward it from what is in the mind alone.

If the philosophy of Hume is the necessary consequence of positing ideas as objects, how are we to explain the origin of this error? Hume's observations about impressions and ideas may, after all, seem quite reasonable to any philosopher examining

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[77] White, Jeremy Joyner (ed. John A. Gueguen), *A Humean Critique of David Hume's Theory of Knowledge*, Lanham ND, University Press of America, 1988, p. 88.

the nature of understanding, and Reid argues that Hume's error has far deeper roots in the history of epistemology. It is precisely because philosophers have become familiar with and accustomed to certain modes of expression that the way of ideas is so readily accepted. The need to describe and explain the nature of understanding leads us to the invention and use of terms quite alien to common usage, and the gradual adoption of such terms in inappropriate ways hinders the possibility of genuine understanding:

> The language of philosophers, with regard to the original faculties of the mind, is so adapted to the prevailing system, that it cannot fit any other; like a coat that fits a man for whom it was made, and shows him to advantage, yet will sit very awkward upon one of a different make, although perhaps as handsome and as well proportioned. It is hardly possible to make any innovation on our philosophy concerning the mind and its operations, without using new words and phrases, or giving a different meaning to those that are received; a liberty which, even when necessary, creates prejudice and misconstruction, and which must wait the sanction of time to authorize it. For innovations in language, like those in religion and government, are always suspected and disliked by the many, till use hath made them familiar, and prescription hath given them a title.[78]

The philosophical re-invention of language makes it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to describe the act of understanding separately from certain implicit assumptions which may, in fact, be a great hindrance to seeing it for what it truly is. It does not seem entirely inappropriate to describe this as a sort of 18th century "philosophical correctness," where new modes of expression alter our perception of

[78] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 2, p. 14.

meaning. Indeed, the philosophical language of Reid's contemporaries survives in quite a similar form to this day. Language becomes a means by which understanding is itself modified, whether accidentally or deliberately. The very use of the term "idea" in an increasingly object-oriented manner is a case in point, such that ideas are gradually assumed to be things themselves through the manner in which the word is employed. Ultimately, one cannot even refer to an idea at all without implying that it stands as a representational object in understanding. With such a bias or prejudice inherent in the use of language, it becomes clear how the ideal system becomes imbedded in our very expressions.

In employing such philosophical language, "it must therefore require great application of mind, for a man that is grown up in all the prejudices of education, fashion, and philosophy, to unravel his notions and opinions, till he finds out the simple and original principles of his constitution, of which no account can be given but the will of our Maker."[79] Reid therefore asks us to look beyond the constraints of academic terminology, so as to discern the misleading assumptions their use entails.

Reid employs the example of the term "color" to further explain his point. "By color, all men, who have not been tutored by modern philosophy, understand, not a sensation of the mind, which can have no existence when it is not perceived, but a quality or modification of bodies, which continue to be the same, whether it is seen or not."[80] A certain vagueness or ambiguity arises, however, when we begin to examine the means by

[79] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 2, p. 15.
[80] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 4, p. 85.

which color is perceived, such that one and the same term is used to describe both the quality of color in bodies themselves, as well as the appearance of color to the eye. We accept that the former, as a cause, is a "fixed and permanent quality," while the latter, as an effect in the senses, "may be varied a thousand ways, by a variation of the light, of the medium, or of the eye itself."[81]

In other words, we come to perceive the objective quality of color through the effect, and thereby what appears as a simple notion of color is actually something "compounded" between cause and effect, where "both go together in the imagination, and are so closely united, that they are mistaken for one simple object of thought."[82] Once again, this difference poses little difficulty to a vulgar apprehension, which rightly grasps the appearance being directly of an external reality, and accordingly has no need to distinguish essentially between the two.

Yet this ambiguity of language, so obvious and inoffensive in common usage, becomes problematic when applied to philosophical reflection. Having compounded the cause and effect into one object of perception, the ideal hypothesis misrepresents this object as existing in the mind, and not externally as a thing itself: "one of the most remarkable paradoxes of modern philosophy, which hath been universally esteemed as a great discovery, is, in reality, when examined to the bottom, nothing else but an abuse of

[81] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 4, p. 86.
[82] Ibid.

words. The paradox I mean is, that color is not a quality of bodies, but only an idea in the mind."[83]

This abuse of words, then, starts with a simple and vulgar apprehension, that we generally perceive color and appearance as being of one and the same thing, but then proceeds to shift that compounded object into a realm far removed from its original common sense definition. This is the result of switching the order of signification between object and appearance, or cause and effect, and of assuming that the vulgar conjunction of the two must in turn merely reduce to a quality primarily in the appearance alone. So the ideal hypothesis begins with an assumption of common sense, but then misrepresents and distorts that notion into something far removed from its original meaning.

The innocent use of everyday language can, therefore, lead to unintended consequences when it is applied in a philosophical manner. The result is that the perception is confused with the object itself, the exact opposite of what common sense accepts as given. This paradox is to be found not only in accounts on vision in particular, but on all sensation and understanding in general, such that the misuse of the term "idea" follows the pattern of misusing the term "color."

We have already seen that "there is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words,"[84] and this is clearest where the term "idea" itself is employed. Once again, Reid distinguishes between the popular and philosophical meanings of the word, and the manner in which the two readily become confused:

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[83] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 5, p. 87.
[84] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 1, p. 17.

> The word *idea* occurs so frequently in modern philosophical writings upon the mind, and is so ambiguous in its meaning, that it is necessary to make some observations upon it. There are chiefly two meanings of this word in modern authors, a popular and a philosophical.
>
> First, in popular language, idea signifies the same thing as conception, apprehension, notion. To have an idea of any thing, is to conceive it. To have a distinct idea, is to conceive it distinctly. To have no idea of it, is not to conceive it at all. It was before observed, that conceiving or apprehending has always been considered by all men as an act or operation of the mind, and on that account has been expressed in all languages by an active verb. When, therefore, we use the phrase of having ideas, in the popular sense, we ought to attend to this, that it signifies precisely the same thing which we commonly express by the active verbs conceiving and apprehending.
>
> When the word idea is taken in this popular sense, no man can possibly doubt whether he has ideas. For he that doubts must think, and to think is to have ideas."[85]

As with our earlier example of color, the common or popular definition is clear and immediate, though easily subject to misinterpretation when taken out of context. To "have an idea" means simply to conceive or think about something, and is accordingly itself the act or operation of thinking, not a separate object. It is most readily presented in the form of an active verb, i.e. to conceive, to think, or to apprehend, and in this sense it

[85] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 1, p. 27.

is present in the relation of the mind thinking about objects. In contrast, however, philosophers employ the term rather differently:

> Secondly, according to the philosophical meaning of the word idea, it does not signify that act of the mind which we call thought or conception, but some object of thought. Ideas, according to Mr. Locke, (whose very frequent use of the word has probably been the occasion of its being adopted into common language) "are nothing but the immediate objects of the mind in thinking."[86]

Here the idea ceases to be the act of thinking, conceiving, or apprehending, but itself becomes the thing that is thought, conceived, or apprehended. This, Reid argues, is what Plato introduced with his subsistent Forms, what Aristotle intended by the intelligible species, what Descartes posits as clear and distinct ideas, or what Locke, Berkeley and Hume mean when they speak of the objects of awareness. In all these cases, philosophers have both misrepresented language to explain knowing, by introducing representations that themselves become things, and as a result introduced unnecessary causes to complicate what is really simple apprehension. Where common sense sees the relation of knower and known, philosophers add a further intermediary:

> When, therefore, in common language, we speak of having an idea of any thing, we mean no more by that expression, but thinking of it. The vulgar allow, that this expression implies a mind that thinks; an act of the mind which we call thinking, and an object about which we think. But besides these three, the Philosophers conceive that there is a fourth, to wit, the

[86] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 1, p. 28.

> idea, which is the immediate object. The idea is in the mind itself, and can have no existence but in a mind that thinks; but the remote or mediate object may be of something external, as the sun or moon; it may be something past or future; it may be something which never existed. This is the philosophical meaning of the word idea; and we may observe, that this meaning of that word is built upon a philosophical opinion: For, if Philosophers had not believed that there are such immediate objects of all our thought in the mind, they would never have used the idea to express them.[87]

Note that Reid has absolutely no difficulty with employing the term "idea," if we mean it in the vulgar sense of the act or operation of thinking, apprehending, or conceiving something. But when it takes on the property of something further which is added to the relation of knowing, something which stands in place of the thing itself within the mind, the term "idea" is misused. Rather than risk succumbing to this error, Reid suggests that we avoid its use wherever possible, so as not to add to philosophical ambiguity and confusion.[88]

In treating ideas not as operations but as objects, the ideal hypothesis further reduces knowing to a mere passive reception, not an active conception. Again, the employment of another inappropriate term, "impression," simply encourages such a view, for it would lead us to think that the senses and mind do not themselves act, but are merely acted upon, and intellectual powers are thereby invariably reduced to sensitive passions. A misuse of sensible analogy is once again the root cause here, for the

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[87] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 1, pp. 31-32.
[88] Ibid.

assumption is made that the cause of motion and change in material bodies should be a literal model for sensation and understanding as well:

> There is no prejudice more natural to man, than to conceive of the mind as having some similitude to body in its operations. Hence men have been prone to imagine, that as bodies are put in motion by some impulse or impression made upon them by contiguous bodies; so the mind is made to think and to perceive by some impression made upon it, or some impulse given to it by contiguous objects. . . [89]

> . . .To say that an object which I see with perfect indifference makes an impression upon my mind, is not, as I apprehend, good English. If Philosophers mean no more but that I see the object, why should they invent an improper phrase to express what every man knows how to express in plain English?

> But it evident, from the manner in which this phrase is used by modern Philosophers, that they mean not barely to express by it, my perceiving an object, but to explain the manner of perception. They think that the object perceived acts upon the mind, in some way similar to that in which one body acts upon another, by making an impression upon it. The impression upon the mind is conceived to be something wherein the mind is altogether passive, and has some effect produced in it by the object. But this is a hypothesis which contradicts the common sense of mankind, and which ought not to be admitted without proof.

[89] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 4, p. 88.

> When I look upon the wall of my room, the wall does not act at all, nor is capable of acting; the perceiving is an act or operation in me. That this is the common apprehension of mankind with regard to perception, is evident from the manner of expressing it in all languages.[90]

Just as the introduction of the idea as an intermediary object appeals to a weak material analogy, where inanimate things merely move one another like a row of dominos, so too the use of impressions assumes a mechanistic account of knowing. Seeking, perhaps, to explain understanding in as precise a manner as the natural sciences, such an approach entirely ignores the fact that knowing is an operation of a living person, and thereby of an agent who thinks and understands, not a material body which is only acted upon:

> An object, in being perceived, does not act at all. I perceive the walls of the room where I sit; but they are perfectly inactive, and therefore act not upon the mind. To be perceived is what logicians call an external denomination which implies neither action nor quality in the object perceived. Nor could men ever have gone into this notion that perception is owing to some action of the object upon the mind, were it not that we are so prone to form our notions of the mind from some similitude we conceive between it and body. Thought in the mind is conceived to have some analogy to motion in a body: and as a body is put in motion by being acted upon by some other body, so we are apt to think the mind is made to perceive by some impulse it receives from the object. But reasonings drawn from such analogies ought never to be trusted. They are, indeed, the cause of most of our errors with regard to the mind. And we might as well conclude that minds may be measured by feet and inches, or weighed by

[90] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 4, p. 89

ounces and drams; because bodies have those properties.

> I see as little reason, in the second place, to believe that in perception the mind acts upon the object. To perceive an object is one thing, to act upon it is another; nor is the last at all included in the first. To say that I act upon the wall by looking at it is an abuse of language, and has no meaning. Logicians distinguish two kinds of operations of mind: the first kind produces no effect without the mind; the last does. The first they call *immanent acts,* the second *transitive.* All intellectual operations belong to the first class; they produce no effect upon any external object. But, without having recourse to logical distinctions, every man of common sense knows that to think of an object, and to act upon it, are very different things.[91]

That knowing is an action or operation is not what is in question, but rather whether the causality of knowing can be understood in a purely material manner. As Reid says, the mind and its acts of understanding are as real and immediate as its material objects, but do not admit of the same qualifications and characteristics. External bodies in no way directly operate upon the mind, nor does the mind in any way alter or affect the material object; when the mind knows, its operation is immanent, and not transitive, for its action remains within the mind and does pass outward into anything external. Hence the manner in which the mind causes knowledge is inherently different from the manner in which one body acts upon another. While such observations are apparent to any common conception of awareness, they are neglected and overlooked when an improper measure is introduced through any weak analogy.

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[91] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 14, pp. 176-177.

Though the vulgar are intuitively aware that the act of thinking is distinctly different from the behavior of bodies, the philosopher reduces what is a conscious and intrinsically immaterial act to a descriptive model based upon material images. Hence the very notions of sensible qualities, ideas, or impressions become incomplete and misleading. Reid is, of course, not only concerned with the technical problems of epistemology here, but the manner in which all truths of man succumb to a form of nihilism, where the real itself, so primary and essential to all consciousness, is further and further removed from the knowing subject. Yet another level of irony in the ideal system is that while the use of bodily analogy seeks to make an analysis of the understanding more concretely scientific, it ultimately makes it only more vague and inaccurate.

Whether we are concerned with particular sense images, or the universal conceptions of ideas, the abuse of analogical language encourages the notion that the act of sensing or understanding involves the presence of images or representative pictures within the mind, which are like impressed copies of external things. Reid is, of course, not denying that the mind in some way conceives the nature of what it knows, nor is he denying us the use of analogy to help express understanding. But when the figurative is itself taken literally, confusion takes hold:

> Of all the analogies between the operations of the body and those of the mind, there is none so strong and so obvious to all mankind as that which there is between painting, or other plastic arts, and the power of conceiving objects in the mind. Hence in all languages, the words, by which this power of the mind and its various modifications are expressed, are analogical, and borrowed from those arts. We consider this power of

> the mind as a plastic power, by which we form to ourselves images of the objects of thought.
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> In vain should we attempt to avoid this analogical language, for we have no other language upon the subject; yet it is dangerous, and apt to mislead. All analogical and figurative words have a double meaning; and, if we are not very much upon our guard, we slide insensibly from the borrowed and figurative meaning into the primitive. We are prone to carry the parallel between the things compared farther than it will hold, and thus very naturally to fall into error. [92]

Given that material action depends upon the contiguous action of one body upon another, and that one body impresses its own likeness onto another, the assumption is made that there must be some immediate and proximate object within the mind that carries the representation of the remote and distant external thing into the understanding. The regular employment of analogies from sculpture or painting simply encourages this model. One might say that the philosopher is carried away, so to speak, by an appeal to images and representations, and presumes that there must be both the original and a duplicate object at work in understanding. What is invariably missed is the common-sense awareness that the terms "image" and "object" do not denote separate things in understanding, but rather are one and the same thing in both its existence and the act of that thing being perceived:

[92] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 4, Chapter 1, p. 299.

> The common language of those who have not imbibed any philosophical opinion upon this subject, authorize us to understand the conception of a thing, and an image of it in the mind, not as two different things, but as two different expressions, to signify one and the same thing; and I wish to use common words in their common acceptation.[93]

The depth of Reid's argument becomes clear in all these considerations. We are not confronted here with a reactionary philosopher who begrudges the forces of scientific progress, or a dogmatic theist and moralist disturbed by the contemporary trends of agnosticism and moral relativism. He is indeed concerned with all these problems, but not through any blind opposition; he rightly sees them as symptoms of a deeper disease, a misguided epistemology which, in reducing awareness to internal ideas as objects, absurdly denies reality itself and negates the possibility of any objective truth.

In examining various theories of conception, Reid therefore isolates two types of prejudices or false assumptions inherent in the ideal system:

> 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 one may act upon the other. The *second*, 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.
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> . . .The first of these principles has led Philosophers to think, that as the external objects of sense are too remote to act upon the mind immediately,

[93] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 4, Chapter 1, p. 301.

there must be some image or shadow of them that is present to the mind, and is the immediate object of perception. That there is such an immediate object of perception, distinct from the external object, has been very unanimously held by philosophers, though they have differed much about the name, the nature, and the origins of those immediate objects. . .

. . . It is by these principles that Philosophers have been led to think, that in every act of memory and of conception, as well as of perception, there are two objects. The one, the immediate object, the idea, the species, the form: the other, the mediate or external object. The vulgar know only of one object, which in perception is something external that exists; in memory, something that did exist; and in conception, may be something that never existed: But the immediate object of the Philosophers, the idea, is said to exist, and to be perceived in all these operations.

These principles have not only led Philosophers to split objects into two, where others can find but one, but likewise have led them to reduce the three operations now mentioned to one, making memory and conception, as well as perception, to be the perception of ideas. But nothing appears more evident to the vulgar, than that, what is only remembered, or only conceived, is not perceived; and to speak of the perceptions of memory, appears to them as absurd, as to speak of the hearing of sight.[94]

It is immediately clear that these two prejudices are closely related, for the first assumption, that the mind must be directly acted upon by a proximate and immediate object, leads into the second, that this direct object of awareness must be itself a

[94] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 4, Chapter 2, p. 312-313.

representation of something remote and external. Once we are convinced that all objects of awareness must be contiguous, it becomes necessary to posit a contiguous image of external things within the mind.

In the simplest of terms, understanding involves the immanent action of a knowing subject on an object known. To perceive something is, first, to conceive it, i.e. to have a notion of what the thing is, second, to have a "strong and irresistible conviction and belief of its present existence," and third, "that this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning."[95] Yet the ideal system confuses this direct relationship by splitting the object of knowledge, presenting two things where earlier there was only one. Now all operations of the understanding, whether conception, perception, memory, are all alike an awareness of ideas, where earlier they were distinguished by their relations to what is external.

Instead of having perception be the act of conceiving an existing thing, perception is now the presence of an idea, which in turn may or may not be a representation of another thing. Reid's account of signification in the act of sensing further explains this point, for as an idea is not an intermediary object, so sensations are also not things standing in for other things:

> Sensation, taken by itself, implies neither the conception nor belief of any external object. It supposes a sentient being, and a certain manner in which that being is affected, but it supposes no more. Perception implies an immediate conviction and belief of something external; something different both from the mind that perceives, and from the act of

[95] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 5, p. 96.

> perception. Things so different in their nature ought to be distinguished; but by our constitution they are always united. Every different perception is conjoined with a sensation that is proper to it. The one is the sign, the other the thing signified. They coalesce in our imagination. They are signified by one name, and are considered as one simple operation. The purposes of life do not require them to be distinguished.
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> It is the Philosopher alone who has occasion to distinguish them, when he would analyze the operation compounded of them. But he has no suspicion that there is any composition in it; and to discover this requires a degree of reflection which has been too little practiced even by Philosophers.[96]

Common sense does not as such distinguish sensations and perceptions from their objects, and even as philosophy may consider the more specific relationship of sign and signified in understanding, any real division between them is the root of our problem. A closer examination of Reid's view of sensation provides some further explanation. Whereas perception involves an awareness of existence, sensation is itself an act of feeling alone, but which cannot be considered independently of what is felt.

We saw earlier, for example, that color is a quality of bodies, and that the appearance of color is the means by which this quality is sensed; so too, the sensation is the feeling of qualities of things, the former the act by which the latter is made present. In this relationship of cause and effect, therefore, the sensation signifies what is sensed. In any case of sensing, the sensation and the sensed are commonly viewed as one and the

[96] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 16, p. 199.

same thing, for one is an active feeling about the other. The instance of smelling is like that of seeing:

> The vulgar are commonly charged by philosophers, with the absurdity of imagining the smell in the rose to be something like the sensation of smelling; but I think, unjustly; for they neither give the same epithets to both, nor do they reason in the same manner from them. What is smell in the rose? It is a quality or virtue of the rose, or of something proceeding from it, which we perceive by the sense of smelling; and this is all we know of the matter. But what is smelling? It is an act of the mind, but is never imagined to be a quality of the mind. Again, the sensation of smelling is conceived to infer necessarily a mind or sentient being; but smell in the rose infers no such thing. We say, this body smells sweet, and that stinks. Therefore smell in the rose, and the sensation which it causes, are not conceived, even by the vulgar, to be things of the same kind, although they have the same name.
>
> From what has been said, we may learn, that the smell of a rose signifies two things. First, a sensation, which can have no existence but when it is perceived, and can only be in a sentient being or mind. Secondly, it signifies some power, quality, or virtue, in the rose, or in effluvia proceeding from it, which hath a permanent existence, independent of the mind, and which, by the constitution of nature, produces the sensation in us. By the original constitution of our nature, we are both led to believe, that there is a permanent cause of the sensation, and prompted to seek after it; and experience determines us to place it in the rose. The names of all smells, tastes, sounds, as well as heat and cold, have a like ambiguity in all languages: but it deserves our attention, that these names are but rarely, in

> common language, used to signify the sensations; for the most part, they signify the external qualities which are indicated by the sensations.[97]

Just as Reid argued that the act of conceiving and the thing conceived should be viewed not as two objects, but as our awareness of one object, so too the feeling of sensation and the quality are also united. The sensation is therefore the medium by which the quality is sensed; it is not a sign in the sense of a representative likeness or object, but as a feeling which has no existence in itself. The same holds true, for example, in the sensation of touch:

> Let a man press his hand against the table: he feels it hard. But what is the meaning of this? The meaning undoubtedly is, that he hath a certain feeling of touch, from which he concludes, without any reasoning, or comparing ideas, that there is something external really existing, whose parts stick so firmly together, that the cannot be displaced without considerable force.
>
> There is here a feeling, and a conclusion drawn from it, or some way suggested by it. In order to compare these, we must view them separately, and then consider by what tie they are connected, and wherein they resemble one another. The hardness of the table is the conclusion, the feeling is the medium by which we led to that conclusion.[98]

Reid has no difficulty in saying that the sensation signifies the quality, as an effect proceeds from a cause, just as the act of perceiving signifies the thing perceived. But this

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[97] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 2, Section 9, pp. 42-43.
[98] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 5, p. 64.

signification in is no way or manner by means of some representation or image as an intermediary, but rests in the act of sensing and perceiving itself. Indeed, Reid is quite insistent that any appeal to a resemblance or likeness in perception is quite inappropriate. Though the first principles of experience and natural disposition lead the mind to equate the perception with the object, with the former signifying the latter, this does not mean that the feelings of sensation in any way resemble the thing sensed. In fact, quite the opposite is true, for the manner in which we feel sensations is quite unlike the actual qualities that are sensed. Continuing with the discussion of touch, we see, for example, that the feeling of hardness (the medium) and the quality of hardness (the conclusion) are rather different:

> Let a man attend distinctly to this medium, and to the conclusion, and he will perceive them to be as unlike as any two things in nature. The one is a sensation of the mind, which can have no existence but in a sentient being; nor can it exist one moment longer than it is felt; the other is in the table, and we conclude without any difficulty, that it was in the table before it was felt, and continues after the feeling is over. The one implies no kind of extension, nor parts, nor cohesion; the other implies all these. Both indeed admit of degrees, and the feeling, beyond a certain degree, is a species of pain; but adamantine hardness does not imply the least pain. And as the feeling hath no similitude to hardness, so neither can our reason perceive the least tie or connection between them; nor will the logician ever be able to show a reason why we should conclude hardness from this feeling, rather than softness, or any other quality whatsoever. But in reality all mankind are led by their constitution to conclude hardness from this feeling.[99]

[99] Ibid.

