

## *Thomas Reid on Consciousness and Attention*

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### **I Introduction**

It was common enough in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to find philosophers holding the position that for something to be 'in the mind' and for that mind to be conscious of it are one and the same thing. The thought is that consciousness is a relation between a mind and a mental entity playing the same role as the relation of inherence found between a substance and qualities belonging to it. What it is, on this view, for something to 'inhere' in the mind is for that mind to be conscious of it. Locke was explicit in his acceptance of such a claim, writing, for instance,

[T]o be in the Mind, and, never to be perceived, is all one, as to say, any thing is, and is not, in the Mind.<sup>1</sup>

The implication here is that it is a flat contradiction to assert that something is in the mind and 'unperceived' where a mind 'perceives' some-

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1 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Nidditch, P. H. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, I.ii.5.

thing, in this context, just in case it is conscious of it. On this issue, as on many others, Locke's position was accepted almost verbatim by the most influential Anglophone philosophers of the century that followed, including even those, such as Thomas Reid, who opposed many of the tenets of Locke's philosophy of mind.

If it follows from this analysis of the notion of presence in the mind that anything that is in a person's mind is something the nature and qualities of which he is in position to understand and accurately describe, then the position would be quite obviously mistaken; there's an awful lot going on in there about which we know nothing or about which we are positively wrong. But probably no philosopher of the period, and certainly not Locke, accepted this implication. Much more common was the view that there are things of which we are conscious about which we understand very little and can articulate even less. It is one thing for a substance to have a quality, and quite another for that substance to know what quality it has; correlatively, it is one thing for a mind to be conscious of something — for that thing to inhere in the mind — and quite another for it to understand the nature of that of which it is conscious. Rather, to know anything about the objects of consciousness<sup>2</sup> we need not just to be aware of them — after all, since consciousness is a form of awareness, one is *ipso facto* aware of any object of consciousness — but to have another, superior, form of awareness of them. We need to make them objects of 'attention,' or 'reflection' or 'contemplation' and not merely objects of consciousness. This, then, raises a question: What is it about this superior form of awareness that provides us with knowledge about them? And how does this superior form of awareness differ from consciousness? Thomas Reid made more progress on these questions than most philosophers of the period. This paper aims to articulate his contribution by explaining what the difference is, for Reid, between attending to an object of consciousness and merely being conscious of it.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, Reid's conception of

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2 I use the term 'object of consciousness' to mean that thing, whatever it is, that is attended by consciousness and is, thereby, 'in the mind.' There is, of course, a difference between ascribing consciousness to a creature and ascribing it to a mental state. For our purposes here, the only kind of consciousness is creature consciousness — awareness on the part of some creature of some state of its mind. Talk of states of consciousness — of 'conscious mental states,' for instance — should be understood to be equivalent to talk of a mind being conscious of one of its mental states.

3 References to 'EIP' are by essay and chapter to Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek Brookes, Penn State Press, 2002. References to 'EAP' are by essay and chapter to Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, ed. B. Brody, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969. References to 'INQ' are by chapter and section

attention provides him with a tool for defending the methodology of introspective psychology to which he, and many of his contemporaries, was wedded. Because of what attention is, we have reason to trust that the deliverances of introspection are often telling us the truth about the nature of our minds.

Section II explains the importance to Reid of the distinction between attention and consciousness. That distinction plays an important role in his case against the theory of sensory perception (he takes to be) advocated by many of his predecessors and in his case for his own alternative theory. What emerges in section II is a challenge to his employment of the distinction: it can seem that he is not entitled to reach the results that he reaches, since it seems perfectly possible for the objects of attention to be different when they are attended to than when they are not. This challenge is clearly articulable in connection to Reid's striking treatment of binocular vision, which is discussed at some length in section II. In section III, the challenge is met through an account of what Reid takes attention to be, and of how he takes it to differ from consciousness. It is an implication of that account that Reid is justified in reaching the conclusions that he reaches with respect to binocular vision and, by extension, with respect to those results that he takes to favor his theory of sensory perception over its competitor.

## II

Reid's theory of sensory perception is well-known.<sup>4</sup> It is developed in opposition to the 'theory of ideas,' the representationalist theory advocated most clearly by Locke (although Reid claims the view to have been held by all philosophers from Plato to Hume<sup>5</sup>). According to the theory of ideas, perception of a quality of an object takes place through apprehension of a mental entity — an idea — that represents the object as possessing the quality. All of the content of our ideas, on the empiricist's version of the theory, is derived directly or indirectly from sen-

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to Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek Brookes, Penn State Press, 1997.