While the feeling or sensation of hardness necessarily leads us to accept the quality of hardness in external things, Reid once again critiques the simplistic argument that the sensation is a likeness of the quality. Physical hardness is characterized by spatial extension, is composed of material components, and admits of degrees of density; the sensation, of course, has no such properties, even as it directly signifies them. Similarly, sensations inherently involve pleasurable or painful feelings, through which we are then aware of the object, though pleasure and pain, the degrees of feeling, are in no way qualities of material things. Once again, Reid is suggesting that the notion of a likeness, resemblance, or similitude in sensation and material qualities derives from the weak application of analogy. To say, therefore, that perception involves the reception by the mind of likeness to the thing itself treats the understanding as if it were itself a material body, and fails to see that the active operations of the mind cannot be reduced to an inanimate causality.

The same is true in the case of sight, where our experience teaches us to read the signs, so to speak, of vision, even as these feelings do not themselves resemble the objective qualities seen. The relationship of degrees of light and color, distance, dimension, or perspective, are not given to us in the act of seeing itself, but in the gradual learning as to what these sensations stand for. The differences of apparent size, for example, between near and far objects is a quality of sensation, but this does not mean the object itself grows larger or smaller, just as the apparent differences of color in degrees of light and dark do not as such indicate a change in the material quality of the object. Just as a man gradually learns a language, so too, he learns the meaning of sensations and their signification:

> The visible appearance of an object is extremely different from the notion of it which experience teaches us to form by sight; and to enable the reader to attend to the visible appearance of color, figure, and extension, in visible things, which is no common object of thought, but must be carefully attended to by those who would enter into the philosophy of this sense, or would comprehend what shall be said upon it. To a man newly made to see, the visible appearance of objects would be the same as to us; but he would see nothing at all of their real dimensions, as we do. He could form no conjecture, by means of his sight only, how many inches or feet they were in length, breadth, or thickness. He could perceive little or nothing of their real figure; nor could he discern, that this was a cube, that a sphere; that this was a cone, and that a cylinder. His eyes could not inform him, that this object was near, and that more remote. The habit of a man or of a woman, which appeared to us as one uniform color, variously folded and shaded, would present to his eye neither fold nor shade, but a variety of color. In a word, his eyes, though ever so perfect, would at first give him almost no information of things without him. They would indeed present the same appearances to him as they do to us, and speak the same language; but to him it is an unknown language; and therefore he would attend only to the signs, without knowing the signification of them: whereas to us it is a language perfectly familiar; and therefore we take no notice of the signs, but attend only to the things signified by them.[100]

Whatever the sensation, whatever the kind or degree of feeling involved, the perception of objects indicates the nature of those things, but does not do so through a literal similarity. The desire to insist upon such a resemblance follows directly from the

[100] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 3, pp. 84-85.

premises of the ideal system: assuming that intramental qualities of ideas are the primary object of understanding, the philosopher then attempts to demonstrate how and why these ideas, in turn, are bridges to an external reality. Hence only the misguided desire to prove the existence of things from ideas, conjoined with the pseudo-rationalist rejection of self-evident first principles, calls for such a model. This need to derive the external from the internal, the perceived from the act of perceiving, lies at the heart of a system that destroys real knowledge in an attempt to define it, and goes contrary to every principle that is already implicit in understanding. Reid takes it for granted that any operation already presumes as prior the subject and object of that relation, and consequently rejects putting the cart before the horse:

> Upon the whole, it appears, that our philosophers have imposed upon themselves, and upon us, in pretending to deduce from sensation the first origins of our notions of external existences, of space, motion, and extension, and all the primary qualities of body, that is, the qualities whereof we have the most clear and distinct conception. These qualities do not at all tally with any system of the human faculties that hath been advanced. They have no resemblance to any sensation, or to any operation of our minds; and therefore they cannot be ideas either of sensation, or of reflection. The very conception of them is irreconcilable to the principles of all our philosophic systems of the understanding. The belief of them is no less so.[101]

The notion of resemblance between idea and object remains the only hope of the idealist in salvaging any real relationship between the mind and reality, even as the

[101] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 6, p. 67.

attempt is already futile. Hume, drawing the proper conclusions from the representationalist model, clearly saw the impossibility of the mind making any objective judgments when it has but subjective perceptions by which to judge; our customary belief, then, arises not from a conformity of thought and thing, but from an internal instinct of thought. Attempting to pass from the feeling to the thing is an attempt to unite by force totally dissimilar qualities:

> But let us, as becomes philosophers, lay aside authority; we need not surely consult Aristotle or Locke, to know whether pain be like the point of a sword. I have as clear a conception of extension, hardness, and motion as I have of the point of a sword; and with some pains and practice, I can form as clear a notion of the other sensations of touch, as I have of pain. When I do so, and compare them together, it appears to me clear as daylight, that the former are not kin to the latter, nor resemble them in any one feature. They are as unlike, yea as certainly and manifestly unlike, pain is to the point of a sword. It may be true, that those sensations first introduced the material world to our acquaintance; it may be true, that it seldom or never appears without their company; but for all that, they are as unlike as the passion of anger is to those features of the countenance which attend it.[102]

The passage above provides two delightfully wonderful examples: the feeling of pain in relation to the point of a sword, and the feeling of anger in relation to the facial expression that follows from it. If, like Reid, we take for granted the existence of real qualities in things, as well as the corresponding feelings that invariably accompany them,

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[102] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, p. 69.

there is little difficulty in learning the relationship between sensation and object. But once we attempt to pass from one into the other, by introducing a literal likeness, there can be no transference of causes.

In other words, once we only accept the impression or idea as primary object, rather than accepting the thing as the object that is perceived, the impressions and ideas alone can point to nothing beyond themselves. Common sense requires that the mind grant the existence of the sword, or the countenance of anger. When each is associated with a sensation in experience, a relationship of sign and signified becomes apparent. But if one grants only the feeling of a sharp pain, or the emotion of rage, one cannot then prove any resemblance to the same external objects that common sense already takes as given.

But how can we genuinely know if the perception corresponds to the thing? By what means are we to determine that feelings really do represent the objectively real? The question, unfortunately, already presumes a representationalist mindset by seeking to prove the existence of the object through the act of perceiving. The natural and common-sense order of awareness rightly assumes that the very act of perceiving already presupposes the object, just as any quality or relation is of a substance. One neither can nor should seeks reasons for what is self evident:

> It is beyond our power to say, when or in what order we came by our notions of these qualities. When we trace the operations of our minds as

far back as memory and reflection can carry us, we find them already in possession of our imagination and belief, and quite familiar to the mind.[103]

All reasoning must be from first principles; and for first principles no other reason can be given but this, that, by the constitution of our nature, we are under a necessity of assenting to them. Such principles are parts of our constitution, no less than the power of thinking: reason can neither make nor destroy them; nor can it do anything without them: it is like a telescope, which may help a man see farther, who hath eyes; but without eyes, a telescope shows nothing at all. A mathematician cannot prove the truth of his axioms, nor can he prove any thing, unless he takes them for granted. We cannot prove the existence of our minds, not even of our thoughts and sensations. A historian, or a witness, can prove nothing, unless it is taken for granted, that the memory and senses may be trusted. A natural philosopher can prove nothing, unless it is taken for granted, that the course of nature is steady and uniform.

How or when I got such first principles, upon which I build all my reasoning, I know not; for I had them before I can remember: but I am sure they are part of my constitution, and that I cannot throw them off. That our thoughts ans sensations must have a subject, which we call ourself, is not therefore an opinion got by reasoning, but a natural principle. That our sensations of touch indicate something external, extended, figured, hard, or soft, is not a deduction of reason, but a natural principle. The belief of it, and the very conception of it, are equally parts of our constitution. If we are deceived in it, we are deceived by Him that made us, and there is no remedy.[104]

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[103] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, p. 67.
[104] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, pp. 71-72.

The problem of the true philosopher is not, therefore, whether we are to accept the existence of an external world, which is something that all awareness must already take for granted; the problem lies in trying to prove an external world from a sort of likeness between the idea in the mind to the thing itself, from what is internal to what is external. We saw earlier that the abuse of language lies at the root of the inference that ideas are themselves things known. Reid has now also explained the essence of a second false inference:

> A second inference is, that although color is really a quality of body, yet it is not represented to the mind by an idea or sensation that resembles it; on the contrary, it is suggested by an idea which does not in the least resemble it. And this inference is applicable, not to color only, but to all the qualities of body which we have examined.
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> It deserves to be remarked, that in the analysis we have hitherto given of the operation of the five senses, and of the qualities of bodies discovered by them, no instance hath occurred, either of any sensation which resembles any quality of body, or of any quality of body whose image or resemblance is conveyed to the mind by means of the senses.[105]

The ideal hypothesis has sought to show how the "intercourse that is carried on between the mind and the external world"[106] is possible through such likenesses, whether they be the species of the Peripatetics, or the ideas of sensation in Locke. At first, this

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[105] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 6, pp. 90-91.
[106] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 6, p. 91.

seems a largely harmless position, as attention was still first given to the object. But the hypothesis had already taken hold, and the inevitable result was a skepticism that, in the end, completely denies a world of things in favor of a pure world of thought. Where the act of conception is no longer of the real, the act of judgment, which always requires conception as the basis of its terms,[107] can no longer affirm or deny what is true and false. Judgment itself, in ceasing to be objectively grounded, now lacks the foundation to grasp objective truth.

Reid explains this creeping but inevitable process in the history of philosophy in terms of the aforementioned inferences of the ideal system. The first inferred error was the assumption that qualities are not primarily in things, but in the mind. The second inferred error was the assumption that the idea is a representation or likeness of the object. When the first and second error are combined, the problem seems less serious; even though the false premise of the idea being the primary object of awareness is present, the bridge of the likeness remains, and attention is still directed at the thing which the idea represents. This, claims Reid, is the position of Aristotle, the Scholastics, and Locke.

But when the second error is corrected, and the first remains, we are left with ideas as the primary object of awareness, while the rejection of the idea as a likeness now means that there is total separation of thought and things, leading, in turn, to an absolute skepticism and rejection of the laws of nature. This, claims Reid, is the position of Hume, where all meaning and truth is lost. The darkness of skepticism begins with the

[107] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 1, p. 408.

intermediary of ideas, proceeds with a rejection of the material world, and ends in a total denial of nature itself:

> As it happens sometimes in an arithmetical operation, that two errors balance one another, so that the conclusion is little or nothing affected by them; but when one of them is corrected, and the other left, we are led farther from the truth, than by both together: so it seems to have happened in the Peripatetic philosophy of sensation, compared with the modern. The Peripatetics adopted two errors; but the last served as a corrective to the first, and rendered it mild and gentle, so that their system had no tendency to skepticism. The moderns have retained the first of those errors, but have gradually detected and corrected the last. The consequence hath been, that the light we have struck out hath created darkness, and skepticism hath advanced hand in hand with knowledge, spreading its melancholy gloom, first over the material world, and at last over the whole face of nature. Such a phenomenon as this, is apt to stagger even the lovers of light and knowledge, while its cause is latent; but when it is detected, it may give hopes, that this darkness shall not be everlasting, but that it shall be succeeded by a more permanent light.[108]

This incredibly insightful analysis of the status of ideas explains the slippery-slope origin of modern skepticism, and the manner in which the correction of one error, while ignoring another, can lead to even deeper difficulties. While the intent of introducing the idea as a resemblance in the mind of external things arose from a genuine desire to explain the process of conception, it separates the idea from the thing and treats it as an object in itself. Once the fiction of a resemblance is lost, the idea stands alone. It

[108] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 6, pp. 94-95.

is no wonder that Hume, in destroying one inference while inheriting the other, represents the zenith of skepticism, or, perhaps more accurately, the nadir of realism.

The hope of philosophy, Reid tells us, is first to detect the root of the error, and then to restore the light by describing the process of understanding as it truly is, free from all intellectual presumption and misleading analogies. We must deny the propositions that ideas are objects of understanding, that perception receives a likeness of what is known, and that first principles of consciousness can or should be demonstrated. Conversely, we must affirm the propositions that things themselves are the objects of understanding, that they are directly known to the mind in perception, and that the first principles of common sense are the foundation of all consequent knowledge. Underlying all of this rests the awareness that understanding is not a passive state, but an active power.

Few notions have interfered with genuine understanding more than the introduction of the idea: it first divides the unified object of thought into the immediate idea and the remote thing, and then, having burned the bridge between the two, leaves only the idea. The act of perceiving and the thing perceived are, however, not at all two things, but the mind's active and direct awareness of one thing, which exists in itself and not in thought alone:

> When we see the sun or moon, we have no doubt that the very objects which we immediately see are very far distant from us, and from one another. We have not the least doubt that this is the sun and moon which God created some thousands of years ago, and which have continued to perform their revolutions in the heavens ever since. But how are we

astonished when the philosopher informs us that we are mistaken in all this; that the sun and moon which we see are not, as we imagine, many miles distant from us, and from each other, but they are in our own mind; that they had no existence before we saw them, and will have none when we cease to perceive and to think of them; because the objects we perceive are only ideas in our own mind, which can have no existence a moment longer than we think of them.[109]

[109] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 14, p. 172.

## Chapter 4: Whither Ideas?

> *It is clear that the intelligible ideas by which the potential intellect is actualized are not in themselves the intellect's object; for they are not that which, but that by which it understands.*[110]

While both Aquinas and Reid propose a model of knowing that treats things themselves as the proper object of awareness, their corresponding accounts of the role of ideas in this relation may at first appear to be at odds with one another. As we have seen, Aquinas argues that the intelligible species are not that which the intellect knows, but that by which, the intellect knows things. Hence the species are not in themselves objects, but the means of apprehension, and which are themselves only knowable secondarily as a reflection of the mind upon its own primary act of understanding. In contrast, Reid argues that the act of conception between the mind and things makes the introduction of ideas into this relationship both unnecessary and inherently opposed to any genuinely realist understanding. The philosophers' appeal to ideas becomes, therefore, a model of knowing that contradicts the self-evident principle that awareness of things themselves is direct and immediate.

The problem here is not merely that Aquinas proposes an additional element to the reality of knowing which Reid does not; by Reid's account, a system that posits ideas in any way, shape, or form, whether as primary objects or as intermediaries, slips into an indefensible representaionalism. Accordingly, we cannot simply claim that both models

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[110] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Kenelm Foster et. al.), *Aristotle's De Anima*, Yale University Press, 1951, Book 3, Lectio 8, §718.

agree in the principle on the primacy of the object, and therefore remain, despite their differences, essentially realist accounts. If any and all introduction of ideas into the equation of knowing is in itself opposed to a genuine realism, as Reid argues, then Aquinas is clearly not a realist. While his conclusions may, with all good intentions, seek to maintain the thing itself as the primary object, they nevertheless introduce an intermediary as the secondary thing known, and thereby negates any possibility of direct awareness.

In Reid's critique of the dominant philosophical account of knowing, we saw that there are two distinct yet closely related false inferences. The first, that intelligible qualities are not in things but in the mind, might not at first appear to apply to Aquinas' approach; after all, the texts of Aquinas examined in Chapter 2 repeatedly insist that the intelligible species are not themselves objects, but the means of grasping the proper objects, and that a representationalist model necessarily reduces to the contradictory claims of skepticism and relativism. Furthermore, Aquinas' examination of the action of knowing argues how and why the species constitute the form of the thing known as made present by abstraction to the intellect.

Yet all is not necessarily as it seems here. Again, Reid's insistence was not just that things themselves are the object of the mind, but that that any presence of the ideal denies the true presence of the real. As soon as Aquinas places the intelligible species between the act of thought and the thing, Reid would have it, the species, however innocently, becomes the proximate object, the thing itself distant and separated. To say, therefore, that the mind knows the thing through the idea already makes the idea the first thing known, the thing the second thing known, in some way through or by the idea.

Since Aristotle and the Scholastics still claim the real as the foundation of knowledge, the tendency to skepticism is lessened, but the root cause problem remains.

The second false inference Reid discusses is the assumption that the ideas within the mind are in some way a likeness, resemblance, or representation of the thing outside the mind. While the nature of this claim will be more closely considered in Chapter 5, it is well worth noting here that this second error serves as an unwitting support for the first. As Reid has argued, the indefensible claim that ideas are intramental copies of things is used to defend the status of the idea. Though the doctrine of resemblance joined together with the objectification of ideas seems to lessen the error, by seeking to maintain the bridge between mind and object, the difference is one of degree, not of kind. As soon as the myth of likenesses is revealed, no direct connection between thought and thing remains possible.

According to Reid, therefore, the status of the idea appears to be an all-or-nothing proposition. Either we accept the idea as an intermediary, in which case we already deny the primacy and priority of the thing itself, or we dispose of it entirely, and describe knowing as it truly is. There seems to be no room here for equivocation or subtle distinction. From Reid's own perspective, the intelligible species of the Peripatetics and Scholastics has already violated the principles of common sense in knowing, thereby compromising their reality. The species seem to become a sort of excuse or rationalization in which the error of ideas can be maintained by insisting on their likeness to the qualities of bodies.

When contemporary commentators like Haldane[111] or McInerny[112] argue for the underlying unity of Aquinas and Reid on the nature of knowing, we must approach such claims carefully, neither accepting nor rejecting them out of hand. Are they the result of a wishful thinking that ignores a striking opposition, or a genuine understanding that sees beyond a seeming disharmony? Given that Aquinas claims a model of direct apprehension, how can the presence of the intelligible species as the means of this apprehension be explained and justified? Conversely, if Aquinas is indeed correct in placing the species as the medium of awareness, does Reid's account reveal a limitation in its outright rejection of ideas?

Reid had explained that the misuse or misunderstanding of language rests as one of the primary causes of the ideal hypothesis, and it should come as little surprise that this same issue stands in the way of harmonizing the epistemologies of Aquinas and Reid. It should be readily apparent that the vastly different philosophical landscape and terminology of both thinkers can present a hindrance, and the danger lies in hastily assuming that Aquinas' intelligible species and Reid's ideas are precisely one and the same thing. Aquinas clearly sees the need to argue for the species as the means of awareness, and to read this exclusively in the context of Reid's ideas is to do the argument a disservice; while Reid rejects the species as intermediary, we should not immediately assume that he understands this term in the same way as Aquinas.

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[111] Haldane, John J., "Reid, Scholasticism and Current Philosophy of Mind", in Dalgarno, Melvin and Eric Matthews (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, Philosophical Studies Series 42, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, p. 287.
[112] McInerny, Ralph, "Thomas Reid and Common Sense", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 3, Summer 2000, p. 348.

A careful and honest reading of the arguments presented in Chapters 2 and 3 reveals that the positions can appear, so to speak, to be talking past one another. First, both Aquinas and Reid are in complete agreement that the direct and immediate objects of knowing are things themselves. Second, both Aquinas and Reid reject the species or idea as objects themselves, and are clearly aware of the dangers and contradictions inherent in such an error. Third, both Aquinas and Reid stress the fact that knowing is an active operation, and that the action of knowing is itself the relation between the knower and known. In both arguments, we are not expected to merely accept a subject and object alone, but a subject and object joined together through the third term of the operation of the mind.

The intelligible species of Aquinas are not, therefore, the ideas as things of which Reid is so critical, but are rather the nature of the formal relation between two things, where the quiddity of the thing known is made intelligible through the action of knowing. Reid himself more than willingly accepts the necessity of such an active and relational understanding, and embraces it as the vulgar conception of the idea, as distinct from the philosophical notion. As a whole, it should become clear that the intelligible species of Aquinas are intended in the same manner as Reid's vulgar notion of ideas, just as Aquinas' critique of the species as objects in themselves conforms to Reid's critique of the philosophical notion of ideas.

Despite Aquinas' insightful and prophetic warnings on the dangers or representationalism, it is a mistake to interpret his arguments only from the perspective of later distinctions. Given the increasing historical predominance of the ideas as objects, the intelligible species may begin more and more to appear in this light, and in the

context of Reid's rejection of the ideal hypothesis, the species are viewed in quite a different manner than they were originally intended. The unfortunate fact that Reid himself critiques the species is an indication that he mistakenly groups them together with other contemporary notions of the idea. Aquinas intended them not as things, but as formal relations between things; Reid's entirely reasonable attack on the modern model of ideas unwittingly subsumes the Thomist model into a later and very different class of epistemology. As Gilson says:

> The very legitimate preoccupation of finding in Thomism the reply to questions formulated since his day leads us imperceptibly to a modification of the sense of the problem actually confronting him. It tends to make us change the meaning of texts so as to adapt them to new questions, sometimes even to force them in such a way that we compromise the balance of his entire synthesis for the sake of some new interpretation.[113]

If we falsely claim that Aquinas' species are intermediary objects, rather than formal relations, one is further tempted to argue that his embrace of a representational model, that begins with ideas, is therefore also a critical model, that seeks to argue for the existence of external things from those ideas. Indeed, Reid was convinced that, once the Peripatetics and Scholastics embraced the idea as a primary object, their system was simply a mild precursor to later skepticism. Aquinas, however, does no such thing, and, as such, is not subject to Reid's critique; in fact, his model does not oppose Reid's claim, but ultimately supports it.

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[113] Gilson, Etienne (trans. L.K. Shook), *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, p. 223.

Just as we are in danger of misreading Aquinas' intentions and terms in light of later distinctions, we are equally in danger of failing to see that Reid's almost complete reinvention of epistemological language need not entail a wholesale rejection of the classical realist tradition. Convinced that the gradual abuse of abstract philosophical terms had confused the matter at hand, Reid encourages us to view human understanding in terms of active powers, rather than passive states, and alters his language accordingly. Given the epistemological state of affairs at his time, such a move may well have been fitting and necessary. The problem of knowing, from Descartes onward, had succumbed to ever increasing degrees of subjectivism, and harsh times call for harsh measures. As Michaud points out, such a crucial set of errors called for a radical refutation of the original representationalist premises:

> From the moment one claims we perceive things through the medium of mental objects the existence of the external world is to be proven or guaranteed by God, or else the world is sublimized into a Berkeleyan world of ideas 'in the mind.' Moreover, the existence of other minds becomes in its turn problematic and we end in solipsism or egoism. Finally, even our own minds vanish and no reality subsists but that of ideas. Such radically sceptical conclusions are obviously contrary to the dictates of common sense. So by a sort *of modus tollens*, we have to drop the ideal premise of the argument.[114]

[114] Michaud, Yves, "Reid's Attack on the Theory of Ideas: From a Reconsideration of Reid's Arguments to a Reassessment of the Theory of Ideas," in Dalgarno, Melvin and Eric Matthews (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, Philosophical Studies Series 42, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, p. 10.

Given the gravity of his task, Reid broadens his argument to include any and all support of ideas, impressions, concepts, or species in his critique. In the context of most of his contemporaries, he is quite justified in doing so, and a rebuilding of the philosophical framework of knowing is therefore understandable. We must, however, be wary of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and avoid applying his general conclusion to particular cases where it does not properly apply. While Reid is right to reject the ideal system, he is surely mistaken in claiming to be the first and only thinker to follow this path of common sense

Reid's language of the active powers of the intellect, of stressing the operation of perceiving over the possessing of ideas, has the clear and necessary purpose of removing linguistic obstacles to an accurate view of the understanding:

> Reid's attempt to demonstrate that the common theory of ideas mishandles the activity of the mind is the most perceptive and promising of his criticisms. It suggests that we are to invent a whole new conceptual apparatus if we wish to account for the human mind as a collection of active powers. Even if we add force, vivacity and belief to ideas, even if we describe them as elements in systems in which they are enlivened and strengthened by associations and dispositions, it won't do. Thinking cannot be accounted for by enumerating the various patterns in which mental atoms are arranged, since the mind is basically active.[115]

When the very reference to ideas begins to require the presence of some additional part or element within the mind, as it invariably does for Locke, Berkeley, or Hume, it becomes necessary to rid ourselves of such a damaging association. That

[115] Michaud, "Reid's Attack on the Theory of Ideas," p. 26.

Aquinas' intelligible species end up being included in such a housecleaning is unfortunate. Again, the situation and circumstances require us to look beyond mere nominal distinctions to the heart of the arguments themselves; when this is done, the essential unity of Aquinas and Reid can come forth. Even as the intelligible species can be misrepresented, and even as a critique of the ideal system can be overextended, the soundness of a genuine realism remains.

In looking more closely at these shared principles, it seems proper to briefly review precisely what Aquinas means by the intelligible species, and what Reid means by his distinction between the philosophical and vulgar notion of ideas. Seen side by side, the complementarity between the two arguments becomes apparent.

When Aquinas establishes the actual as the foundation of all science and inquiry, he champions the triumph of the real over the ideal. Just as actions and relations are not themselves things, but accidents of things, so knowing is itself the act of the intellect about being. Such a conclusion, furthermore, is not reached by starting with the act of understanding, and then proceeding to the object, but rather in realizing the necessity that being is already inherently given as a condition of intelligibility, and that understanding self-evidently presupposes a knowing subject and an object as known.

Reid comes to precisely the same conclusion when he establishes that the existence of substances is a common-sense first principle, and that any action or operation presupposes both subject and object as necessary components. We cannot speak of knowing at all without an agent who knows, and a separate content of what is known. To prove such a point is in vain, for all proof must itself depend upon what is first readily apparent to all in common sense. While Reid is apprehensive of any

metaphysical reflection upon the nature of the actual, and prefers to describe the given in purely practical terms, the existence of things themselves is the grounding and precondition of all awareness.

In affirming such principles, Aquinas and Reid are both firmly at odds with the dominant movements of modernity and post-modernity. This fact alone unites the two models in an unequivocal non-critical approach, thereby avoiding the entanglements and contradictions of the ideal hypothesis. Rather than embracing the assumed position that thought itself is the starting point of all inquiry, the dilemma of proceeding from subjective appearance to objective reality never occurs for Aquinas or Reid. Both are immediately aware that a representationalist argument cannot be opposed while simultaneously accepting representational premises.

Interpreted through the assumptions of the modern ideal system, Aquinas' epistemology may at first appear to be a largely passive model, where both the intelligible species and concepts are received intermediaries, proximate representations, or objects of thought presented to the understanding. As we have seen, however, such a conclusion misrepresents the active role of the intellect in Aquinas. The very nature of all living things is quite literally the principle of action, such that all powers of the soul are characterized as degrees of activity, from the vegetative, sensitive, and appetitive, through the intellectual. Indeed, Aquinas argues that while the intellect must be said to be passive insofar as it receives the forms of things, and is itself actualized by what is prior in act,[116] the intellect is likewise active, insofar as the mind itself must make things

[116] Cf. Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), *Summa Theologica*, London, Benziger Brothers, 1948, 1a, Q. 79, Art. 2.

actually intelligible by abstracting the form from sensible and material conditions.[117] In other words, the mind must be able to receive knowledge, but must also itself abstract that content in the operation of knowing.

Reid's primary purpose in stressing the active powers of the understanding is to combat the passive model of received ideas, and it for this reason that he encourages the use of transitive verbs, rather than nouns and intransitive verbs, to describe the operation. In this regard, of course, Aquinas' use of "phantasm," "intelligible species," or "concept" may seem rather passive, yet as soon as we examine the proper definitions of such terms, we see that he also intends them in terms of active powers. Phantasms and intelligible species are not things, but the mode of the action of knowing, and concepts are not objects, but the manner in which the forms of things are defined and considered universally within the mind. We are not speaking, therefore, of a series of represented objects, but one thing being actively understood by the intellect. Despite a certain degree of misunderstanding of the original position, Reid is willing to give at least some proper credit to the Peripatetic approach to the intellect:

> Although the Peripatetics had no good reason to suppose an active and a passive intellect, since attention may be well enough accounted an act of the will; yet I think they came nearer to the truth, in holding the mind to be in sensation partly passive and partly active, than the moderns, in affirming it to be purely passive. Sensation, imagination, memory, and judgment, have, by the vulgar, in all ages, been considered as acts of the mind. The manner in which they are expressed in all languages, shows this. When the mind is much employed in them, we say it is very active;

[117] Aquinas, *Summa Theoloigica*, 1a, Q. 84, Art. 1.

> whereas, if they were impressions only, as the ideal philosophy would lead us to conceive, we ought in such a case rather to say, that the mind is very passive: for I suppose no man would attribute great activity to the paper I write upon, because it receives a variety of characters.[118]

This passage serves admirably as an example of Reid's partial misinterpretation of Aristotle; this is indeed rather ironic, since his misreading seems to derive precisely from the unwarranted assumption that Aristotle and his followers embrace the ideal hypothesis. When Reid states that an active intellect is unnecessary because the attention of the will is sufficient to account for the attention given an object in knowing, he is missing the point. The purpose of the active intellect is not merely an attention to the object, but more importantly the power by which the formal identity of material things is made intelligible. As will be shown in Chapter 5, it is this lack of consideration for the form of things actively understood which is noticeably absent in Reid's thought, and leaves an important component of knowing unaddressed. Nevertheless, Reid grants that the mind being active and passive in different senses, and in accord with a vulgar conception, is a conception superior to that of the ideal philosophers, where it is presented as purely passive.

Reid makes a similar judgment concerning the Aristotelian model when he assumes that, because there must be sensible and intelligible species in the mind, that these species are therefore the proximate objects of knowing. Furthermore, he again believes that the passive intellect merely receives these species, and then that the active

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[118] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, Chapter 2, Section 10, p. 44.

intellect simply considers them once they have been received into the passive intellect. Even overlooking the confused relation of matter and form that Reid suggests, it is manifestly false that Aristotle, or Aquinas, argue for the passive reception of species from things, without a causally prior active abstraction by the mind. Neither, for that matter, believed that the species are objects of knowledge, but rather that things themselves, as intelligible, must consequently be formally present to the mind in the act of knowing. Again, Reid assumes that any reference to internal ideas can only be an instance of the ideal system:

> Aristotle had no good affection for the word idea, and seldom or never uses it but in refuting Plato's notions about ideas. He thought that matter may exist without form; but that forms cannot exist without matter. But at the same time he taught, that there can be no sensation, imagination, nor intellection, without forms, phantasms or species in the mind; and that things sensible are perceived by sensible species, and things intelligible by intelligible species. His followers taught more explicitly, that those sensible and intelligible species are sent forth by the objects, and make their impressions upon the passive intellect; and that the active intellect perceives them in the passive intellect. And this seems to have been the common opinion while the Peripatetic philosophy retained its authority.[119]

Despite such unfortunate misunderstandings, Aquinas and Reid are in total agreement that *first*, the act of knowing must be directly and immediately about actual things, existing independently of the mind, as the self-evident precondition of awareness, and *second*, that the manner by which the mind knows things is an active operation, not

[119] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 7, p. 207.

just a passive reception. Aquinas certainly offers a more thorough and comprehensive account of both the formal identity of things known, and the active and passive aspects of the intellectual operation. Reid, however, offers the necessary insistence that any account of knowing as active is best argued, especially in the modern context of the ideal system, in terms of dynamic operations rather than static states. The very fact that Reid himself so easily confuses the claims of Aristotle is a rather suitable indication of this, and reminds us to explain the true intentions, genuine meaning, and original terms of Aristotle or Aquinas to the modern reader in this light.

Building upon this foundation, it becomes clear that Aquinas and Reid are entirely in agreement on the status of ideas, despite the seeming opposition of context and terms. In both cases the act of knowing is immanent and not transitive, in that the action remains in the agent and does not pass to something external. Such a common awareness indicates how both models see beyond the limitations of sensible and material causality, and that knowing, as an intellectual, and therefore immaterial, operation, is not defined in terms of one body acting upon another. It remains only to be seen how and in what manner the relationship between knower and known proceeds, since knowing must be understood as the action by which the mind is aware of things.

It cannot be stressed enough that Aquinas' account in no way treats the intelligible species as static objects or representational states existing within the mind. If we are to speak of the species as signs of the thing known, this can only be understood in the sense of formal, and not instrumental, signs, as the species have no existence or identity in themselves independent from their act of signifying. While the modern reader, accustomed to a representational model of knowing, immediately sees the species or

concepts as mental objects, a direct appeal to the principle of action in Aquinas' arguments reveals the inaccuracy of such an assumption. Knowing is an action of the intellectual power, which is directly of and about the real as its object. In turn, the intelligible species is the form of the thing in its action of being known, binding subject and object in an immediate relationship.

The intelligible species is, therefore, the form of the object as actively intelligible, and to secondarily reflect upon the species is for the intellect to consider its own operation as its object. The species may be said to be an intermediary insofar as any causal agency is the medium of change, but not as a static image or representation. While a materialist reading of Aquinas can only consider the species and concepts as duplicating states, the argument itself presents them as a thing in the act of being understood; there are only two things present, the knower and the known, and we should speak of an idea not as an additional thing intervening between them, but as the active means by which the intelligible nature of things passes to the mind. In building his argument around the mode of action in knowing, there should be little doubt that Aquinas does not intend species or concepts as distinct components or parts which themselves receive impressed copies of distant objects. Instead of multiplying the object over and over, there is but one object, and the species is that very same thing insofar as it is intelligible.

Aquinas' use of sensible analogies to illustrate his point can indeed serve as a distraction from the role of the species as forms of action. The fault, however, is not with Aquinas, but with the prejudices of a modern mindset which cannot help but conceive of any reality only in terms of material and inanimate causality. Hence, even as Aquinas

clearly defines the species as the form of the action by which the intellect knows its object, the representationalist continues to view the species as a static state rather than a dynamic action.

Looking beyond the differences of terminology, this position is remarkably similar to Reid's notion of the active power of the mind. Confronted with the errors of the ideal hypothesis, which treats ideas as representational objects within the mind, Reid therefore rejects the philosophical notion of the idea itself, recommending instead that we view knowing as an active relation whereby things themselves are implicitly made present through the attention of the mind's operation. As we saw, by the philosophical notion of ideas Reid means the status of the idea as itself a proximate object of thought, which may, or may not, then serve as a representation of a removed existing thing. This is precisely the same position Aquinas rejects when he argues that the intelligible species are not the object of knowing.

Reid is, however, willing to grant the use of the term "idea" if by it is meant the vulgar or common notion of simply conceiving a thing. In this sense, an idea is not an object or representation, but the very action of knowing itself, an action through which the mind can then consider and reflect upon in relation to the things it understands. It is for this reason that Reid suggests that the use of transitive verbs is most suitable to describe such an operation, where instead of positing ideas, impressions, concepts, or species, it is best to speak of the actions to *think*, to *know*, to *conceive*, or to *perceive*. The danger, of course, in confusing the more accurate vulgar notion of the idea with the corrupt philosophical notions suggests that the term itself be avoided to deter any misleading suggestion of passive reception or mental objects.

What Aquinas describes as the intelligible species is best equated with Reid's vulgar or common notion of the idea, and is simply a more detailed account of the form of the action of knowing, without any appeal to intermediary objects. Hence while the thing itself is that which is primarily understood, the species is that which is secondarily understood as the mode through which the intellect operates. A representationalist model, of course, reverses this priority, by making the idea that which is primarily understood, and the thing itself as remotely secondary to this proximate and internal awareness.

While Aquinas seeks to explain the content and causality of knowing in presenting the species as the formal intelligibility of the object, Reid steers clear of any such explanation. Rather, he is completely satisfied in arguing that we must simply accept the self-evident reality of knowing, even while the true reasons and causes for this state of affairs remain mysterious. No amount of questioning, reflection, or philosophical definitions will change the necessary fact that any act of perceiving is of a real mind and about real things, and that one cannot speak of actions or relations without first assuming things acting and in those relations.

Given the context of Reid's reaction to the dominant ideal system of his day, such an attitude is once again understandable. Just as Aquinas does not embrace a critical approach whereby the ideal is given as evidence to defend the real, so too Reid is surely concerned that any seeming attempt to argue from ideas to an external world succumb to the contradictory claims of proving principles that are themselves the basis of all proof. Since every common man is perfectly content to accept that he lives and acts in a real world, Reid is perfectly content to take this truth for granted. Metaphysical reflection and

philosophizing on this fact might lead us only into the representationalist trap of seeking to justify what is already given.

Nevertheless, Reid's account of the feelings of sensation as signifying the qualities of bodies does parallel Aquinas' discussion of the sensible and intelligible species, even as Reid denies any means of understanding the causal relation between the two. For Aquinas, the species are not themselves things, but the form of action by which the object is sensible and intelligible. On the one hand, therefore, we have a thing that has an objective nature, on the other, the means by which that nature is sensible and intelligible to the subject; the latter is a formal signification of the former, and has no existence independently of it. Aquinas, of course, adds that this relationship proceeds in the form of a likeness, such that the identity of the thing known is itself present to the mind in the mode of the species.

While Reid refuses to speculate on the internal structure of the relationship between sensation and quality, content only to affirm that experience intuitively teaches us to affirm it, he certainly does mirror Aquinas' argument that the manner in which the mind feels or apprehends directly signifies the nature of bodies. While philosophy can and should distinguish between the aspects of the sensation and the qualities that are themselves sensed, Reid insists that common awareness rightly makes no such real distinction. Once again, Reid reminds us that we are not speaking of two things, or an action in itself separated from things, but rather only one object insofar as it is perceived. The vulgar conception, therefore, is far closer to the truth of things than the philosophical, always reminding us that perception is invariably of or about the thing that

is perceived. So, just as the species are meaningless without the actual as known, so too the feeling of sensation is meaningless without the qualities sensed.

It becomes evident that both Aquinas and Reid, even while they employ a different terminology and are addressing different sets of opponents, share a common view on the status of the idea. In both cases, the ideal is not a state, representation, or object in itself. Rather, the specific, limited, and proper notion of the idea is a relation of the mind to what is known, and can be defined accurately only in terms of an action directly linking subject and object. Furthermore, it is the thing that is known first through this operation, and any reference to the action of thought itself proceeds only secondarily as a reflection upon the relation. In this way, any confusion on the priority of intramental awareness is avoided, for the relation of knowing cannot be considered independently of an external reality that is immediately and self-evidently apprehended.

Finally, Aquinas and Reid share a common concern for the problem of skepticism as a necessary consequence of the representationalist model. As shown earlier, Aquinas argues that the treatment of the intelligible species as the object of knowledge results in the conclusion that truth is determined by subjective apprehension alone. This, in turn, leaves us with a contradictory skepticism, where nothing can be known, and a contradictory relativism, where all propositions are equally true.

Reid's isolates precisely the same erroneous consequences of the ideal hypothesis, and in reflecting back on the progress of Enlightenment thought, describes the origin and development of the same contradictions of which Aquinas had warned. In both cases, there is a negative refutation of representationalism, indicating how the reduction of

awareness to subjective appearances alone disrupts the order of truth by separating the knower from the known, and ultimately negating the very objective nature of both.

The philosophy of Hume, the most critical and visible target of Reid's critique, is an ideal embodiment of these errors. By first treating impressions and ideas as objects themselves, no certain or necessary knowledge can be predicated of natural things, and the identity of the self is then also, in turn, denied. Hume is left with feelings, thoughts, and beliefs without any human identity doing the feeling, thinking, or believing, and without anything about which one feels, thinks, or believes. Aquinas and Reid swim against the current of modern and post-modern trends by insisting on the common-sense facts that knowing is always grasping the identity of something actual, and that truth is thereby objectively and necessarily grounded as the agreement of the mind with what is real.

In a philosophical climate accustomed to the ideal system, it comes as little surprise that Aquinas' use of sensible analogies to help elucidate the nature of knowing is misread as offering a static and object-based notion of the intelligible species. Even though Aquinas makes it clear that the similarities between sensing and knowing, or between material and immaterial operations, do not imply that they are identical, a purely passive, materialist, and mechanistic view of awareness cannot help but interpret him in such a manner. Even Reid himself, after all, well aware of the problems inherent in presenting a realist account of knowledge, is misled in his judgment of the Peripatetics and Scholastics.

Though Reid's philosophy stands in direct opposition to the representationalism of Locke, Berkelely, and Hume, one also finds that his arguments are often presented

through the premises of the ideal system. While such readings may come from the best of intentions and a sincere desire to grasp the philosophy of common sense, they often overlook the most critical element of his philosophy: the fact that there can be no place for ideal objects or states in an active notion of understanding that directly perceives real things.

The force of the ideal trend is so great that contemporary commentators on both Aquinas and Reid, scholars whose expertise and specialization should give them a fuller insight into the genuine meaning of the arguments, often impose a representational structure upon these realist foundations. The problem is nothing new, for example, in the world of Neo-Scholasticism, where repeated attempts have been made to harmonize the realism of Aquinas with the critical agenda of Kant. The very suggestion of such a project already indicates a complete lack of understanding on the premises of realism; one cannot both begin with objective being as the first principle of knowing, while at the same time seeking to argue toward objective being from subjective mental states.

Gilson incisively attacks transcendental Thomism on just this point. Reducing the issue to its bare essentials, Gilson asks, "what do the systems which the neo-scholastic philosophers want to refute have in common? The idea that philosophical reflection ought necessarily to go from thought to things."[120] To seek to move from thought to things, to demonstrate the existence of a real, objective external world from the given starting point of ideas already inherently assumes a false premise; in trying to prove realism, one has already become an idealist, embracing the flawed Cartesian

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[120] Gilson, Etienne (trans. Philip Trower*), Methodical Realism*, Fron Royal VA, Christendom Press, 1990, p. 17.

experiment of proceeding from *cogito ergo sum* to *cogito ergo res sunt*. Hence Gilson says, "It is impossible to extract from any kind of *cogito* whatsoever a justification for the realism of St. Thomas Aquinas."[121]

Gilson's justifiable opposition to demonstrating the real from the ideal has much in common with Reid's reluctance to explain the causal relationship of perceiving and things perceived; in both cases there is the very real danger of assuming ideal premises, such that "he who beings an idealist, ends an idealist."[122] Likewise, Gilson's insistence that there can be no compromise between realism and idealism parallels Reid's claim that the principles of common sense are an all-or-nothing proposition. In this way, further shared principles between Thomism and Reid's philosophy become apparent; the striking rejection of all critical elements derives from the single conviction that there can be no room for both ideas and things as objects of awareness.

As clear as such truths may be to the genuine realist, the force of modern idealism often encourages the Thomist, whether consciously or unconsciously, to attempt a synthesis of such opposed principles. Gilson criticizes Mercier, for example, in his Cartesian attempt to "infer from the existence of something in thought to the existence of something outside thought."[123] Noël, in a similar manner, argues for an immediate realism, which seeks to start with the immediate data of consciousness, and thereby finds common ground with the idealist model.[124] Yet in doing so, such an approach must necessarily treat the act of apprehension independently from what is apprehended, and

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[121] Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, p. 28.
[122] Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, p. 21.
[123] Gilson, Methodical Realism, p. 64. See Mercier, D. *Critérliogie générale ou théorie générale de la certitude*, Louvain-Paris, 1918. (7 ed.).
[124] see Noël, L., *Notes d'epistémologie thomiste,* Louvain-Paris, 1925.

thereby renounces any claim to a genuine realism, which cannot suggest the possibility of awareness without an actual object.

The recent work of Pasnau provides a perfect opportunity to closely consider the introduction of representationalist assumptions into Aquinas' realist arguments. Pasnau consistently approaches realist principles from a critical perspective, as well as vigorously arguing that intelligible species are, despite Aquinas' claims to the contrary, intermediary objects or representations. Such arguments often seem to miss the point by neglecting the active nature of knowing, and reducing the species to a static state. There is a certain irony in the fact that Pasnau criticizes Aquinas for succumbing to representationalism, while at the same time working from representationalist premises which have no place in Aquinas' model. While Aquinas argues for the impossibility of knowledge without any actual content, Pasnau offers the following account:

> It may seem that Aquinas can take for granted that the intellect's proper object is the nature of the material world. Just as no argument was needed to establish that color is the proper object of sight, so perhaps no argument is needed in the intellect's case. Isn't the point just obvious? But we shouldn't grant this point too quickly. There are certain facts about the intellect that can plausibly be taken for granted: for example, that each one of us is a thinking thing, and that the intellect is the capacity that allows us to think. But Aquinas' account of the intellect's proper object is more controversial. The notion of a quiddity is too abstruse to be taken for granted, and it is far from obvious that these quiddities are existing in

corporeal matter. His thesis about the proper object of intellect therefore needs some defense.[125]

It is difficult to know where to begin in responding to such a reading of Aquinas; in almost every way, it implicitly embraces a critical approach to knowing, and requires that the realist be subject to idealist principles. First, Pasnau questions the very first principle, shared by both Aquinas and Reid, that the proper object of the intellect is material things. In doing so, he tells us that while the operation of thinking can be taken for granted, we should not assume that such an action includes any actual content. Here we have nothing less than a defense of the Cartesian *cogito*, separated and isolated from its concrete object, and where thought itself is considered as self-evident, while beings known must in some way be demonstrated. While a genuine realist position, such as that of Aquinas or Reid, views the presence of things known as a self-evident first principle, Pasnau claims that we must somehow defend what is obvious and apparent in the very act of awareness.

Second, Pasnau then finds it controversial and abstruse to claim that knowing apprehends the quiddities of sensible things. While the idealist, convinced that the formal content of thought can subsist in itself, readily embraces such a claim, the realist should find it ridiculous; quiddities are not mysterious entities dwelling in some murky intellectual realm, but the simple and straightforward identity of a thing in an external reality made present to the senses and the intellect. The question could only be posed by already assuming that there is no self-evident bond between the act of knowing and the

[125] Pasnau, Robert, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 296-297.

thing known, each component inseparable from the other. The realist, of course, starts with the real as given in experience, while the idealist, like Pasnau, wonders how thought, considered in itself, can be related to the real.

When considering the role of the intelligible species in the act of knowing, Pasnau isolates what he sees as two crucial problems in Aquinas' arguments. First, he insists that while Aquinas claims to argue a position of direct realism, the position ends up being a rather confused form of representationalism: "I argue that Aquinas does in fact treat species as a kind of cognitive object. Although he denies that species are ordinarily things we see and understand, he tends at the same time to explain cognition in terms of a perceptual-like relationship between our faculties and the species that inform those faculties."[126] In other words, it would appear that Aquinas' very introduction of the species, wittingly or unwittingly, complicates his position and transforms the species into an intramental object.

Second, Pasnau argues that species as a likeness of the thing known is equally problematic: "Does he think that in the case of sensation there is literally something in the percipient resembling the external object? How? In color, in shape, or on a more abstract level? Further, the account suggests that this species will itself be perceived. If we don't actually perceive the species, in perceiving the external object, then it becomes less clear why the species should be thought to have the characteristics of the external object."[127] The problem here is apparently that Aquinas is unclear on precisely how the species are a likeness, and if they are to be present in the act of knowing, then surely, as

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[126] Pasnau, Robert, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 15.
[127] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 16.

the means of apprehension, they are themselves the objects known. If, on the other hand, they are not the objects known, why is it necessary to introduce them as intermediaries?

In elaborating on this critique, Pasnau distinguishes between a naïve and sophisiticated theory of species. Aquinas would seem to be struggling between these two positions, while generally falling on the side of a naïve theory, since the manner in which he presents the species consistently reduces to their presence as literal objects or duplicates of external things:

> On the naïve account, species are themselves the objects of cognition. They are literally likenesses of the external world—pictures, almost. The naïve species theory rejects direct realism. It holds, instead, a representationalist theory of perception, according to which it is species that we directly perceive, wheras the external world is perceived indirectly.
>
> On the sophisticated theory of species, in contrast, species may be intermediaries between our cognitive faculties and the external world, but they will only be causal intermediaries. Species will not themselves be the objects of cognition, because they play their role at an entirely subcognitive level.[128]

Pasnau, therefore, attributes an act-object account of knowing to Aquinas, where "the act of perceiving an external object takes place through the apprehension of a mental object. The proponent of the act-object doctrine will analyze cognition into a perception-like relationship between an internal cognitive faculty and the internal object representing

[128] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 195.

the external world."[129] This is, of course, precisely the same sort of mitigated representationalism that Reid attributes to Aristotle and Locke, and Pasnau is quite right to question whether such a position can legitimately be considered a form of realism. Once the idea, concept, or species is the immediate, and therefore, primary, object of apprehension, the very possibility of a direct realism is, after all, inherently compromised.

Yet, as we have already seen, Aquinas does not support such a position, and any attempt to attribute it to him can only be a fallacious straw-man. The first objection and reply of 1a, Question 85, Article 2 in the *Summa Theologica* merely confirms this point, and also specifically counters the claim that the species can in any way be considered as objects independent of external things. While we can certainly say that the mind is actualized by the action of knowing, it is impossible to speak of this action without direct reference to the thing known, and the species is, therefore, a likeness of or about something external to the mind. Once again, Aquinas' usual and uncanny foresight comes into play; the objection he at first presents is tailor-made to considering Pasnau's claim that the species is itself an object of awareness:

> Objection 1: It would seem that the intelligible species abstracted from the phantasm is related to our intellect as that which is understood. For the understood in act is in the one who understands: since the understood in act is the intellect itself in act. But nothing of what is understood is in the intellect actually understanding, save the abstracted intelligible species. Therefore this species is what is actually understood. . .

[129] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 197.

> Reply to Objection 1*:* The thing understood is in the intellect by its own likeness; and it is in this sense that we say that the thing actually understood is the intellect in act, because the likeness of the thing understood is the form of the intellect, as the likeness of a sensible thing is the form of the sense in act. Hence it does not follow that the intelligible species abstracted is what is actually understood; but rather that it is the likeness thereof.[130]

Note how the objection hinges upon the claims that only that which is *within* the intellect itself can be understood, and since only the intelligible species is within the intellect, therefore only the species is that which is understood. The error lies entirely in assuming that the species is itself something known, rather than the means by which the thing known is present within the mind, and therefore treats the likeness within the mind as something in itself. The likeness within the mind, however, is the form of the thing itself, and is that through which something external proceeds to an internal apprehension in the action of knowing.

In other words, while the first premise of the objection is true, that the mind can only know what is actually present within it, the second premise is false, that only the species itself is present. It is rather the form of the thing itself that is present through the species, and the presence of a likeness does not constitute an object of intelligibility, but a means of intelligibility. Again, it is one external and sensible thing that is known, and the species as a likeness is that same external thing in the mode of being actively understood internally within the intellect. Aquinas is unequivocally and painstakingly clear on this

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[130] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), *Summa Theologica*, London, Benziger Brothers, 1948, 1a, Q. 85, Art. 2.

point, and through it indicates how the quiddity of what is in sensible things proceeds into the intellect; the intellect is in act by apprehending the thing itself as in act.

While seemingly willing to grant such points, Pasnau nevertheless seeks to find other texts from Aquinas' writings that supposedly reveal a latent and implicit representationalism or naïve realism. In every case, however, these passages either entirely ignore the context of Aquinas' argument, or clearly reinterpret his meaning. Pasnau refers, for example, to the following section from the *Commentary on the Sentences*:

> It should be known, nevertheless, that a thing is said to be intellectively cognized in two ways, just as is a thing seen. For there is a first thing seen, which is a species of the visible thing existing in the pupil, which is also the completion of the one seeing and the source of vision and the intermediary light of the visible thing. And there is a second thing seen, which is the thing itself outside the soul. Likewise, the first thing intellectively cognized is the likeness of the thing, in intellect, and the second thing intellectively cognized is the thing itself, which is intellectively cognized through that likeness.[131]

The passage is certainly noteworthy insofar as Aquinas speaks of the species as the first thing seen or known, and the thing itself as the second thing seen or known, in seeming contradiction to most other texts, where the thing itself is what is primarily known, the species that which is secondarily known. Does this, perhaps, reveal Aquinas' true meaning, that the species are the things we know first, and that the things themselves

[131] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentrary on the Sentences*, 35.1.2, from Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 201.

are only apprehended consequently to our apprehension of the species? Pasnau seems convinced that Aquinas has let his true theory slip out in such a form of expression.

Aquinas, however, is specifically referring to the species as the "first" thing seen or known in the context of the completion and actualization of the sensible and intellectual powers, and therefore speaks of the species as the source by and through which the mind is actualized. Relative to the perfection of the knower, and not the thing itself as known, one can quite reasonably speak of the species as "first" in the priority of awareness. Yet in case there is any confusion, Aquinas immediately makes it clear in the above passage that the thing is known through the likeness of the species, indicating that in itself the thing is primary as the object. Pasnau, therefore, is simply confusing the different senses in which Aquinas is employing the terms primary and secondary, whether relative to the completion of the operation of the knower, or to the thing itself which is known in the operation of understanding.

Even when Aquinas refers to the species as a thing known, whether primarily or secondarily, we must be clear that by the equivocal use of the term "thing" he does exclusively mean an object as substance *per se*. Like Reid, Aquinas says that we can and do indeed know actions and relations, but only insofar as they are actions and relations of actual substances; they are objects of knowledge through an apprehension of things acting and being acted upon. Hence the mind knows its own operation through the actual content of things known, and can consider its own action of knowing as an object relative to and derived from what is prior in act. The intellect, then, knows the intelligible species as objects secondarily insofar as it reflects upon its own operation and the means by which it understands actual things.

Pasnau further offers the following text from the *De Veritate* to support his argument that Aquinas treats the species as things themselves: "But with respect to the apprehension of sense, it should be known that there is one kind of apprehensive force that apprehends the sensible species when the sensible thing is present—that is, the sense proper—and another that apprehends it when the thing is absent—that is, imagination."[132] Here, of course, Aquinas explains that the mind can know a thing in the species whether it be present or absent; Pasnau once again assumes this means that the species, and therefore not the thing, is what is sensed or known.

But such a conclusion simply does not follow. Whether the intellect apprehends a thing as present through the senses, or absent through the memory, in no way alters the fact that the thing itself is the that which is known, and the species is the means by which it is known. We have already seen that the intelligible species is indeed apprehended, but as the medium and not the object of awareness; the action of understanding remains constant regardless of the present existence or position of the original object.

Refering to Aquinas' explicit statement that "the likeness of the thing understood, that is, the intelligible species, is the form by which the intellect understands,"[133] Pasnau counters that "this claim attributes to species a certain causal role. But it doesn't rule out that the causal role might be brought about by species themselves being, in a certain sense, apprehended."[134] Such a claim sums up Pasnau's objections quite nicely, and further indicates the unfortunate misrepresentation inherent within it.

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[132] St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 1.11, from Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 203.
[133] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, Q. 85, Art. 2.
[134] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 211.

By all means, the species do indeed serve a certain causal role, and the species themselves are indeed " in a certain sense" apprehended as the medium of the action of knowing; but this in no way makes them things or states themselves, for, as Aquinas says, the species is the form *by which* the intellect understands, not *that which* the intellect understands. To remove all doubt, the above passage is immediately followed with the statement that "since the intellect reflects upon itself, by such reflection it understands both its own act of intelligence, and the species by which it understands,"[135] and it is in this sense that we must understand the species as that which is known secondarily.

Though a more detailed discussion of the role of likeness within the species will be found in Chapter 5, Pasnau's above-mentioned uncertainty over precisely how the species is a likeness (i.e. is it a likeness in color, shape, or something more abstract?), arises from the very same confusion that leads him to conclude that the species are themselves intermediary objects of knowing. In both parts of his critique, he cannot help but presume the modern representationalist premise that ideas can only have the status of sensible and material states: the species must be a passive intermediary thing, and the likeness is conceived of as a literal duplicate or representation. What this view ignores is the simple fact that the action of knowing, far from being something that is simply 'more abstract,' is an operation that transcends mere material conditions by actively presenting the very quiddity of things within the intellect; it is, in a sense, a far more real mode of apprehension than the sensation of bodies, and while we might employ sensible analogies to help describe this process, we must be wary of confusing a formal and a literal likeness.

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[135] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, Q. 85, Art. 2.

Reid's warning of the dangers of false analogy and the philosophical abuse of language is entirely applicable in this context. The primary reason scholars like Pasnau miss the point in interpreting Aquinas is either an unwillingness or inability to grasp knowing as an active relation by which a formal identity is apprehended, and thereby to limit it to the passive presence of mental states and objects. The species as likeness, Aquinas has explained, are themselves apprehended not as things, but as the forms of the things made intelligible in the action of knowing, and the species are themselves knowable insofar as the intellect reflects back upon its own operation; Reid has likewise confirmed these facts in his insistence upon the active power of perception. Wherever and whenever these insights are neglected, no accurate account of species or ideas is possible. As Haldane says:

> Certain aspects of the realist theories developed in the middle ages lend themselves, at least on a superficial reading, to a representationalist (mis)interpretation. In the present context the most significant of these is the claim made several times by Aquinas and often repeated by those familiar with his philosophy. . . that ideas *may* be objects of thought. Given a strongly held conviction that most philosophical errors are the product of a faulty theory of knowledge, and an evangelical attitude to task of promoting realism, any suggestion whatsoever to the effect that the mind may be directed upon its own contents looks threatening, and is therefore easy to dismiss as inadequate any theory which implies or countenances this.
>
> Nonetheless, such a claim is compatible with the version of realism close to Reid's own, such as that developed by Aquinas. . . . According to this latter, while the first act of the intellect is engagement with the world as

> brought under concepts, its second act is one of reflection upon the former and its intelligible content—reflection which as Aquinas and Reid both recognize, is involved in concept formation.[136]

Pasnau is, of course, not alone in this misinterpretation, as he himself indicates in his discussion of Peter John Olivi and William of Ockham on the role of the species. Both Olivi and Ockham, Pasnau explains, thought Aquinas' appeal to the intelligible species is inherently superfluous: "One of the principal motivations for the theory of species, Olivi and Ockham both claim, is the need to give an account of the causal link from external objects to cognizer," and "to rebut this account, Olivi and Ockham had developed an alternative theory of the way the cognitive powers apprehend distant objects."[137]

Olivi and Ockham's critique of the species has much in common with Reid's rejection of the ideal hypothesis, and builds upon the premise that knowledge of things need be direct and immediate. Yet as with Reid, this aspect of their theory is in no way contrary to Aquinas' model, but rather simply an affirmation of a crucial component of realism which Aquinas shares. It is, once again, only a misrepresentation of Aquinas that would view direct realism in opposition to the intelligible species as the active means of knowledge. The unfortunate and divisive consequence is that a genuine commitment to realism is far too easily fractured, by presuming representational premises where none are truly present. Pasnau offers the following account of Ockham's model of realism and the cosequent rejection of species:

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[136] Haldane, "Reid, Scholasticism and Current Philosophy of Mind", p. 289.
[137] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 161-162.

> Ockham's view is that the efficient cause of an intuitive cognition is not some intermediary species but the external object itself. Aquinas had called the external object the 'sufficient agent' of sensory cognition, But it is the species representing the object that for Aquinas is the direct, immediate cause of cognition. Thus, he calls the species the source (principium) of cognition, the medium of cognition, and that by which (quo) cognition takes place. For Ockham, in contrast, the thing itself brings about cognition—even intellective cognition—directly: "when the presence of the thing itself. . . is posited, without any other prior thing (habit or species), the intellect can intuitively cognize that thing."[138]

Ockham's seeming opposition to Aquinas is, at least in this particular sense, a non-issue. While Ockham, like Reid and Pasnau, rejects the species as objects of awareness, he does so unnecessarily, since the species in Aquinas is not itself the thing known. Aquinas would perhaps agree that the presence or existence of a thing itself is the sufficient grounds for its potential intelligibility, though we must also necessarily consider in what manner and by what means the thing is actually made intelligible.

Pasnau, however, complicates this general agreement by claiming that Aquinas proposes the species itself as the immediate cause of knowing, not the thing itself. This is, quite simply, false, as we have seen in our preceding analysis. Aquinas, in speaking of the species as the principle or medium by which knowing takes place, is in no way, shape, or form arguing that the species is the efficient cause of knowing. Rather, we can more properly speak, in an analogical sense, of the intellect, the agent of understanding, as being like an efficient cause, and sensible experience as being like a material cause.

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[138] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 163-164.

To extend this model, one might say that the species is, in a sense, like a formal cause, or the common identity that is present in both the knower and the thing known: "every action proceeds in virtue of some form."

If Ockham suggests that the thing itself alone, by merely existing or being present, is the efficient cause of knowing, one must wonder in what sense he could consider the thing as an agent. As Reid had rightly pointed out, bodies do not in themselves act upon the senses or the mind, just as the mind does not transitively act upon bodies. In any event, such a view once again reduces the intellect to a merely passive receptivity, entirely ignoring the active power of the mind in understanding. Reid would surely consider Ockham's theory an odd hybrid of the true common sense principle that things are indeed perceived directly, blended with the false claim that knowing is a static reception.

Ockham further argues that while the species has been falsely introduced as an explanation of how physically separated objects can be present to the intellect, this too is unnecessary: "the immediate mover does not always coincide with the thing moved; rather, it can be at a distance."[139] This objection can also be easily put aside, since it falsely assumes that physical distance has any role to play in Aquinas' species. Again, only an attitude unable to see beyond material conditions would confuse the incorporeal action and causality of knowing with the motion of bodies. Ockham here is entirely subject to Reid's critique of taking analogy literally, and thereby misreading Aquinas' intent.

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[139] Ockham, *Opera Philosophica et Theoloigca*, VI, 48, in Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*,p. 164.

In contrast to Ockham's thing as efficient agent, Olivi's approach to realism shares the immediate connection of knower and known, yet shifts the efficient agency of knowing from the thing to the action of the knower. Furthermore, while rejecting the species as the efficient cause of knowing, he is willing to accept them as a means of apprehension. As Pasnau explains:

> Olivi does not even reject species *in medio*, and here of course he is differing from Ockham. But Olivi denies that these species are the efficient cause of cognition. Instead, he proposes an account based on what he calls virtual attention. Cognizers obtain information about the external world not by receiving physical impressions through the sense organs but by virtually extending the soul's cognitive attention to particular features of the external environment. . . . The crucial and striking consequence of this theory is that the object itself needn't exert any causal influence, not on the cognitive faculties nor even on the physical sense organs. The external object need only be close enough to be apprehended by the cognizer's spiritual attention. . . in the case of both sensation and intellection, the efficient agent is the cognitive power. . . Aquinas calls the external object the "sufficient agent" with respect to sensation and the "instrumental agent" with respect to intellection. Olivi, in contrast, believes that the external object is merely a kind of final cause, or, more precisely, a terminative cause.[140]

At the risk of pointless repetition, we once again have here a critique of Aquinas which distorts the very position it claims to critique. First, the species in Aquinas is not the thing known or the efficient cause of knowledge, and the reference to the species as a

[140] Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 168-171.

sufficient or instrumental cause properly refers to its role as that out of or through which understanding arises. Second, if Olivi accepts the species as means of understanding, he is fully in agreement with Aquinas. Third, if by spiritual attention Olivi means the action of the agent intellect, he is agreeing with Aquinas or Reid on the active power of the understanding.

Pasnau's repeated attempts to condemn Aquinas as a naïve realist, whether through his own judgments or through the arguments of later Scholastics, brings us directly back to Reid's analysis of the abuse of language and analogy in philosophy. While Reid's own misreading of Aquinas is perhaps understandable, Pasnau, a scholar who has a far greater familiarity with the genuine meaning of Thomist realism, should surely know better. Instead of properly seeing the species as the direct formal relation between knower and known, Pasnau's interpretation succumbs to a markedly representationalist bias, where ideas are invariably conceived as objects, states, or literal duplicates of things. In any event, the solution to defending a genuine realism is not the outright rejection of ideas or species, as Pasnau, or Ockham, and even, to a limited extent, Reid, would have it, but rather to understand ideas or species as the necessary and immediate medium of action in knowing, through which the quiddity of things is made present to the mind.

It should, of course, come as no surprise that a similar representationalist bias can also be found in many contemporary criticisms of Reid. We must remember that Reid rejects ideas insofar as they are understood philosophically, i.e. as intermediary objects of awareness, and not in the vulgar sense, as the very action and means of perceiving as such. In this way, Reid hopes to avoid the absurdity of interposing mental states between

the mind and its proper object. Even as Reid repeatedly and unequivocally states that he is not employing terms such as sensation, sign, idea, perception, or understanding in the same manner as his Enlightenment contemporaries, modern scholars, who are, of course, the offspring of the very Enlightenment idealism Reid opposes, insist upon false applying his use of those notions.

Buras, for example, in his careful and painstaking analysis of signification in Reid's epistemology, argues that Reid is committed to two distinct aspects of cognitional theory: first, a Direct Realist Thesis (DRT), where "mind-independent qualities are among the objects of perception," and second, a Sign Theory of Sensations (STS), where "sensations function as natural signs of bodily qualities in perception."[141] Buras suggests, however, that these two aspects seem to contradict, for while any form of direct realism requires that things themselves be the immediate object of awareness, the introduction of signs as intermediaries makes such a direct apprehension impossible. This criticism is, of course, already familiar as the very claim made by Reid himself; Buras, therefore, is arguing that Reid succumbs to the very model he rejects by presenting sensations as signs of things. He summarizes this claim as follows:

> In sum: the thoughts involved in perception cannot be about bodily qualities without first being about the sensation-signs of bodily qualities—and this so whether or not our thoughts about sensation figure in the presentational content of our thoughts about bodies, or in the epistemic basis of our thoughts about bodies. For we must have a thought about our sensations in order to have a sensation; and we must have a sensation in

[141] Buras, J. Todd, "The Problem with Reid's Direct Realism", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 209, October 2002, p. 457.

> order to apprehend and hold beliefs about bodies; and we must apprehend and hold beliefs about bodies in order to perceive bodies. It is therefore by virtue of thinking about the sensations which signify bodily qualities that we have beliefs about bodily qualities in perception. So if sensations function as signs of bodily qualities in perception, then bodily qualities are not among the (referentially) immediate objects of perception.[142]

Just as Pasnau presents the species as an intermediary object in Aquinas, so Buras presents sensations as intermediary objects in Reid. Buras proposes the progression that we first have thoughts, which are about sensations, which are the condition for apprehending bodies, and the apprehension of which allows us to perceive them. In following such a causal chain of knowing, the problem with any representationalist model of knowing is immediately apparent, and if Buras is correct in his reading, then Reid falls to the very same error he is so keen on avoiding.

Yet while such a critique is entirely applicable to most modern forms of epistemology, it in no way applies to Reid's model, just as Reid's model itself, so accurate in its account of the dominant ideal system, in turn does not apply to the realism of Aquinas. Buras is indeed correct that Reid espouses a Direct Realist Thesis by arguing for the implicit and self-evident presence of things themselves as known; Reid, however, does not embrace a Sign Theory of Sensations, if by this we are to understands sensations as representative signs of things themselves.

Clearly Buras assumes that Reid considers sensations as intermediaries between mind and thing, which would indeed contradict any form of direct realism. But Reid has repeatedly made it clear that neither the feelings of sensations, of the operations of

[142] Buras, "The Problem with Reid's Direct Realism", p. 472.

thinking, are in any way intermediary objects of representations of things. Rather, we should remember that any action or operation is in no way a thing itself, but rather the action or operation of some thing, and that the act of sensing or knowing cannot be separated from the thing sensed or known. While we may, in principle and in theory, examine sensation and perception in their own right, just as any operation can be thought of bracketed from the substances acting or being acted upon, they cannot be defined or fully understood independently of their subject and object.

Hence sensations, which are feelings, and perceptions, which are acts of the mind, have no existence in themselves; their very presence in awareness already presumes as prior the immediate presence of what is sensed or perceived. Once again, the sensation or concept as sign is formal and not instrumental; it is itself the very direct and immediate object in the act of being sensed and understood. The sign, being nothing in itself, is the active means by which the properties of bodies are made present, such that the former already implicitly assumes the latter, and is in no way a third thing, but the mode of relation between knower and known.

Buras' critique would only apply if Reid is suggesting that sensations or perceptions are themselves first apprehended, and then secondarily point to things indirectly. But sensations and perceptions are not at all apprehended, except reflectively as actions that proceed from the knower and the known, and the very presence of sensing and perceiving requires the object as sensed and perceived to be directly present to experience. In the simplest of terms, Reid insists that actions and operations are by no means things, but the immediate relations between things. Reid does not, therefore, espouse a Sign Theory of Sensations in the manner that Buras proposes, and seeks to

make it abundantly evident that the action of sensing and perceiving is not itself an object.

These problems of direct versus representational realism only occur if we posit the mode of mediacy and representation as a thing itself. The act of knowing is still direct and immediate if we understand impressions, sensations, perceptions, ideas, or concepts not as an interposed object, but as the mode or form of the action of the mind upon the thing known itself. Much of the misguided debate, like that of Buras, on direct versus representational realism unfortunately already presumes the representational model by inherently taking any ideas as a thing that intervenes, not an action which directly relates knower and known.

A naïve view of knowing is an atomist view, which indiscriminately assumes that elements or principles of knowledge are pieces, parts, or states, without drawing out the role of action in knowing. Again, it is simplistic to present knowing like a set of dominoes, where the object acts upon the idea, and the idea then acts upon the mind. Buras succumbs to this very theory and applies it to Reid's arguments, even as Reid's position explicitly rejects such a weak analogical and mechanistic view of awareness.

Alston's analysis of direct awareness in Reid provides a further means of considering such difficulties. Quite correctly grasping that Reid's model seeks to remove any form of intermediary objects from perception, and therefore offers a notion of the idea entirely different from the representationalist theory, Alston affirms that "in opposition to the reigning theory of ideas, Thomas Reid sought to develop an account of sense perception according to which we, in some sense, directly perceive independently

existing objects."[143] Yet Alston also argues that the sort of direct realism which Reid presents is based only upon the subjective act of perception and belief, without any immediate presence of an existing object as implicit and given in the act of knowing. In other words, such a "realism" would end up bearing more in common with the habitual belief of Hume. Alston distinguishes between three classes of direct perception:

> *Presentational directness*. In perception an external object is directly presented to our awareness; it is given to consciousness. We are immediately aware of it, as contrasted with just thinking about it, forming a concept of it, or believing something about it. Our awareness of it is intuitive rather than discursive. This is knowledge by acquaintance rather than knowledge by description.
>
> *Doxastic directness*. The belief involved arises spontaneously rather than through inference or other intellectual processes.
>
> *Epistemological directness*. The belief involved is justified, warranted, rationally acceptable, apart from any reasons the subject has for it. It is intrinsically credible, prima facie justified, just by being a perceptual belief.[144]

Reid's doctrine of direct perception, according to Alston, is clearly epistemological and doxastic, in that the belief in the existence of objects is intuitive and reasonable, but apparently not presentational, since Reid supposedly fails to posit the

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[143] Alston, William P., "Reid on Perception and Conception," in Cueno, Terence and René Van Woudenburg (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 472.
[144] Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception", p. 36.

object as immediately given. In other words, Alston argues that Reid's model reduces to a merely subjective intuition and belief, which fails to present the thing itself as a necessary objective foundation of awareness: "If perception wholly consists of a conception of an external object, and a belief in its present existence, it does not involve any direct presentation of that object."[145] As such, "there would appear to be no alternative to taking Reid as a doxastic and epistemological realist only, not a presentational direct realist at all,"[146] as it is the conceiving and believing about objects that apparently matters to Reid, not the object presented as such; Alston concludes that for Reid, "seeing is believing indeed."[147]

If Alston is correct in his analysis, Reid is simply claiming that an immediate belief in an act of conception is sufficient ground for real perception, and it need not have a presented or given object per se. In other words, perception is about believing and conceiving, not about things. Indeed, Alston at first seems to offer some convincing textual evidence in support of such a reading: this appears to be what Reid truly means, for example, when he says that "we ask no argument for the existence of the object but that we perceive it; perception commands our belief upon its own authority, and disdains to rest its authority upon any reasoning whatsoever."[148] Likewise, as we saw earlier, Reid characterizes the nature of perception as follows:

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[145] Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception", p. 37.
[146] Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception", p. 45.
[147] Alston, "Reid on Perception and Conception", p. 38.
[148] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, Essay 2, Chapter 20, p. 227.

> If, therefore, we attend to that act of our mind which we call the perception of an external object of sense, we shall find it in these three things. 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.[149]

Here, it would seem, is the evidence to convince us that Reid is, after all, not concerned with the awareness of a given reality as such, but merely with the internal and subjective operations of conception and belief. Yet Alston's critique entirely ignores the fact that, in passages such as the above, Reid is simply considering the nature of the act of perception itself, and that he repeatedly insists that this operation is completely impossible without first presuming things themselves as immediately and directly given to awareness: "Belief must have an object. For he that believes, must believe something; and that which he believes is called the object of his belief."[150] The given existence of objects is, after all, a self-evident first principle for Reid, and the necessary foundation for all experience and knowledge: "I take it for granted that, in most operations of the mind, there must be an object distinct from the operation itself. I cannot see, without seeing something."[151] It may even be argued that this single point is the most essential and primary principle of Reid's common sense, for it is precisely when thought is separated from things, operations from objects, and knowing from the content known that the ideal system takes root.

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[149] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 5, p. 96.
[150] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 20, p. 227.
[151] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man,* Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 44.

Alston judges Reid to be merely a doxastic and epistemological realist from an incomplete reading of certain passages which Reid intends only to describe the operation of perception in the mind; what he neglects is the vast body of arguments which insist that such operations are impossible without first accepting things themselves as immediately given to awareness, which in turn clearly characterizes Reid as embracing a presentationally direct realism. Contrary to Alston's revisionist interpretation, Reid is not claiming that the acts of conception and belief are themselves the only grounds for awareness; rather, such operations of the mind are of and about objects given to consciousness, and which are in no way made present through proof or demonstration. Like Aquinas, Reid stands firm in insisting that the act of perception proves or implies the presence of objects, but rather that the presence of objects is the self-evident foundation of perception.

Like Pasnau or Buras, Alston attempts to transplant a representationalist organ into a realist body. For whatever reason, both Aquinas and Reid, two philosophers firmly grounded in direct realism, are presented as something they most assuredly are not. The first difficulty to overcome in apprehending common realism of Aquinas and Reid is, as we have seen, looking beyond the limitations of accidental language and historical context. It has further become apparent that a second, and equally formidable, difficulty lies in the perspectives of modern commentators who insist upon interpreting the realism of Aquinas and Reid in purely representationalist terms.

The examples we have considered provide an ideal means of confronting these problems, specifically with regard to the status of ideas in the awareness of the real. Even as both Aquinas and Reid insist that ideas are not objects, but the acts of the

intellect through which things themselves are known, Pasnau, Buras, or Alston neglect this crucial relation of action and object, confusing the former for the latter. Indeed, any possible problems that may arise in the inherent compatibility of Aquinas and Reid on the status of ideas likewise arises from a confusion of terms, where Aquinas' intelligible species are mistakenly included within Reid's rejection of philosophical ideas.

In one sense, the very question of whether one can posit ideas at all within a direct realist model will only arise if the ideas is implicitly assumed to be itself an object of awareness. A correct notion of the idea merely strengthens the immediate relation of mind and thing, as the active relation by which the object is formally and directly present. In Chapter 1, we asked whether the introduction of an idea as an intermediary compromised the possibility of a direct realism; having looked more closely at the arguments of Aquinas and Reid, and having more carefully defined what each properly means by an idea, it has become clear that no real incompatibility exists. We only imagine a false dichotomy when the very status of the ideal is misunderstood.

What, then, in light of Aquinas and Reid, are we to make of ideas? Despite a first appearance of opposition, both philosophers explicitly and carefully argue that ideas or intelligible species can never be considered as static objects or substantial intermediaries. Rather, an idea is itself the active operation of the mind upon the actual as known, and serves as the direct means by and through which the intellect knows things. We can only speak of an idea as something in itself known or considered insofar as the mind reflects upon its own active operation, and considers such action in relation to the prior being of things; the common-sense foundation of such a position is that actions, relations, feelings, or impressions are never themselves things, but only intelligible as the attributes of

things. Aquinas makes this perfectly clear in insisting that the intelligible species are not that which, but that by which, the mind understands, just as Reid made it perfectly clear that understanding is an immanent active power through which we perceive real objects. In both cases of the intelligible species and the vulgar notion of the idea, there are no intramental substances or states that serve as intermediary representations; the genuine role of the idea is as the very action of knowing itself, through which things themselves as directly made present to the intellect.

The idea, therefore, only serves as a hindrance or distraction from direct realism if we misconstrue it to be a *something* that stands in the way of mind and thing. Rather, the idea is nothing more or less than the thing perceived insofar as it is actively present to the intellect. In this crucial point, Aquinas and Reid are both direct realists who rightly discern the inherent dangers of reifying thought, and confusing the action of the intellect with the false analogy of merely material causality. Likewise, both are thoroughly aware of the dire consequences to philosophy if these self-evident and common-sense facts are ignored. Thought is nothing if it is not about something, and the intellect cannot be actualized unless it is through that which is prior in act.

The differences in method and style in Aquinas and Reid, far from being a hindrance to such an agreement, serve as mutual complements. Once the initial confusion of terminology and historical context is overcome, each position stresses a helpful, and even necessary, component of a genuine objective realism.

In the most general of terms, Aquinas offers a precise and thorough account of the causal order of knowing in the relation of the actual as intelligible, while Reid reminds us all, tempted as we are to contort epistemological theory into idealist flights of fancy, that

a realist model of knowing must always ground its apprehension of the actual on the concrete foundation of practical experience. Aquinas is by no means lacking in a practical common-sense approach, just as Reid is not lacking in an awareness of the depth and distinction of theoretical reflection; with both philosophers, we find a common awareness of being as the measure of thought, the direct relation of mind to thing, and the status of the idea as the active mode of that relation. Nevertheless, it is the particular strength of Aquinas to elucidate the formal content of knowing, just as it is Reid's particular strength to stress the practical dependence of any such content upon the self-evident measure of real things.

It is by no means a flaw in the arguments of Reid and Aquinas that leads to their misrepresentation in a representationalist context; it is the flaw of modern interpreters who fail to see beyond their own mechanistic and idealist assumptions on ideas. Aquinas argues that the ideas are not things, but rather the form of the thing itself insofar as it is received and possessed by the intellect, while Reid argues that the distorted view of ideas inherent in modern epistemology invariably leads us further and further away from this essential truth.

In all, the genuine notion of the idea, as presented by both Aquinas and Reid, is properly a means of bringing together and uniting mind and thing, not a division between them. The idea is not an intermediary object, but the active and immediate presence of the real within the intellect. We must, of course, take care in our use of language on this point: the philosophical notion of the idea rightly rejected by Reid is not synonymous with Aquinas' model of the intelligible species, and the role of the species should more properly be equated with the vulgar notion of the idea, a notion far from being naïve or

simplistic, but rather necessary for and inseparable from each and every act of human awareness. Accordingly, any account of knowing is only as sound as its conformity and agreement with the measure of the actual. Every honest man who lives, breathes, and experiences knows this, even as any philosopher who attempts to think without things is drawn into a fantastic world of impossible fantasy and illusion.

**Chapter 5: One of These Things Is Not Like the Other. . .**

> *The common language of those who have not imbibed any philosophical opinion upon this subject, authorizes us to understand the conception of a thing, and an image of it in the mind, not as two different things, but as two different expressions, to signify one and the same thing; and I wish to use common words in their common acceptation.*[152]

In blurring the role of substance and action, the representationalist philosophy of the ideal system commits the error of confusing the operation of the mind and its primary object; ideas, properly the active means through which understanding of things takes place, become things themselves, and the things themselves, the necessary content of that which is known, are bracketed, ignored, or rejected entirely. That such a model has become the *status quo* of modern idealism may surprise the man of common sense, but it should not surprise the historian of philosophy, who recognizes the desire and temptation to complicate the simple and to subsume the real world into the ideal realm. Seen in their own right, there is a certain beauty of seeming innovation and apparent order in progressive models of the ideal, which, as Descartes would have it, replace confusing layers of assumption and tradition with clean, orderly, and entirely rational constructs.

Yet in their quest for novel and revolutionary solutions, the models of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, or Kant remove the order of being from the order of knowing. When Aquinas insists that the intelligible species is not that which, but that by which, the

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[152] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, Essay 4, Chapter 1, p. 301.

intellect understands, he is in agreement with Reid's rejection of the ideal hypothesis that objectifies thought itself. In both systems, a primary and necessary reference is made back to the actual content of existing things, which is, in turn, the absolute and objective measure of true knowledge.

The idea is, therefore, not a thing, either in itself or even as a duplicate representation of external objects. It is, likewise, not a passive reception, but the active means by which the mind directly knows things. For Aquinas, the species is not another thing, but the thing itself insofar as it is immediately present and intelligible to the intellect, just as for Reid, the mind's act of conception and the thing conceived are not two separate things, but one thing expressed in different senses. Whether we seek to define the notion of the idea more carefully, as Aquinas does, or dispose of the term entirely to clear the air or representationalist prejudices, as Reid does, is perhaps a matter of prudential preference; in either case, however, the goal of genuine realism remains one and the same. Aquinas and Reid both make it perfectly clear that the reduction of knowing to intramental states is an impossible and unsupportable position, which can end only in an unintelligible skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism.

While we saw, in Chapter 4, that any seeming opposition between Aquinas and Reid on the role and presence of ideas can be readily overcome by examining the essence of both arguments, there still remains the problem of the how we are to view the very formal content of the intelligible species and the act of perception. In other words, if the species is the thing known as actively intelligible to the intellect, and conception, or the vulgar notion of the idea, is the active power by which the mind understands, what exactly constitutes the nature of such action?

While a proper beginning is to say that a thing is made present to the mind in the species and the act of conception, there is surely more at work here than merely saying that the fact of existence is made manifest; to know is, after all, not simply to be aware *that* there is something known, but more specifically to know *what* that something is. Things known are made present through their identity, such that the mind possesses the essence or quiddity of its object, in that the knowledge of a dog, cat, tree, or man specifically reveals the different natures of these things.

Having moved beyond the realm of the corporeal and sensible in such accounts, great care must be taken to both avoid limiting an account of ideas to incomplete or even misleading sensible analogies on the one hand, as well as cryptic and pseudo-mystical speculation on the other. Indeed, it is Reid who rightly warns us of the former, and Aquinas who, with his precise metaphysical definitions, so aptly overcomes the latter. Once again, Reid's common sense and Aquinas' philosophical rigor serve as our complementary guides. As we shall see, it might be said that while Aquinas seeks to explain what the content of knowing *is*, Reid occupies himself with considering what knowing most definitely *is not*.

The problem of a critical justification for the content of understanding is, once more, a concurrent issue. While Aquinas seeks to explain the causal order of knowing, Reid is firm in avoiding such a practice, as it might imply that we must reason for that which is self-evident. Aquinas is, however, not seeking to prove the existence of actual things from thought, but rather considers precisely how this process takes place, and we can grant both Aquinas' desire to elucidate the structure of intelligible content as well as

Reid's concern for maintaining the inviolability of first principles. In this sense, Aquinas' *explanatory* account can stand in harmony with Reid's *descriptive* account.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Aquinas defines the relation between knower and known as the immanent act of the mind upon that which is understood, an action through which the form of the thing is abstracted and received in the intellect. The intelligible species is not, as we further saw in Chapter 4, a static "third thing" that stands between intellect and the external thing, but rather the direct and immediate active relation of knowing, and constitutes the means by which the identity of the thing known is itself made present within the knower. But how does this transference take place? An appeal to sensible analogy alone, however helpful it may be, is insufficient, as it reduces the incorporeal act of knowing to a corporeal measure. Likewise, how are we to understand the claim that the intellect, in a sense, becomes what it knows? While the form of the thing known is present within the knower, this clearly does not mean that the mind takes upon itself the actual material properties of sensible things. As Gilson says:

> This manner of being existence which things have in the thought assimilating them is called "intentional' being." This, if we only think about it, is a profound transformation of concrete datum by the mind receiving it. Experience furnishes a particular man, form and matter; the senses, and after them, the intellect receive a form more and more released from every material mark; that is, they receive its intelligibility.[153]

[153] Gilson, Etienne (trans. L.K. Shook), *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, p. 229.

Since the very act of understanding is not merely a particular apprehension, but the abstract awareness of universal form, a consideration of the formal presence of ideas is nothing les than a consideration of the incorporeal and spiritual operations of human nature. It is an unfortunate mark of the post-modern condition that the very term "abstract" has taken on an implication of being something vague, imprecise, or distant. Yet in its proper meaning, abstraction is a mode of apprehension that is, in a sense, more "real" than sensible awareness, for it reaches to the pure essence of the actual, more precise in that it formally defines the thing, and more immediate in that it unites the identity of knower and known.

To speak, then, of the relationship of intellect and thing as one of a *likeness*, is to approach the manner in which the mind receives and contains within itself the form of what is known, and thereby to unite the knower and the known by this shared and common identity. In the most basic terms, this means that the incorporeal intellect, while being fully itself, concurrently contains the form of corporeal things, a notion that reveals all the depth and wonder of knowledge. As such, knowing a thing involves that thing existing outside of the mind, while also existing within it. If we fail to explain how such a seemingly odd state of affairs is possible, the immediate and necessary link between intellect and thing is invariably lost.

As Maritain says, "the way things exist in our thought, so as to be known, is not the same way they exist in themselves."[154] Immediately, it is clear that Aquinas by no means intends us to think that the mode of existence of the knower is entirely identical

[154] Maritain, Jacques (trans. Gerald B. Phelan), *The Degrees of Knowledge*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, p. 89.

with the mode of existence of the known; if this were so, then the mind would literally be a bodily duplicate of the object through its reception of material form. The problem lies in understanding how, at one and the same time, the mind receives the form of the known, while not *literally* becoming that thing as a body, while also sharing one and the same formal content. Hence we may speak of the thing as existing in itself, and the thing insofar as it is intelligible.

But if a thing's existence in itself and its existence as intelligible are not necessarily joined by a common formal identity or likeness, then the mode of the thing itself and the mode of intelligibility become separated; the idea, as the order of thought, and the thing itself, as the order of being, are no longer different aspects of one thing, but become two divided things, where any relation between them becomes problematic. It is no accident that this problem is exactly what Reid warns us about, where ideas and things are treated as two distinct, and accordingly incongruous, types of object. Here again, of course, is the root of representational idealism, which must then, in turn, struggle, and ultimately fail, to find some sort of critical proof and justification for the relation of idea and thing. Maritain considers this point by carefully distinguishing the terms *thing* and *object*:

> The same thing is clearly seen to be at one and the same time in the world of nature, in order to exist, and in the world of the soul or mind, when it is known. Thus, we must distinguish between the thing as thing—as existing or able to exist for itself—and the thing as object—when it is set before the faculty of knowing and made present to it. . . in general, moderns take *object* as pure object, cut off in itself from any *thing* in which it has existence, I mean an existence independent of my own *cogito*, and

existence posited in its own right before my act of thinking and independent of it.[155]

The importance of Aquinas' doctrine of likenesses in the intelligible species should become increasingly clear; the very status of the idea, whether as the active intelligibility of the thing or as an independent object, stands or falls with the possibility of the same formal identity being present in both the intellect and in the thing, though in different manners or modes. As introduced in Chapter 2, Aquinas argues that the same identity may be present in two subjects, a common likeness, but under different conditions. Though a first assumption might be that a form must exist in the exact same manner in both the intellect and the thing, Aquinas insists that this need not be the case. While the form of a corporeal thing is specifically bound to matter, and therefore sensible, particular, and changeable, it is received "in the intellect under conditions of universality, immateriality, and immobility."[156]

Just as a form may be present in different degrees or conjunctions in many material substances (e.g. "whiteness may be of great intensity in one, and of a less intensity in another: in one we find whiteness with sweetness, in another without sweetness. . ."[157]), so too, the form is present differently in the thing, in the senses, and in the intellect; while the form is specifically joined to matter in the thing itself, and while the senses receive the particular form separated from matter, the intellect further apprehends the form universally, i.e. "under conditions of immateriality and

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[155] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 96-97.
[156] Aquinas, St. Thomas, (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), *Summa Theologica*, London, Benziger Brothers, 1948, 1a Q. 84, Art. 1.
[157] Ibid.

immobility."[158] It is one and the same identity in all three cases, but under different conditions.

While Aquinas is here concerned with countering a Platonic model of knowing, where the properties of the external object of knowing are assumed to be identical with the immaterial and unchangeable conditions within the mind, his critique applies equally as well to the other extreme model of a materialist empiricism, where it is assumed that the conditions within the mind must be identical with the material and changeable properties of bodies. In the first case, things must be identical with immaterial thought, and in the second case, thought must be identical with material things. As Aquinas says later,[159] it is the wisdom of Aristotle to choose the middle ground between such extremes. Democritus begins with positing sensible bodies as the object of knowledge, and then insists that all knowledge must therefore also be a material operation, while Plato begins with positing the immaterial operation of knowing, and then insists that the objects must therefore also be immaterial in nature.

While Aristotle and Aquinas agree with Democritus that all knowledge begins with the sensible awareness of bodies, they add that it is not limited to a material operation alone, just as they agree with Plato that knowledge involves a universal and necessary apprehension, though it is not an immaterial operation alone. Rather, the operation of the soul is composite, in that it proceeds, by the abstracting agency of the active intellect, from a particular and sensible perception to a universal and intellectual

[158] Ibid.
[159] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 6.

apprehension. In short, the act of awareness is not *either* material or immaterial, but *both* material and immaterial.

This, then, is what Aquinas means when he says that "the received is in the receiver according to the mode of the receiver," and "we must conclude, therefore, that through the intellect the soul knows bodies by a knowledge which is immaterial, universal, and necessary."[160] The intelligible species as a likeness is, therefore, the means by which the form of the corporeal is present within the mind in an incorporeal manner, one and the same thing manifest in different modes. Without such a common likeness of form, of course, knowledge becomes impossible, since there can be no real relationship between the intellect and what is actual; furthermore, there is no need to critically proceed from the species to the thing, and thereby to separate the ideal and the real, since the likeness is itself like the common bridge or "middle term," so to speak, of awareness, the thing as both externally existing and internally intelligible.

Whether we employ the term likeness, conformity, or adequation, the principle of the species as the common and shared element is the key to grasping the relation of the ideal to the real. As is clear from the above, such a likeness is not a merely material similarity or resemblance, nor can it be fully articulated through the limited means of sensible analogy. In bridging the realm of the material and the immaterial, the species as a likeness is that which permits the transition from the former to the latter. Though such distinctions may at first appear subtle, they are crucial to realizing that the division of mind and matter is a fiction, readily overcome by isolating the species as the immediate shared bond between them. It is in this light that Maritain observes:

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[160] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 1.

> Thus the sense is clear in which we must understand the definition of truth which St. Thomas has made classic: *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, adequation or conformity between intellect and thing. This adequation or conformity has nothing to do with a copy or material transfer. Inasmuch as our knowledge comes originally from the senses, all our words, as we noted a little while ago, are drawn from the order of visible and tangible things; the words "adequation" and "conformity" are no exception. But in the case what the designate should be thought of as completely purified from what is visible and tangible. It is a question of a certain conformity, quite unique in its class, between the way the mind declares itself on the thing and posits it in existence in its own inner act of judgment, and the way the thing exists. It is a correspondence that amounts to identity, not in relation to the mode of existing in the thing and in the mind, but in reference to the existing of the thing taken in its pure value as intelligible object.[161]

> Philosophical reflection has neither to reconstitute the *thing* starting with the *object* as a necessary hypothesis, nor to suppress the *thing* as a superfluous thesis. Such a thesis is even self-contradictory. Philosophical reflection has to affirm that the thing is given with and by the object, and that it even absurd to wish to separate them.[162]

If the intelligible species is not that which, but that by which, the intellect understands a thing, it follows that this means of knowing must in turn be in a conformity and likeness to the thing as actual, for "a thing is not known according as it is in

[161] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 92-93.
[162] Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 99.

potentiality, but only according as it is in act."[163] In other words, if knowing must be *about* something actual, the means by which the mind knows must directly conform to what the thing itself is, for every action "proceeds in virtue of some form."[164] The nature of what is actual will, in turn, determine both how it operates upon other things, as well as how it is abstracted and received by the intellect. A problem in this model only occurs when we separate the act of intelligibility from the act of existence.

The critical role of the likeness within the intelligible species becomes apparent when we remember that the species (or "object," as Maritain puts it) and the thing itself are one and the same thing under different modes or conditions, and therefore share the same formal identity. As such, one can scarcely imagine Aquinas' model of knowing without the likeness, for it fully explains how and why the nature of what is external to the mind simultaneously becomes present within it.

Yet just as Aquinas and Reid appeared to be at odds, in Chapter 4, on the very existence of ideas themselves, so too, it might seem that Aquinas and Reid hold incompatible positions on the presence of a likeness or resemblance within the act of knowing. In Chapter 3, we saw that Reid expressly rejects any possibility of a likeness, resemblance, or similarity between bodily qualities and their perception within the mind; rather, while we can with intuitive certainty say that the perception acts as a real sign of things, the attempt to argue for a causal resemblance between the feeling of perception and the quality of bodies follows only from a desire to prove or demonstrate the validity of experience. Since such an approach is, in turn, merely consequent from the ideal

[163] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 84, Art. 2, et. al.
[164] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a Q. 85, Art. 2.

hypothesis that divides ideas and things from one another, the attempt to posit a resemblance is a misguided desire to join what should never have been separated. Since the feeling and the quality are not two things at all, but simply the quality itself insofar as it is perceived, and both are inherently given in the operation of understanding, we need not argue through a likeness from one to the other.

Reid carefully and explicitly argues this position at various points in the *Inquiry* and *Essays*. While the conclusion of a quality is inferred by the mind from a feeling, and the "feeling is the medium by which we are led to that conclusion,"[165] the feeling and quality "are as unlike as any two things in nature."[166] While the feeling does indeed signify the qualities of bodies, it in no way shares in the material nature of thing known: "the one implies no kind of extension, nor parts, nor cohesion; the other implies all these."[167] As Reid further explains elsewhere:

> That external objects make some impression on the organs of sense, and by them on the nerves and brain, is granted; but that those impressions resemble the objects they are made by, so as that they may be called images of the objects, is most improbable. Every hypothesis that has been contrived shows that there can be no such resemblance; for neither the motions of animal spirits, nor the vibrations of elastic chords, or of elastic aether, or of the infinitesimal particles of the nerves, can be supposed to resemble the objects by which they are excited.[168]

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[165] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, Chapter 5, Section 1, p. 64.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, Chapter 4, p. 94.

The point should certainly be well taken: by what possible means can we say that the feeling of a sensation within the mind bears a likeness to the quality itself? In feeling hardness or softness, light or dark, heat or cold, the mind does indeed apprehend these qualities through sensation, but by most certainly does not take these material properties unto itself. At the risk of seeming trite, Reid is simply pointing out that the mind does not *become* "woody" when it touches wood, or "icy" when it feels cold. The previously mentioned example of the relation between the sharpness of a sword and the feeling of pain is again appropriate: "we need not surely consult Aristotle or Locke, to know whether pain be like the point of a sword."[169] We learn quite quickly that one necessarily signifies and follows from the other, but cannot, and should not, attempt to suggest that the feeling somehow resembles the actual material attributes of sharpened steel.

Otherwise, we are left with the clearly ridiculous claim that sensation involves the material duplication of actual things, such that the feeling of pain is *literally* cold, hard, sharp-edged, or metallic. It is for this reason that Reid concludes: "None of our sensations are resemblances of any qualities of bodies," and, with the example of color, "although color is really a quality of body, yet it is not represented to the mind by an idea or sensation that resembles it; on the contrary, it is suggested by an idea which does not in the least resemble it. And this inference is applicable, not to color only, but to all the qualities of a body which we have examined."[170]

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[169] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, p. 69.
[170] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section 6, pp. 90-91.

If Reid is indeed correct in claiming the absence of a resemblance between idea and object, how can we possibly claim any real and immediate relation between them? Reid's point is, however, that the seeming need to justify or explain a causal relationship between things and ideas is itself a symptom of the misguided ideal hypothesis. The simple and irrefutable fact of common sense is that we *can* and *do* infer such a relation; but employing the notion of a likeness can serve no other purpose than reasoning for that which cannot be provided by reason. Why else, asks Reid, would the philosopher seek the form of a likeness, unless he feels compelled to demonstrate the dependence of ideas upon bodies?

Note, of course, that this approach already presumes that we begin with the feeling of an impression or idea, and must then proceed outward toward the thing that is somehow the cause of that feeling. Yet Reid has consistently argued that, despite all our ability to theoretically distinguish perception from object, actual experience does not distinguish in this way, since common sense apprehends that the awareness is necessarily joined to the object. It is a natural and intuitive first principle of human understanding to grant that sensations and ideas are directly of and about the properties of things, which are both equally and simultaneously given; only the ideal system falsely begins with one, the subjective, as something in itself, and then critically demonstrates to the other, the objective, as yet another object.

It is precisely this act of "pretending to deduce from sensation the first origins of our notions of external existences"[171] that is the root of our modern conundrum, the act of

[171] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 6, p. 67.

starting with thought itself as the only given fact. But can we explain how or why the process of conjunction between idea and thing takes place? Reid responds unequivocally: "it is beyond our power to say, when, or in what order, we came by our notions of these qualities."[172] Reid is entirely satisfied to leave such a question unanswered, even unasked, since to do so would suggest that we must prove what cannot be proven, or give an account of what is intuitively given. As difficult as it is for the contemporary philosopher to fathom, the very asking of the question already reveals a false, unfortunate, and misguided set of premises, whereby it is even possible to consider thinking without being.

To elucidate Reid's insistence on not questioning what is naturally given, it is fruitful to recall the following passages:

> How or when I got such first principles, upon which I build all my reasoning, I know not; for I had them before I can remember: but I am sure they are part of my constitution, and that I cannot throw them off. That our thoughts and sensations must have a subject, which we call ourself, is not therefore an opinion got by reasoning, but a natural principle. That our sensations of touch indicate something external, extended, figured, hard, or soft, is not a deduction of reason, but a natural principle. The belief of it, and the very conception of it, are equally parts of our constitution. If we are deceived in it, we are deceived by Him that made us, and there is no remedy.[173]

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[172] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, p. 67.
[173] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, p. 72.

> We know how the eye forms a picture of the visible object upon the retina; but how this picture makes us see the object we know not; and if experience had not informed us that such a picture is necessary to vision, we should never have known it. We can also give no reason why a like picture on any other part of the body produces nothing like vision.
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> It is likewise a law of nature, that we perceive not external objects, unless certain impressions be made by the object upon the organ, and by means of the organ upon the nerves and brain. But of the nature of those impressions we are perfectly ignorant; and thought they are conjoined with perception by the will of our Maker, yet it does not appear that they have any necessary connection with it in their own nature, far less that they can be the proper efficient cause of it. We perceive, because God has given us the power of perceiving, and not because we have impressions from objects. We perceive nothing without those impressions, because our Maker has limited an circumscribed our powers of perception, by such laws of Nature a to his wisdom seemed meet, and such as suited our rank in his creation.[174]

What Reid suggests is by no means a case of disdain for inquiry or a small-minded anti-intellectualism; he simply affirms that we cannot prove what need not be proven. As will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6, this is the very basis of Reid's doctrine of common sense, and the distinguishing quality so notably lacking in the ideal system. The pursuit of unnecessary and impossible positions is, in the spirit of Reid, a matter of beating a dead horse, of vainly questioning what is obvious and apparent, and it

[174] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 2, p. 95.

is for this reason that the ideal philosopher is unable to think in the same world in which he actually lives.

We know, then, *that* the mind understands the qualities of bodies, and we know this not by reasoning, but by a necessary assent to self-evident first principles; the very act of thinking presumes both a subject and an object as components of such an operation. If, however, we ask *how* or *why* this operation takes place, we are left without an answer, not because of some Berkeleian or Humean skepticism about the possibility of knowledge, but because proving the obvious is a non-question.

Given this state of affairs, is it possible to harmonize Aquinas' insistence on the species as likeness with Reid's rejection of resemblance between the idea and qualities of bodies? At first glance, there would appear to be little room for agreement. Once again, however, we must take into account both the differences of terminology and intent for both thinkers. Just as the very definition of the idea varied in Aquinas and Reid, so too does their use of the terms likeness or resemblance, while Aquinas' desire to explain the formal content of knowing must be related to Reid's objections to a critical justification for things themselves.

The sort of likeness of which Aquinas speaks is by no means subject to Reid's attack on resemblances. It is necessary to recall that Aquinas' likeness between the species and the thing is not a material likeness, but a formal one, such that the mind "becomes" what it knows, not by receiving matter or material properties itself, but by receiving the form or identity of the thing separated from its material conditions. In this way, while the senses receive the particular form of individual things without receiving

the matter, the intellect abstracts and receives the universal form under more perfect immaterial and immovable conditions.

In this context, Reid is entirely correct in claiming that perceptions and ideas do not contain within themselves resemblances of material qualities, and Aquinas is in complete agreement. To presume that the mind literally becomes what it knows is a naïve approach which falsely represents the use of sensible analogy in an inappropriate way; this has, after all, been one of Reid's primary criticisms of the ideal system, and is mirrored by Aquinas' claim that the mode of reception of intelligible form is not a corporeal or bodily resemblance. Gilson and Maritain, defenders of Aquinas' classical realism, have, as we saw, repeatedly stressed the same point. It is no accident that Reid's rejection of a material resemblance between idea and thing is in total harmony with Aquinas doctrine of the formal likeness, as both philosophers are genuine realists who recognize the limitations of sensible analogy.

When Reid rejects the possibility of resemblance between thing and idea, he refers specifically to a bodily or material similitude, which Aquinas also rejects. When Aquinas argues for a formal similitude, and considers the manner in which such a process of abstraction and reception proceeds, we enter into a field where Reid prefers silence to the possibility of further philosophical confusion. While Reid grants the common-sense principle that the mind knows things in the act of conception, he offers virtually no account of how this occurs; given his disdain for the justifying and rationalizing of mental operations, this seems entirely appropriate. It is enough, Reid argues, to grant as a given first principle that the act of conception apprehends what things are; we should be

perfectly content with this fact, as anything more smacks of an ideal attempt to reason for the presence of ideas within the mind. As Haldane observes:

> In contrast to Reid's disavowal of any attempt to give an account of natural cognitive significance, Aquinas tackles directly the issues of mental content and intentional reference, recognizing them to be the central elements of realist epistemology. The conclusion at which he arrives is that thoughts have significance by expressing concepts which are mental counterparts of forms existing in nature.
>
> Thus, when he speaks of species in the mind as images, similitudes, likenesses and imitations of aspects of reality the relation he is concerned with is one of formal or qualitative identity and not some kind of pictorial resemblance:
>
> *De Potentia*, Q. 2, A. 1: "When our intellect conceives the character of a thing existing outside the mind, there occurs a certain communication of the thing, inasmuch as our intellect receives, in a certain mode the form of it.
>
> *Quodlibetum*, VIII, Q. 2,A. 2: "Hence the intelligible species is a similitude of the very essence of the thing, and it is in a certain way the very character and nature of the thing according to intelligible existence, and not according to natural existence as it is in things.[175]

The fact that Reid passes over such an account of formal content and likeness does not mean that he rejects the real and immediate relation of knower and known, or

[175] Haldane, John J., "Reid, Scholasticism and Current Philosophy of Mind", in Dalgarno, Melvin and Eric Matthews (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, Philosophical Studies Series 42, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, pp. 298-299

that the mind really grasps the identity of what it knows; after all, these are positions he repeatedly defends. Rather, his silence should be understood in the context of the ideal philosophies to which he is responding and reacting. In seeking to consider the validity of experience by proceeding from thought to things, Locke, Berkeley, or Hume consistently address the content of thought as a possible justification for the existence of things. It should come as no surprise, then, that Reid has little to do with such a project, as most every epistemology contemporary to Reid uses such explanations of knowing in a misguided manner.

Clearly, then, Reid considers such causal accounts of the formal content of knowing to be unnecessary and misleading symptoms of the ideal hypothesis. It should be perfectly complete and satisfying to the man of common sense to affirm that knowing takes place, without trying to explain how or why it occurs. After all, to ask *why* seems paramount to asking for proof, and asking for proof is to confuse what is reasoned with first principles that precede reason.

Given that he includes Aristotle and the Scholastic tradition in his condemnation of the theory of ideas, Reid would most likely assume that Aquinas also suggests the likeness within the intelligible species as a justification for things; as Haldane says, however, "Thomas Reid was a very fine thinker who saw clearly the defects in the philosophies of mind and cognition of the modern period, particularly of his own age and that of the preceding century. He was not, however, a reliable historian of thought." [176]

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**[176]** Haldane, John J. "Thomas Reid and the History of Ideas" American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, VOL LXXIV, No. 3, Summer 2000, p. 468.

Though Reid's misinterpretation of classical realism is perhaps understandable, it should not hinder us from discerning his ultimate unity of principle with Aquinas.

Aquinas does not, in any way, seek to argue for things from thought, and his appeal to the likeness within the species is not a demonstration of the existence of things and their correspondence to the mind, but rather an explanation of the means by which the intellect understands things. That knowing presumes the actual as content, and the awareness of the actual through the power of the intellect, is given as self-evident, just as it is for Reid.

Since Aquinas is not offering a critical account of knowing, his account of the likeness must be understood as being purely *explanatory*, and not *demonstrative*. Such a distinction, while often overlooked, is real and crucial. While a demonstration proceeds from premises to a conclusion, an explanation of this sort simply clarifies the meanings of the terms in a proposition. We might offer, for example, the self-evident proposition that knowing is the operation of the intellect apprehending what is actual; what Aquinas' account does is to explain more clearly precisely what we mean by apprehension, and thereby explaining how the knowledge of a thing involves the awareness of its identity. In turn, an awareness of the identity can mean nothing else than the presence of the form both in the thing and in the mind, but in different modes and under different conditions.

In contrast, a demonstrative account might begin with the premise that the mind knows, and from the properties of the operation of thought seek to prove the existence of its object. Again, Aquinas does not do this, and like Reid, his very definition of the operation of knowing implicitly contains the actual as the necessary content of that power. Without the actual as that which is understood, knowing is purely potential, and

in this way we can say that the very term of knowledge self-evidently assumes something known.

Reid's down-to-earth, practical, and proudly "vulgar" approach may well disdain such niceties and subtleties, not necessarily because an explanatory account of the self-evident is impossible, but because it easily leads to the slippery slope of a demonstrative and critical approach. Given the approach of his opposition, Reid can easily be forgiven for neglecting a fuller account of the content of thought. There is, after all, little to gain from dwelling upon the obvious, if such consideration only tempts us further from the truth. At the same time, we must be careful not to assume that obvious things cannot be better and more fully explained, thereby offering a richer account of the common foundations of all knowledge.

There is, therefore, no contradiction between Aquinas' defense of the likeness and Reid's rejection of resemblances, and the relation between the two positions might best be described as one of complementarity, rather than opposition. Reid rightly insists upon the self-evident nature of conception, and its implicit requirement of the action between an actual subject and object, just as he rightly insists that any questioning of such first principles can only lead to a critical and ideal hypothesis of the mind. Likewise, Reid is correct to deny any literal material resemblance between ideas and things. Aquinas also takes it as self-evident that knowing presumes subject and object, is equally critical of the reification of ideas as things in themselves, and, most importantly for this case, also agrees that the likeness between species and thing is not one of material identity.

Beyond Reid's wariness of any explanatory account of knowing, a fact easily understood in his philosophical and historical context, the only major difference

remaining is Aquinas' claim that knowing does indeed proceed by a formal, but not material, likeness. Quite simply, where Reid remains silent for the sake of simplicity, Aquinas elaborates for the sake of thoroughness. Put another way, while Reid accepts that the mind knows things, Aquinas expands upon this basic point by considering how and why this process takes place: to know is to grasp *what* something is, to grasp such a quiddity is to receive and possess its identity, to possess the identity is the intellect's act of containing within itself, under universal and immaterial conditions, the form of particular and material bodies.

In Chapter 4, we saw some of the ways in which Aquinas' realism is readily subject to a representationalist misinterpretation. This occurs when the intelligible species is misunderstood as a static state, and where the relation between the species and thing must in turn be reasoned for and justified. Indeed, if the species is nothing more than an extraneous "third thing" intervening between knower and known, such a critique is entirely sound. The key to unraveling this problem lies not in blaming Aquinas for his appeal to the species, but in the assumptions of modern interpreters that the species are themselves primary objects. As soon as we remember that Aquinas defines the species as the form of the thing itself insofar as it is actively understood, the issue is solved.

Reid's more contemporary account of the same problem serves us admirably as a confirmation of what Aquinas genuinely meant: idea and thing are not two things, but one thing in the act of being understood. In like manner, Aquinas' discussion of the formal content of knowing helps us avoid a similar sort of misinterpretation of Reid, for just as Aquinas is misunderstood by many interpreters, so too Reid's account can also be misunderstood through the blinders of modern representationalism and skepticism.

In particular, Reid's silence on an explanation of the formal content of knowing can very easily be misconstrued as a tacit agreement with Hume that we have no grounds for accepting the evidence of the senses beyond a subjective belief. In referring to assent to first principles, let us recall how Reid says that "the belief of it, and the very conception of it, are equally parts of our constitution. If we are deceived in it, we are deceived by Him that made us, and there is no remedy."[177] Taken in itself, one might say that this statement is no different from Hume's argument that the only basis for knowledge is a type of instinct:

> This belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent.[178]

Such a view would, of course, entirely neglect the essential differences between Hume and Reid, most specifically the fact that Hume considers impressions and ideas alone, while Reid argues that they cannot be considered independently of a subject and an object. But when Reid says that we cannot help, as part of our constitution, but believe in first principles, and then proceeds to claim that no account can or should be given for

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[177] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, p. 72.
[178] Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis, (2nd ed.) Hackett Publishing, 1993, p. 30.

how or why these principles operate, does he not perhaps come dangerously close to replacing one set of unaccountable subjective beliefs with another?

In the greater context of his writings, it becomes clear that Reid means no such thing, for such beliefs are not just subjective inclinations, but necessary preconditions for all thought itself, a model far deeper than Hume's reduction of man to a sensitive and appetitive bundle of impressions and feelings. It is here, however, that Aquinas' model of the species as likeness can serve to explain (though by no means demonstrate) more fully what Reid truly means, and how the realist approach differs essentially from idealism and representationalism. Though the claim that ideas must be grounded in things, either directly or indirectly, needs no proof, an account of how and why this process takes place casts aside any doubt that this doctrine is simply another subjective set of assumptions.

In other words, Aquinas' appeal to the species provides a set of explanations on the inner workings of the mind, and helps us remember that there is a remarkable internal consistency within the realist model, which elucidates the particular relationship of knower and known. In binding the mind and thing through the mediacy of the species, it becomes clear that realism is not just a set of blindly subjective habits: it is the only system that can account for how and why we know the way we do. By highlighting the form as commonly present both within and without the intellect under differing conditions, the struggle to escape the subjectivity of ideas is entirely unnecessary, and the claim that philosophy is nothing more than this or that set of subjective assumptions, where each may be "true" for me, if not for you, is readily overcome.

Reid and Aquinas, as representatives of the realist tradition, manage to avoid the whole dilemma of subjectivity, and its corresponding symptoms of philosophical skepticism and relativism, by highlighting being as the necessary condition of knowing. Even if Reid's disinterest in the inner content of knowing might falsely mislead the modern philosopher into confusing him with a representationalist, Aquinas' thorough account of this inner content should surely remove all doubt concerning the reality of knowing.

When Haldane admirably described the "two central claims" of Thomist realism, we should not be surprised how remarkably this summary can just as easily be attributed to Reid's system:

> First is the suggestion that known and knower are formally identical in virtue of the occurrence of the form of the known in the mind of the knower, which yields the conclusion that the content of a presentative act is intrinsically related to its object. Second is the claim that cognition involves only subject, act and object and the special relation between the content of the act and its object.
>
> These doctrines are the basis of Thomist epistemology: the second rejects the postulation of intentional objects and thereby representationalism, while the first seeks to give account of how the implied realism is made possible.[179]

Even as Reid stresses the common-sense facts of practical living, and thereby strengthens the realist conviction in the grounding of the actual, and Aquinas excels in

[179] Haldane, John J. "Thomas Reid and the History of Ideas" p. 460.

explaining the mode through which the identity of things is made present to the mind, one can attribute both these claims to both thinkers; while Reid might say that conception and bodily properties are not two things, but one thing as actively understood, and Aquinas might say that the form of the known is present within the knower, the root principles are one and the same.

In all, Reid is correct to say that, in one sense, ideas are not like things. Aquinas is correct to say that, in another sense, ideas are like things. To ask whether one of these things is, indeed, like the other, requires a necessary distinction between a material and a formal likeness; the former is an absurdity, the latter a necessity.

## Chapter 6: Brushes and Ladders

> *Thomas Reid is a philosopher who remembers that he was not born one. Professionally, he uses a language he learned long before he heard the word "philosophy," and that he and others continue to speak for a variety of purposes, most of them practical. Reid saw philosophy as having forgotten this elemental truth, or, having recognized it, imagined that the philosophical use of language could be cut free from its origins and proceed from some absolute starting point. Hang on to your brush, I am taking away the ladder.*[180]

An examination of the differences between realism and representationalism shows us that the question of a "starting point" is a hinge upon which so much else depends; are we to begin with thought or with being as having priority? As we have seen, a crucial point of disagreement is whether it is necessary to demonstrate the existence of an external reality, or whether the world of things is already given as self-evident. As such, realism and representationalism proceed from very different sets of first principles. Aquinas and Reid have both argued that being precedes knowing, and that it is entirely unnecessary to prove the existence of things themselves, as the very act of awareness inherently depends upon the real content of what is known; the reality of the world known need not be demonstrated, as its existence is a self-evident first principle. Reid, in particular, regularly refers to such self-evident first principles as being statements of

[180] McInerny, Ralph, "Thomas Reid and Common Sense", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 3, Summer 2000, p. 345.

"common sense," and it precisely to a consideration of such common sense principles that we now turn.

René Descartes confidently opens his *Discourse on Method* stating that "common sense is the most evenly distributed commodity in the world,"[181] while Voltaire conversely insists that "common sense is not so common."[182] As with our conceptions of truth, objectivity, or justice, it is maddening, and saddening, that a principle as basic and fundamental as common sense instead becomes an object of confusion and disagreement. We see here again, of course, another symptom of the separation of thought from things: a proposition, taken without any measure in the real, becomes as true as the consistency of the definition and the conviction of its author.

Whether in the practical realm of commerce and politics, or the theoretical realm of philosophy and scholarship, few authorities are appealed to as much as common sense, and few are so readily abused. The optimism of Descartes readily gives way to the skepticism of Voltaire when we observe the wide array of contradictory statements all equally attributed to common sense. Are we, like so many of the moderns and post-moderns, to despair of any way out, and deny the real foundation of truth itself? Or is there a means to rediscover common sense as something genuinely common, self-evident and obvious to any honest and open-minded man?

A moment of calm and ordered thought should reveal that the misunderstanding or abuse of a term need not invalidate said term, but may rather simply call for a greater clarity of definition. In the simplest of terms, people often mean different things by using

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[181] Descartes, René (trans. Donald A. Cress), *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Hackett, 1993 (3rd ed.), p. 1.
[182] Voltaire (trans. H.I. Woolf), *The Philosophical Dictionary*, Knopf, 1924, p. 5

the same terms; just as importantly, such differences of usage need not involve contradiction if a genuinely clear sense of definition is acquired, whereby one usage may readily exist in harmony with another.

For our purposes, the broad use of the term "idea" has already yielded the strikingly different usages of Aquinas and Reid, even as a closer inspection of each definition reveals that the two senses are not only compatible, but also complementary to one another. Both Aquinas and Reid assert that ideas are not things, but that the mind actively knows things themselves without any intermediary objects; confusion will only arise if we falsely (as Reid himself unfortunately did) attribute the status of mental object to Aquinas' intelligible species. Once the terms are clearly defined, the apparent contradictions disappear, and standing upon common ground, each philosopher, despite differences of time, place and context, apprehends the same perennial truth.

The same is also true of the term "common sense," which, while often employed in wildly different ways, can and should be understood through a shared and, dare one say, common standard. It is fruitful to briefly consider the varied senses in which the term can be employed, as an aid in determining how Aquinas and Reid approach the problem; specifically, we might distinguish between usages that differ in degree for the broad to the narrow, from the more general to the more particular, and from the more everyday to the more technical.

*First*, in its broadest, most general and most everyday usage, common sense is often meant to be synonymous simply with being reasonable. In this context, one might say that a statement or argument is a "common sense" point, in that it can be defended with solid evidence or proof; the statement that laziness is a vice, or that certain foods are

healthy, for example, might be included in such a category. While the difficulty is, of course, that wildly divergent claims are often made with an appeal to reasonableness or common sense, the root meaning here is, in more philosophical terms, that an argument is sound, grounded in true premises and employing a valid structure. The expression "well, that's just common sense" is employed in this manner, and makes use of the term common sense in a broadly inclusive and equivocal way to mean anything that "makes sense," is "sensible" or follows from the process of a consistent, reasoned and orderly mind.

*Second*, and more specifically, common sense is often equated with the obvious assumption of common and generally accepted facts. While this is similar to our first definition, and overlaps with it in many regards, it refers not simply to arguments or proofs that are sensible or reasonable, but to statements which are thought to be universally known and assumed, and where proof may not commonly be demanded. That the earth is round, or that heavy objects fall, are accepted facts that might be included in such a category. We might note that while such statements may, in fact, require demonstration in a strictly scientific sense, they do not necessarily do so in common parlance; their acceptance or assumption in common belief is sufficient grounds to make them common sense claims in this second form.

*Third*, and now proceeding to a more philosophical context of meaning, common sense may more narrowly refer to self-evident first principles. A proposition that is self-evident is a true statement which does not require proof or demonstration, and which is, in turn, a principle upon which any later demonstration is itself based. As such, common sense principles of this sort are self-contradictory, where the contrary of the statement is

inherently impossible; logical or mathematical axioms and postulates are propositions of this sort, and we might include examples such the principles of identity, non-contradiction or the excluded middle, or the statements that the whole is greater than the part and that equals added to equals are also equal. While everyday usage may not regularly appeal this definition, it is certainly the more specifically logical and philosophical sense of the term.

*Fourth*, and finally, the term common sense has a very specialized meaning particular to the schools of Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy, referring quite literally to an aspect of the sensitive powers of living things, and quite literally to what is common, or shared. Whereas the individual external senses refer to the different means by which phantasms or sense impressions are received, the internal sense powers refer to the means by which these impressions are processed and retained by the sensitive power. Of these internal senses, *sensus communis* is a unifying sense power that binds together the various modes of the external senses into a common and shared perception. In this way, the common sense allows for the single apprehension of a thing that is seen, heard or felt through separate qualities of visual, tactile or auditory sensation, and is able to discern what is common between these different senses.

In properly defining common sense, it is crucial to distinguish between such varied uses of the term. What differentiates the epistemological realist like Aquinas or Reid from the variety of representationalists or idealists is a radically different conception of first principles of knowledge: do we take the act of thought itself as a self-evident fact, or do we begin with things themselves as the necessary first principle of awareness? Aquinas and Reid have both made clear that there can inherently be no awareness without

actual content, and that act of perceiving assumes the presence of bodies that are perceived. Furthermore, such claims do not require proof, precisely because they are already given as being self-evident in the act of knowing.

If realism is to be a philosophy of accepting as given the real content of awareness, and thereby to posit as self-evident the existence of things known to the mind, then in precisely what way can we say that realism is a philosophy of common sense? More specifically, how can the notion of common sense be applied to the philosophies of Aquinas and Reid? Just as there was a distinct, yet overlapping and complementary, conception of the intelligible species and the idea in Aquinas and Reid, so there is also a different manner in which first principles and common sense are employed by both thinkers. Despite variations in language and context, however, we see once again that such nominal differences and distinctions reveal a common and shared realist model. Furthermore, as with the earlier understanding of the idea, each thinker supplies useful, necessary and complementary points that allow realism as a whole to be more soundly centered.

A first and immediate difficulty is that the literal term "common sense" in Aquinas' thought is, as indicated above, employed very specifically and very differently from both Reid's usage and various forms of everyday meaning. In particular, Aquinas draws upon Aristotle's definition of the *sensus communis*, and explains that common sense is a unifying internal sense power:

> We have seen that each sense is perceptive of its own proper object precisely in so far as a likeness of the object is formed within its own particular organ as such; for the organ of each sense is, directly, not

indirectly, impressed by the proper object of that sense. And within this proper object each sense discerns its characteristic differences; sight, e.g. discerning white and black, taste sweet and bitter; and so with the others.[183]

. . . Whereas we are able to distinguish not only between black and white, or sweet and bitter, but also between white and sweet, and indeed between any one sense-object and another, it must be in virtue of some sense that we do this, for to know sense-objects as such is a sensuous activity; the difference between white and sweet is for us not only a difference of ideas, which would pertain to the intellect, but precisely a difference between sense-impressions, which pertains only to some sense-faculty.[184]

. . . Now sensitivity flows to the organs of all the five senses from one common root, to which in turn are transmitted, and in which are terminated, an the sensations occurring in each particular organ. And this common root can be regarded from two points of view: either as the common root and term of all sensitivity, or as the root and term of this or that sense in particular. Hence, what he means is that just as a point, under a certain aspect, is not one only but also two, or divisible, so the principle of sensitivity, if regarded as the root and term of seeing and of hearing, appears twice over under the same name, and in this way it is divisible.[185]

. . . In so far then as this single principle receives and "takes account of two distinct" and separate "objects", these are known "as in a separate", i.e. as by a divisible "principle" of knowledge; "but in so far as" it is single in itself it is able to know these objects and their differences

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[183] Aquinas, St. Thomas, Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Kenelm Foster et. al.), *Aristotle's De Anima*, Yale University Press, 1951, Book 3, Lectio 5, § 600

[184] Ibid.

[185] Aquinas, *Aristotle's De Anima*, Book 3, Lectio 5, § 609

> together and simultaneously. It is a common sensitive principle, aware of several objects at once because it terminates several organically distinct sensations; and as such its functions are separate. But just because it is one in itself it discerns the difference between these sensations.[186]

While a detailed discussion of order and function of the sensitive power in the philosophy of Aquinas is beyond the scope of this consideration, it is readily apparent that Aristotelian and Scholastic thought are employing the term "common sense" in a distinctly different manner from most regular usage. Such semantic differences aside, while the fourth type of common sense is specific to Scholastic terminology, Aquinas does indeed present a notion of self-evident first principles, along the lines of our third type of common sense. These first principles of demonstration "are the common conceptions of all men on which all demonstrations are based,"[187] and are therefore not themselves demonstrated, but rather the root of all demonstration; examples of such principles are "everything must either be affirmed or denied," or "it is impossible both to be and not to be at the same time."[188]

Regarding the specific nature of such common conceptions, or self-evident principles of demonstration, Aquinas, following Aristotle, explains that

> In the sciences there are two methods by which knowledge is acquired. One is that by which the whatness of each thing is known, and the other is that by which knowledge is acquired through demonstration. But it does not belong to any science to give us a knowledge of the principles of

[186] Aquinas, *Aristotle's De Anima*, Book 3, Lectio 5, § 610
[187] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. John P. Rowan), *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Notre Dame, Dumb Ox Books, 1995, Book 3, Lectio 5, § 387.
[188] Ibid.

> demonstration by means of the first method, because such knowledge of principles is assumed to be prior to all the sciences. For "we already know" what each one of them is, i.e., we know from the very beginning what these principles signify, and by knowing this the principles themselves are immediately known.[189]

Similarly, when discussing the arguments for the existence of God in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas discusses the proper meaning of the term "self-evident." The distinctions made are directly related to our earlier discussion, in Chapter 2, of the distinction between the order of knowing and the order of being, insofar as we can speak of things relative to our understanding, and absolutely in themselves:

> A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways; on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other hand, self-evident in itself and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject, as "man is an animal," for animal is contained in the essence of man. If, therefore, the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like. If, however, there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject is unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition.[190]

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[189] Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Book 3, Lectio 5, § 389.
[190] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), *Summa Theologica*, London, Benziger Brothers, 1948, 1a, Q. 2, Art. 1.

According to Aquinas, a proposition is self-evident when the predicate is already included in the essence of the subject, such that the predication is necessarily implicit in the nature of the term. Statement such as "a square has four sides", or "man is an animal" do not require proof or demonstration, since the very definition of man or square already presumes these properties. Given a clear apprehension of term, therefore, the predication is already included within the definition. This distinction is parallel to the modern distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions.

Aquinas further adds that a proposition may be self-evident *in itself*, if the definition of the subject includes the predicate, but whether it is also self-evident *to us* depends upon whether we in fact know the definitions. If we are ignorant of the essence of the subject and predicate, it can be said that proposition is self-evident in itself, but not to us. While this properly explains how the existence of God is self-evident in itself, but not to us, it is further helpful in clarifying that the objective nature of things themselves is the measure and foundation of common conceptions, not merely the subjective awareness or ignorance of such principles. In other words, things are not made self-evident because we know them, rather we come to know them because they are inherently self-evident.

Faced with any critical claims of seeking to prove the existence of things in themselves, Thomist realism responds that it is pointless to seek to demonstrate what is self-evident. If we clearly apprehend the essence of knowing, it is inherently obvious that this activity, as the relation of a knower and the known, presupposes both the agency of the subject and the content of the object. To speak of knowledge, therefore, without a thing as the object known is akin to speaking of a square with three sides. Since there can be no infinite regress of demonstration, proof must rest upon self-evident common

conceptions given in all experience. When Aquinas and Aristotle speak of common conceptions, therefore, these are clearly comparable to our third meaning of common sense.

While precise distinction is characteristic of Aquinas' thought, an ability to express philosophical problems in common, approachable language is characteristic of Reid's approach. Accordingly, it should come as little surprise that Reid employs the term "common sense" in a much broader and everyday manner. Like Aquinas, Reid insists that it is a fatal flaw of the critical method to seek proof where none is necessary. While the philosopher may try to reify his thoughts and question the existence of the external world, the vulgar man rightly understands that his perceptions are inseparable from their objects.

As we saw in Chapter 3, Reid claims that all reason must reduce to common-sense principles, which do not admit of proof or demonstration, but which precede and act as the foundation of all reasoning and science. Such common principles "are no sooner understood that they are believed,"[191] and "such principles are older, and of more authority, than Philosophy: she rests upon them as her basis, not they upon her."[192] When confronted with the claims of the critical and representationalist philosophy that seeks to reason toward what must be taken for granted, Reid tells us that

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[191]Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, Essay 6, Chapter 4, p. 452.
[192]Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, Chapter 1, Section 4, p. 21.

> Thus the wisdom of philosophy is set in opposition to the common sense of mankind. The first pretends to demonstrate a priori, that there can be no such thing as a material world; that sun, moon, stars, and earth, vegetable and animal bodies, are, and can be noting else, but sensations in the mind, or images of those sensations in the memory and imagination; that, like pain and joy, they can have no existence when they are not thought of. The last can conceive no otherwise of this opinion, than as a kind of metaphysical lunacy; and concludes, that too much learning is apt to make men mad.[193]

While the power of reasoning, "that is of drawing conclusions from a chain of premises, may with some propriety be called an art," common sense and self-evident propositions, "which are clearly understood, may be compared to the power of swallowing our food. It is purely natural."[194] In the early part of the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Reid present a basic set of five common sense first principles. While we have already given these some consideration in Chapter 3, it is worth briefly repeating them here:

> I shall take it for granted, that I think, that I remember, that I reason, and, in general, that I really perform all these operations of mind of which I am conscious.
>
> Every act or operation, therefore, supposes an agent, that every quality supposes a subject, are things which I do not attempt to prove, but take for granted.

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[193] Reid, Thomas, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 5, Section 7, pp. 67-68.
[194] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 4, p. 453.

> I take it for granted that, in most operations of the mind, there must be an object distinct from the operation itself.
>
> We ought likewise to take for granted, as first principles, things wherein we find an universal agreement, among the learned and unlearned, in the different nations and ages of the world.
>
> I shall also take for granted such facts as are attested by the conviction of all sober and reasonable men, either by our senses, by memory, or by human testimony.[195]

Referring back to both the different defintions of the meaning of common sense, as well as Aquinas' use of self-evident common conceptions, it is becomes clear that in this formulation of common sense principles, Reid is appealing to a broader sort of definition. Aquinas' meaning of common sense, the fourth type of definition, is clearly a separate use of the term, but his appeal to self-evident common conceptions directly corresponds to our third definition. In comparison, Reid's first three common sense principles presented in Chapter 1 of the *Essays* are also compatible with our third definition (self-evident first principles), but principles three and four are more in line with our first definition (all reasonable propositions) and second definition (commonly accepted propositions).

More specifically, to say that operations of the mind are given facts, that every action assumes an agent or that every quality assumes a subject, and that operations of the mind presume a subject are all propositions that are self evident; the existence of a

[195] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 1, Chapter 2, p. 41.

conscious self is an obvious condition for awareness, the nature of activity or quality inherently presumes an agent or a substance, and the activity of knowing requires the content of an object known. In all three cases, we are presented with the given fact that operations and qualities are not things in themselves, but always *of* and *by* things.

Reid's fourth and fifth principles are, however, not self-evident according the strict sense of our third definition, but are rather more generally applied notions of common sense. It does not necessarily follow as obvious or self-evident that principles derived from universal agreement are necessarily correct, nor can we assume that all persons we judge to be reasonable will necessarily and without exception be trustworthy in all instances. Reid's fourth principle, it would seem, corresponds more fully to our second definition (commonly accepted propositions), while Reid's fifth principle corresponds more fully to our first definition (all reasonable propositions).

While Reid defines common sense in a broader way, it does not necessarily follow that this stands in contradiction to Aquinas' narrower definition of common conception. While both Aquinas and Reid are in agreement that self-evident propositions, where the predicate is included in the meaning of the subject, are properly common conceptions or common sense, Reid is simply also including certain basic and reasonable propositions, derived by demonstration *from* self-evident first principles, in his more general definition. Accepting universally held convictions and paying heed to all reasonable arguments is both practically sensible and sound, in the sense that the very function of life would be impossible without it.

If by common sense we mean, therefore, any propositions that are necessary for all thinking and living, then all of Reid's principles are common sense principles; if by

common sense, however, we mean merely self-evident first principles, then only the first three of Reid's principles are common sense principles. From a Thomist view, Reid's fourth and fifth principles are certainly reasonable, but not self-evident, since they would require demonstration, however basic. It would seem that Aquinas, from a strictly logical standpoint, defines common conceptions as self-evident principles, while Reid, from a practical standpoint, defines common sense as *both* self-evident principles *and* any basic truths that we must assume for the sake of sound living and thinking.

If we accept that the latter are not in opposition to, but derived from and grounded in, the former, there is no contradiction between them; the broader definition includes the narrower, and also adds assumptions that proceed from the narrower sense. This different use of terms is, of course, also a reflection of the distinctly theoretical approach of Aquinas, and the practical approach of Reid, which, as we have seen, are properly complementary.

Reid returns to a discussion of first principles toward the end of the *Essays*, where he reminds us that "opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this: that they are not only false, but absurd."[196] He also offers a rather different set of distinctions on the types of first principles, which, however, do not contradict his earlier categories, but rather clarify and refine them. First, Reid distinguishes between necessary and contingent principles, where the former must always be the case, while the truth of the latter depend upon the existence or non-existence of some possible cause:

[196] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 4, p. 462.

> The truths that fall within the compass of human knowledge, whether they be self-evident, or deduced from those that are self-evident, may be reduced to two classes. They are either necessary and immutable truths, whose contrary is impossible, or contingent and mutable, depending upon some effect of will and power, which had a beginning, and may have an end.[197]

Reid first provides a list of twelve contingent first principles, where the proposition depends upon the existence or qualities of certain subjects or objects:

> *First*, then, I hold, as a first principle, the existence of every thing of which I am conscious.
>
> Another first principle, I think, is, that the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of being I call *myself*, my *mind*, my *person*.
>
> Another first principle I take to be, that those things did really happen which I distinctly remember.
>
> Another first principle is our own personal identity and continued existence, as far back as we remember any thing distinctly.
>
> Another first principle is, that those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be.
>
> Another first principle, I think, is, that we have some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will.

[197] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 5, p. 468.

> Another first principle is, that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious.
>
> Another first principle relating to existence, is, that there is life and intelligence in our fellow men with whom we converse.
>
> Another first principle I take to be, that certain features of the countenance, sounds of the voice, and gestures of the body, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of mind.
>
> Another first principle appears to me to be, that there is a certain regard due to human testimony an matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion."
>
> There are many events depending upon the will of man, in which there is a self-evident probability, greater or less, according to circumstances.
>
> The last principle of contingent truths I mention is, that, in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.[198]

Along the lines of our earlier distinctions, it can be argued that the first through seventh principles outlined by Reid are self-evident in the narrow and specific sense of our third definition (self-evident first principles), while principles eight through twelve

[198] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 5, p. 468-489.

fall under the broader and more general definition of definitions one (all reasonable propositions) and two (commonly accepted propositions). Reid is certainly correct that the contraries of propositions eight through twelve are "absurd," even though they may not be common conceptions in the narrower, Thomist sense.

When discussing first principles of necessary truth, Reid distinguishes between different categories based upon his division of the sciences, such that there are common sense truths in grammar, logic, mathematics, aesthetics and metaphysics. It is specifically the metaphysical first principles that concern us here:

> The first is, that the qualities which we perceive by our senses must have a subject, which we call body, and that the thoughts we are conscious of must have a subject, which we call mind.
>
> The second metaphysical principle I mention is, that whatever begins to exist, must have a cause which produced it.
>
> The last metaphysical principle I mention, which is opposed by the same author [Hume], is, that design, and intelligence in the cause, may be inferred, with certainty, from marks or signs of it in the effect.[199]

While principles one and two are clearly self-evident in the narrow sense of our third definition, as expressions of the logical necessity of identity and causality, Reid's third principle brings us directly back to Aquinas' discussion of the self-evidence of the

[199] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 6, pp. 495-503.

existence of God. Aquinas and Reid are here in perfect agreement that there must be a first, intelligent cause, and that this proposition is self-evident, in that the essence of God presumes his existence.

Aquinas, however, adds that this proposition is self-evident in itself, but not to us (since we do not know the essence of God directly), while Reid does not explicitly make such a distinction. Reid nevertheless does argue that it is possible for there to be disagreement on first principles because there is a distinction between being intuitively conscious of something and actively reflecting upon it, so that "the habit of reflection, even in those whom nature has fitted for it, is not to be attained without much pain and practice."[200] This distinction is very similar to Aquinas' point that we may not always be conscious of a self-evident principle, since we may not know the essence of the subject and predicate. This also helps us to understand why not all appeals to common sense are necessarily true, since not all reflection on their meaning will be sound. In either case, it is once again apparent that Aquinas and Reid admit of differing degrees of common sense conceptions, even as Reid offers a broader meaning to include propositions that are practically or inductively taken for granted.

Aquinas and Reid, in arguing for different senses of common first principles, once again serve to complement each other in support of a shared model of epistemological realism. While Aquinas' arguments offer us the theoretical framework to properly distinguish what is given from what is demonstrated, Reid's arguments offer us the necessary application of common sense to include propositions that are practically taken for granted because of their universal and reasonable character. As Maritain says, there is

[200] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, Chapter 5, p. 472.

coherence between Aquinas' common conceptions and Reid's common sense, even as Aquinas' approach is "much more critical than that of Reid."[201]

Gilson's discussion of the parallels and differences between Aquinas and Reid on common sense rightly distinguishes between these two meanings, and he clearly and concisely explains that "every common conception is part of common sense, but not everything which is part of common sense is not necessarily a common conception."[202] Gilson adds, however, that Reid's model can be considered "unjustified and unjustifiable instinct."[203] While this point is understandable, given that one can easily interpret Reid's model to be unclear and equivocal, it does not seem fair to Reid to reduce his notion of common sense to a sort of Humean subjective skepticism. There is indeed a danger of simply accepting propositions as self-evident because they are believed through an instinct of subjective belief, but this is the very position of Hume that Reid so vehemently argues *against*.

We must recall that while Reid is practically appealing to common and reasonable assumptions as falling under common sense, he does not do so because he thinks belief by frequent conjunction is the source of knowledge; quite the contrary, he reminds us time and time again that truth is grounded upon the existence of objects and our direct perception of them. Our trust in such facts is not instinct of a blind sort, but a necessity of experience; such trust need not be justified, since, as Gilson himself says, its is absurd

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[201] Maritain, Jacques (trans. Gerald B. Phelan), *The Degrees of Knowledge*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, p. 87.
[202] Gilson, Etienne (trans. Mark A. Wauck), *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, p. 44.
[203] Ibid.

to demonstrate what does not require demonstration. Common-sense propositions are not true because we believe them, we believe them because they are true.

Concerned that metaphysical speculation can so easily tempt the philosopher into representational errors, Reid bluntly, and perhaps stubbornly, resists any explanantion of how and why we accept common sense principles; he is content to simply accept that we must do so, just as the man in the street does. But Reid's trust in common sense is not unfounded, since he is well aware that the objective existence of things is itself the necessary foundation of human understanding. In this he is inherently opposed to the subjective belief of Hume, and in this he shares a common commitment to realism with Aquinas.

Just as Reid rightly reminds us that thinking must be practical, Aquinas rightly reminds us that it must also have a firm theoretical base. There can certainly be a danger of misrepresenting Reid's views, in that his inclusion of demonstrated principles in the realm of common sense might appear to be a reduction to subjective belief alone. Here Aquinas' narrower, more specific and univocal notion of common conceptions can be helpful in grasping that any common sense principles, broadly or narrowly construed, must have their basis in logical necessity.

This basis is nothing less than the principle that "the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect,"[204] and as such it is clear that common conceptions such as the existence and identity of substances or the principle of causality are merely formulations of this principle. While Reid may

[204] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. John P. Rowan), *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Notre Dame, Dumb Ox Books, 1995, Book 4, Lectio 6, § 599.

equivocally include further basic fundamental demonstrations that proceed from this necessary truth in his practical view of common sense, it is the principle of identity and non-contradiction that remains the self-evident cornerstone of such truths, not simply their common acceptance by reasonable people.

While Aquinas and Reid offer different views of common conceptions and common sense, these views are compatible and complementary if we properly understand that both philosophers posit things as the objective measure of truth. This is especially important if realism is to be understood not simply as a specific philosophical school, but as a common attitude that is shared by philosophers as different and distinct as Aquinas and Reid. Aquinas explains the logical foundation of self-evident principles, while Reid describes a wider variety of assumptions that are necessary for sound thinking; the latter must include, and be grounded upon, the former. Above all, what must remain clear is that, whatever the scope or range of common sense principles, thought is measured by things, not things by thought, and that a philosophy of common sense is a philosophy that bases itself upon this unquestionable fact:

> To be able to conclude that we must necessarily go from thought to things, and cannot proceed otherwise, it is not enough to assert that everything is given in thought. The fact is, we do proceed otherwise. The awakening of the intelligence coincides with the apprehension of things, which, as soon as they are perceived, are classified according to their most evident similarities. This fact, which has nothing to do with any theory, is something that the theory has to take account of. Realism does precisely

> that, and in this respect is following common sense. That is why every form of realism is a philosophy of common sense.[205]

The critical method of representationalism or idealism questions the validity of the existence of things present to the mind, realism, in whatever form it may take, shares the common truth that the facts of experience are given as self-evident first principles, which should not and cannot require proof or demonstration. The presence of things as objects is a *condition* for awareness, not a consequence of it; in this way, the act of knowing or perception presumes an world of things, and is directly defined as an intentionality toward an external world. As McInerny might say, we cannot hang onto to the brush after having pulled away the ladder.

Though written from yet another historical and intellectual context, Pascal's arguments against skepticism offer a very similar point, and when he speaks of the "heart feeling" first principles, he refers not to a Humean belief, but to an intuitive necessity of all reasoning, in perfect harmony with the theories of Aquinas and Reid. Pascal's own words summarize the realist position in a clear and eloquent manner, reminding us yet again that realism is an approach and attitude that transcends this or that philosophical school or movement:

> We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. The skeptics have no other object than that, and they work at it to no purpose. We know that we are not dreaming, but, however unable we may be to prove it rationally,

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[205] Gilson, Etienne (trans. Philip Trower), *Methodical Realism*, Front Royal VA, Christendom Press, 1990, Ch. 5, p. 132.

our inability proves nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they maintain. For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument. The heart feels that there are three spatial dimensions and that there is an infinite series of numbers, and reason goes on to demonstrate that there are no two square numbers of which one is double the other. Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty though by different means. It is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.[206]

[206] Pascal, Blaise (trans. A.J. Krailsheimer), *Pensées*, London, Penguin, 1966, #109, pp. 57-58.

## Chapter 7: Eggs are Eggs

> *Against all this, the philosophy of St. Thomas stands founded on the universal common conviction that eggs are eggs. The Hegelian may say that a egg is really a hen, because it is part of an endless process of Becoming; the Berkeleian may hold that poached eggs only exist as dreams exist; since it is quite easy to call the dream the cause of the eggs as the eggs the cause of the dream; the Pragmatist may believe that we get the best out scrambled eggs by forgetting that they ever were eggs, and only remembering the scramble. But no pupil of St. Thomas needs to addle his brains in order adequately to addle his eggs; to put his head at any particular angle in looking at eggs, or squinting at eggs, or winking the other eye in order to see a new simplification of eggs. The Thomist stands in the broad daylight of the brotherhood of men, in their common consciousness that eggs are not hens or dreams or mere practical assumptions; but things attested by the Authority of the Senses, which is from God.*[207]

As a creature of intellect, capable of abstraction, reflection and speculation, man is tempted to give a substantial existence to his thoughts. The appeal of the Cartesian *cogito*, thought loosed from things, or the Humean force of subjective belief can be so great as to form the foundation for whole schools of thought; but any attempt at a critical analysis of thought itself proves impossible, as the very presence of the act of knowing presupposes and rests upon the actual content of what is known. This is neither wishful thinking nor naïve assumption, since the essence of any action is relative to things that act and are acted upon.

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[207] Chesterton, G. K., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, New York, Image Books, 1956, p. 147.

Aquinas and Reid, separated in so many ways by both a historical and intellectual context, are philosophers whose arguments and conclusions on the nature of knowledge nevertheless share this common conviction of epistemological realism. As we have seen, the role and status of ideas plays a crucial role in such and argument, such that both theories of knowledge argue that things themselves are the direct object of awareness, and that ideas are not themselves things, but the active means by and through which things are known. Furthermore, such facts need not be proven or demonstrated, but are rather the self-evident conditions of thought, and constitute the common sense basis of a philosophy where objective being is the measure of knowing. As Gilson says:

> What we must do first of all, therefore, is free ourselves from the obsession with epistemology as the necessary pre-condition for philosophy. The philosopher as such has only one duty: to put himself in accord with himself and other things. He has no reason whatever to assume a priori that his thought is the condition of being, and, consequently, he has no a priori obligation to make what he has to say about being depend on what he knows about his own thought.[208]

For all of its insights and advances, the critical philosophy confounds the science of metaphysics, the perennial first philosophy, by making it subservient to the demands of epistemology; it is when metaphysics is understood only as relative to and dependent upon the conditions of the mind that both being and knowing become confused, and thought takes unto itself an independent unity and existence:

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[208] Gilson, Etienne (trans. Philip Trower), *Methodical Realism*, Front Royal VA, Christendom Press, 1990, p. 34.

> The failures of the metaphysicians flow from their unguarded use of a principle of unity present in the human mind. . . Our mind is so made that it cannot formulate a single proposition without relating it to some being. . . since being is the first principle of all human knowledge, it is a fortiori the first principle of metaphysics.[209]

Both Aquinas and Reid, representing theoretical and practical approaches to realism respectively, recognize the far-reaching consequences of succumbing to representationalism, and thereby reducing truth to the mind alone. As we saw in Chapter 2, Aquinas explains that the treatment of the intelligible species as objects, rather than the active means by which a form is present to the intellect, means that science and objective knowledge become impossible, and, in turn, all judgments become purely relative, such that "whatever seems, is true."[210] Reid, concerned with the effect representationalism has upon the art of living, says that skepticism destroys "principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind into the common concerns of life" and forcefully adds that it "can have no other tendency, than to show the acuteness of the sophists at the expense of disgracing reason and human nature, and making mankind Yahoos."[211]

The difficulty is not merely one of taste or preference, but of the very meaning of the true and the good. If man is to be ruled only by his subjective inclinations, where, as

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[209] Gilson, Etienne, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, New York, Scribner's, 1937, pp. 312-313.
[210] Aquinas, St. Thomas (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province), *Summa Theologica*, London, Benziger Brothers, 1948, 1a, Q. 85, Art. 2.
[211] Reid, Thomas (ed. Derek R. Brooks), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 21.

Hume says, "nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception,"[212] then the very possibility of normative standards is lost; the denial of the intellect as the means by which man is open to the truth of things "knocks the world into an unintelligible pluralism."[213] When ideas are severed from being, any and all attempts to find a firm footing for science and morality must meet with failure:

> Once the truth is no longer being as known by the mind, what is truth? Once the good is no longer being as the object of desire, what is the good? And consequently, what are science and morality? It was at this point that the good, the true, and the beautiful begin to transform themselves into *values*, because values are simply transcendentals which strive to subsist after they have severed their connection with being. But from the moment they no longer *are*, it becomes necessary to *ground* them. This is the origin of that sterile proliferation of purely verbal speculation, which encumbers modern philosophy, about values and their foundation; or we should rather say, about their foundation alone, since owing to the fact that these foundations are never discovered, no one ever has time to arrive at the values themselves. [214]

There is a clearly discernable progression from a representational model to a state of scientific and moral relativism. As both Aquinas and Reid have argued, the positing of ideas as objects of knowledge can result only in skepticism, since with "nothing to nature

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[212] Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis, (2nd ed.) Hackett Publishing, 1993, Section 12, p. 104.
[213] Sheen, Fulton J., *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*, New York, Image Books, 1958, Chapter 1, p. 19.
[214] Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, Chapter 4, p. 123.

but ideas and impressions,"[215] "it would follow that every science would not be concerned with objects outside the soul, but only with the intelligible species within the soul."[216] Lacking a basis in the being of things, a purely intramental type of awareness, where ideas are themselves objects, has no means or measure of determining whether said ideas have any real correspondence to an external world. Bracketing, for the moment, the fact that a state of affairs where there are operations without content is logically contradictory, we are left with minds that know only their own thoughts; a skepticism about the very existence and nature of things themselves is the necessary consequence.

Representationalism now finds itself burdened with the critical task of proving the existence of an external world, of trying to "escape" skeptical doubts; this task is impossible, however, since there are no measures beyond the mind itself open for consideration, and awareness is fully separated from anything objective beyond itself. The skepticism of the representational model now leads directly into a subjectivism where only the structures, conditions and judgments of the mind alone serve as a measure of truth.

Finally, such a subjectivism can only lead to a relativism concerning the nature of knowledge: If thinking itself is the only measure, then any apprehensions, and consequent judgments and demonstrations, are only clear, valid and true insofar as they subjectively appear to be so to the mind. With a common objective standard lost, all subjective perceptions become true; we are left with the ultimate consequence so prevalent in post-

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[215] Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 1, Section 5, p. 20.
[216] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, Q. 85, Art. 2.

modern thought, both everyday and academic, that what is "true for me" may not be "true for you," that we have no right to make any form of objective and universal judgments about the nature of things themselves. With only subjective appearance remaining, any and all propositions can be true, simply because they are felt, believed or asserted.

Insofar as a representational model can only be skeptical, skepticism can only lead to subjectivism, and subjectivism must result in relativism, an error on what may at first seem a technical question of epistemology can have a life-changing effect upon our views of nature and morality. It is this context that we should perhaps view the words of Maritain not as a prophet of doom, but as an astute observer of the contemporary philosophical condition:

> A deep vice besets the philosophers of our day . . . it is the ancient error of the *nominalists*. In different forms, and with varying degrees of awareness, they all blame knowledge-through-concepts for not being a supra-sensible intuition of the existing singular . . . they cannot forgive that knowledge for not opening directly upon existence as sensation does, but only onto essences, possibles. They cannot forgive it for its inability to reach actual existence except by turning back upon sense. They have a basic misunderstanding of the value of the abstract, that immateriality more enduring than things for all that is untouchable and unimaginable, that immateriality which mind seeks out in the very heart of things. But why this incurable nominalism? The reason is that while having a taste for the real indeed, they nevertheless have no sense of being. Being as such, loosed from the matter in which it is incorporated, being, with its

> pure objective necessities and its laws that prove no burden, its restraints which do not bind, its invisible evidence, is for them only a word.[217]

As Maritian says, the error arises not from blind ignorance or malice, but from a misunderstanding of the nature of abstraction and being. Faced with the difficulty of bridging the mind and things, the immaterial and the material, nominalist or representational philosophy seeks in the intermediary object of the idea a replacement or substitute for external objects. The mistaken assumption is that the mode of existence of the mind can have no direct relation to the mode of existence of matter, because, as we saw in Chapter 5, material and formal likenesses are confused. Consequently, the remarkable process of intellectual abstraction is overlooked, where the mind, through its active power, can universally apprehend the forms of particular, material things according to its own mode of immaterial existence.

As Sheen says, "the presumption at the bottom of these and similar critiques is that the concept does not reveal reality, but merely gives a substitute for it."[218] Once the separation of thinking and being has taken place, and the inevitable progression from skepticism, via subjectivism, to relativism has occurred, the very order and meaning of reality is inexorably altered. It is possible to distinguish a four-fold development of interrelated crises of philosophy, where each follows from the other:

A crisis of *knowing* occurs when knowing and being are separated from one another through the treatment of ideas as objects of awareness. Skepticism negates the proper role of the intellect.

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[217] Maritain, Jacques (trans. Gerald B. Phelan), *The Degrees of Knowledge*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, Chapter 1, p. 1.
[218] Sheen, *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*, Chapter 8, p. 118.

A crisis of *being* occurs when, because knowing and being have been separated, the mind is now closed to an intentionality toward things. Subjectivism negates the proper measure of being.

A crisis of *ethics* occurs when, because being is beyond the realm of subjective awareness, normative standards of the good as grounded in the nature of things themselves is lost. Relativism negates the possibility of objective morality.

A crisis of *transcendence* occurs when, because the mind is closed to anything beyond its own apprehension, there is no longer a possibility of an absolute existing outside of the self. Egoism negates an openness to God.

While this last point expands the question at hand into the realm of theology, it is important that such a connection be made. Sheen argues that when truth is no longer measured by things, but by the intellect alone, a reversal takes place whereby the mind takes on characteristics of the absolute, and seeks to make itself divine. In the realist mode of the perennial philosophy, Reid says:

1. The Divine Intellect is a measure, not a thing measured.
2. Natural things are both a measure and a thing measured.
3. The human intellect is a thing measured, not a measure.

> These three principles are at the basis of common-sense philosophy, and their proof, as we have shown, is ultimately reducible to the principle of contradiction. Not only philosophy but even religion itself reposes on these principles, for they determine the relations of God and man. To

> change them is to change the whole fabric of our thought and to substitute a series of relations which perverts the real order of things.[219]

It is surely no accident that realism is so often linked to both a natural law theory of ethics, which grounds morality in the objective nature of creatures, and theism, which argues from the principles of causality to the existence of a perfect being. These concurrences are not merely the result of cultural habits, but of the very real connection between our views on the role of the intellect and where we find measures of ultimate meaning and value. What all realists, of whatever school or persuasion, share in common is a inherent openness to the being of things, and therefore to grasping the mind as relative to and measured by its proper objective content.

Indeed, if realism is to be a viable option to the prevalent representationalism and idealism of contemporary thought, then its appeal must be universal, and not limited to discipleship in any one movement or school. While idealism, grounded upon intramental perceptions, will be as varied and fractured as the number of possible models it proposes, realism, by definition, however distinct in its modes of expression, must share a common measure or standard, the existence and nature of a world of things in which all minds participate in the same way. This is the world intentional world of being "outside" the soul that Aquinas directs us toward, or the down-to-earth common sense that Reid embraces, the "broad daylight of the brotherhood of men," in Chesterton's words. If it is how things truly are that matters, and not just how we choose to look at them, then realism is a philosophy of shared experience, and idealism a philosophy of divided opinions.

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[219] Sheen, *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*, Chapter 13, p. 244.

Aquinas and Reid have already shown us how two philosophers, from different backgrounds and addressing different situations, come to remarkably similar conclusions. Even their wildly different attitudes, preferences and use of language fall away in the face of this unity. At the heart of this unity lie the shared principles that:

- Knowledge involves a direct apprehension of things themselves. (Chapters 2-3)
- Ideas are not themselves objects or intermediaries, but the active means by which the intellect understands. (Chapter 4)
- The relationship between the mind and its object is not one of a material likeness, but of a formal likeness. (Chapter 5)
- The existence of external objects of knowledge is not demonstrable, but is a self-evident first principle. (Chapter 6)

So that we are not under the illusion that realism is only specific to the scholasticism of Aquinas or the common-sense philosophy of Reid, it is worth noting how this common thread can be found in philosophies from other backgrounds. While an exhaustive study of the rich and varied history of realism is a project unto itself, a brief presentation of one further instance of realist principles at work can help to confirm and triangulate, so to speak, their universal application. It is in this sense that realism becomes genuinely *common*.

Despite its character as a distinctly post-modern philosophy, contemporary phenomenology can have much to share with the classical realism of Aquinas and Reid. While certain movements in phenomenology have more in common with the

subjectivism of the existentialist movement, and classical realists might raise objections to the *epoché*, or bracketing of the question of the existence of things themselves, the central tenet of intentionality, as the claim that every act of consciousness is directed toward an object, is in agreement with the philosophy of Aquinas and Reid. In particular, the recent writings of Robert Sokolowski, drawing from the influence of Edmund Husserl, reveal the vitality and shared principles of a common realism that transcends any historical context. Sokolowski writes that

> If we are bereft of intentionality, if we do not have a world in common, then we do not enter into a life of reason, evidence, and truth. Each of us turns to his own private world, and in the practical order we do our own thing: the truth does not make any demands on us. Again, we know that this relativism cannot be the final story. We do argue with one another about what ought to be done and about what the facts are, but philosophically and culturally we find it difficult to ratify our naïve acceptance of a common world and our ability to discover and communicate what it is. The denial of intentionality has as its correlate the denial of the mind's orientation toward truth.[220]

Such convictions are in complete agreement with the thought of Aquinas and Reid, for like them, Sokolowski recognizes that the reification of thought through a denial of intentionality must inevitably lead to subjectivism and relativism. Furthermore, he similarly argues that while the reality of life must take objective measures for granted, it is in the realms of philosophy and culture that difficulties arise. While our experience

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[220] Sokolowski, Robert, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 10.

tells us that we live in a world, inhabited by others who share with us common objects of awareness, philosophical reflection can lead us astray from this necessary fact. A return to intentionality is a return to an openness toward reason and truth.

In discussing the structure of language and its relation to the formation of concepts, Sokolowski further mirrors the principles of a common realism. Building upon the work of linguist Ferdinand De Saussure, Sokolowski claims that, in both linguistics and philosophy, there is a tendency to "subtantialize both concepts and the mind."[221] Accordingly, he argues against what he calls a conceptual model of language, where the three elements present in speech are said to be a) a speaker, b) the phonemic dimension, or word, and c) the "mental thing called a concept."[222] In contrast Sokolowski argues in favor of a model not based on the concept as the object, but upon the thing itself; here the necessary elements of language would be a) a speaker, b) the sound or phonemic dimension of the word, c) the "thing being named or referred to through the use of the word,"[223] and d) a hearer who listens to and understand the meaning of the word.

The parallel to the realism of Aquinas and Reid is immediately apparent. Whereas a model centered on the concept as an object, and a word as a signification of that concept, removes any intentionality towards things, Sokolowski's model directly binds the word to the thing, and removes the concept entirely. The concept, we are told, is rather more like a "transcendental mirage" which appears "not when we look at

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[221] Sokolwski, Robert, Exorcising Concepts," *Review of Metaphysics*, 40, March 1987, p. 451.
[222] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 453.
[223] Ibid.

objects, but when we try to talk about words and thinking."[224] Furthermore, Sokolowski adds the listener as a necessary element of language, such that language is not merely the expression of a speaker, but must always be understood as being shared in common with others. The word, spoken by the speaker and heard by the listener, leads to the thing intended becoming "the target of attention, i.e. through the voicing the thing is made present, presented by speech."[225]

A properly intentional model of language, therefore, has "no need to appeal to a concept or ideas as a mental entity." Rather we might speak of the formal aspect of thing present to awareness as something "layered" onto the thing,[226] "a new slant, not a new thing, is that is added."[227] This notion of a "layering" or slant" has much in common with Aquinas' argument that the intelligible species are not things themselves, but the form of the action of knowing itself, and Reid's claim that "having an idea" can mean nothing more than the act of apprehension or conception. The species, idea or concept is not a thing itself, but the *manner* in which the mind is aware of it, and awareness does not duplicate the thing or statically represent it, but instead the thing itself is simply actively made present.

In summarizing his position, Sokolowski explains the words and things should be properly joined, and suggests that this sense of language has much in common with the experience of primitive cultures, where words have an immediate and intimate connection to the things signified. Indeed, if a word in the primitive sense is said to

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[224] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 454.
[225] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 455.
[226] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 455.
[227] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 456.

contain the "soul" of the thing, this sounds remarkably like the Thomist position that knowing is the reception of the form, the very identity, of what is known. Whether such views are primitive or modern, however, Reid would surely tell us that such a view is nothing more than an expression of common sense. As Sokolowski says,

> My interpretation brings words and things more closely together (there is no concept mediating between them). My interpretation of meaning seems to paste meaning right on the thing that is meant, instead of locating it in the mind or the psyche. My interpretations almost seems to go back to the kind of identification of word and thing that is said to be typical of primitive cultures, in which the name of something or someone is thought to contain the "soul" of what is named. But there may something to this primitive understanding. We in our sophistication have psychologized the use of words. In a Lockean spirit we have allowed words to range only over the domain of our ideas, and we have tacitly taken ideas to be some sort of internal things.[228]

When Hume says that "there is nothing that produces any impression, nor consequently can suggest any idea, of the power of necessary connection,"[229] and thereby denies the intelligibility of things, this is, as Sokolowski says, an outgrowth of Locke's definition of the idea as "nothing but the immediate object of the mind in thinking."[230] The solution to this dilemma is perfectly contained in Sokolowski's words, which could just as well be the words of Aquinas or Reid:

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[228] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 456.
[229] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 7, p. 52.
[230] Locke, John (ed. P.H. Nidditch), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, I.i.8, p. 47.

> An idea is not an internal entity and in an important sense it is really not other to the thing of which it is the idea. An idea is a thing presented and understood. Only the slant of being taken as presented or as understood needs to be 'added' to a thing to give us the idea of that thing.[231]

Like his follower Sokolowski, Husserl, in his critique of psychologism, skepticism and relativism, discerned not only the internal contradictions of an idealist model, but was also distinctly aware of the consequences for philosophy if consciousness was closed to the intentional objects of things themselves. His words on the matter can offer both a final insight on the effect of idealism on contemporary culture and the hope that a common realism, of whatever school or tradition, can serve as a means of renewal:

> Skepticism about the possibility of metaphysics, the collapse of the belief in a universal philosophy as the guide for the new man, actually represents a collapse of the belief in "reason," as the ancients opposed *episteme* to *doxa*.[232]

Genuine knowledge, as the awareness of universal and necessary principles of things, gives way to mere opinion, as the subjective assertion of belief, when an openness to being is removed. If only the internal states of the mind are considered, metaphysics collapses, and with it the possibility of a shared measure and standard of meaning and value. For all of its discovery and brilliance, the thrust of modernity and post-modernity far too easily falls prey to this limitation:

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[231] Sokolowski, "Exorcising Concepts," p. 456.
[232] Husserl, Edmund (trans. David Carr), *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomelolgy*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, Part 1.2, p. 12.

> Only an understanding from within of the movement of modern philosophy from Descartes to the present, which is coherent despite all its contradictions, makes possible an understanding of the present itself. The true struggles of our time, the only ones which are significant, are struggles between humanity which has already collapsed and humanity which still has roots but is struggling to keep them or find new ones. The genuine spiritual struggles of European humanity as such take the form of struggles between the philosophies—or nonphilosophies, which retain the word but not the task—and the actual and still vital philosophies. But the vitality of the latter consists in the fact that they are struggling for their own true and genuine meaning and thus for the meaning of a genuine humanity.[233]

It is the genuine hope of the realist that philosophy, as the love of wisdom, should be grounded in the truth, and that truth should be understood as the conformity of thought to things. This requires that the mind be directly open to being insofar as ideas are not viewed as objects, but rather as the active means by which the formal identity of things is made present. Furthermore, it requires that we not seek to demonstrate the existence of things through a critical method, since the content of awareness is just as self-evident as the presence of the agent, and that the relation of knower and known is one of a formal, and not a material, likeness.

Aquinas and Reid, as well as realists of any and all persuasions, whether old or new, embrace these common principles. They recognize that ideas are not a replacement, substitute or stand-in for the real thing; in this they share with all men of common sense

[233] Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, Part 1.2, pp. 14-15.

the realization that eggs, whether scrambled, poached, dreamt about or squinted at, are, in the end, eggs.

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