4 There are many discussions in the secondary literature. For a start, see Timothy J. Duggan, 'Thomas Reid's Theory Of Sensation' in *Philosophical Review*, 69, 1960, pp. 90-100; Keith De Rose, 'Reid's Anti-Sensationalism and His Realism' in *Philosophical Review*, 98, 1989, pp. 313-348; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

5 See, for instance, EIP II.7-13.

sory experience. Sensory experiences, then, deliver mental images of objects, and our apprehension of those images is what thoughts about those objects are. On the realist version of the theory, when our sense organs are delivering an image of an object and, at the same time, we are apprehending that image, then we have a sensory perception of the object; when the image is present and the object absent, we are merely thinking about the object.

By contrast, Reid holds that to perceive a quality of an object is to bear a relation of awareness to that quality itself — a relation Reid calls ‘conception’ — that one comes to bear as a result of having a sensory experience caused by the quality.<sup>6</sup> The sensory experience, however, merely prompts one to be aware of the object’s quality; healthy human beings are so constituted that on having certain sensory experiences, they come to be directly aware of certain qualities of objects despite the fact that the qualities bear no resemblance to the sensations they cause, and despite the fact that the conjunction of sensation and quality-thought-about is purely contingent and defeasible. Although when one presses on the details, Reid’s view can seem either to collapse into the theory of ideas (is the role of sensation in the theory really different from the role of idea in the theory of ideas?<sup>7</sup>) or just to collapse (is there any adequate explanation available for, for instance, sensory illusion under Reid’s theory?<sup>8</sup>), there’s no denying its initial, and even its lasting appeal. If the view can be defended against objections, who wouldn’t want to accept it? Under it, after all, we do just what we think we do: we directly perceive objects; we aren’t stuck behind a veil.

Part of what motivates Reid to reject the theory of ideas and to offer his alternative conception of sensory perception (if it is, indeed, an alternative) is his conviction that the theory of ideas leads, inevitably, either to external world skepticism or to an equally absurd alternative: idealism. However, this is only part of his motivation. He is also prompted by the results he reaches through a variety of introspective experiments. In each experiment, Reid asks his reader to attend to something

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6 Reid is persnickety about the term ‘cause.’ Strictly speaking the term ‘cause’ is to be reserved for minds that have the power to bring about an effect and exert that power. In this sense, no quality of an object is ever the cause of anything. However, Reid also allows the term ‘cause’ to be used to refer to that which stands in an appropriate law-like relation to some effect. It is in this sense — the sense more familiar to us — that I will be using the term.

7 For discussion of this worry, see Vere Chappell, ‘The Theory of Sensations’ in *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, M. Dalgarno and E. Matthews (eds.), Dordrecht:Kluwer, 1989, pp. 49-63.

8 Reid tries to meet this challenge at EIP II.21-22.

of which he is conscious and to which he does not ordinarily attend. He then claims that when one does so one discovers something rather unexpected about the objects of consciousness; he then asserts that the result is best explained by rejecting the theory of ideas and by accepting his alternative account of sensory perception instead. His method, then, is that of an empirical psychologist (albeit with only one subject, namely himself). He claims that psychological experiments conducted on oneself reveal contingent facts that are explained better by his theory of sensory perception than by any version of representationalism.

For instance, Reid writes,

There is, no doubt, a sensation by which we perceive a hard body to be hard or soft. This sensation of hardness may easily be had, by pressing one's hand against the table, and attending to the feeling that ensues, setting aside, as much as possible, all thought of the table and its qualities, or of any external thing. But it is one thing to have the sensation, and another to attend to it, and make it a distinct object of reflection. The first is very easy; the last, in most cases, extremely difficult. (INQ 5.2, 55-6)

To 'have the sensation' is for it to be something of which one is conscious. But to attend to the sensation is something else. Most of the time, Reid thinks, we have the sensation without attending to it; we attend, instead, to the qualities of the object that cause the sensation. Further, until we attend to the sensation, and perhaps even after, we are apt to attribute the qualities of *the sensation*, the qualities of which we are conscious, to the object that the sensation informs us about, and vice versa. This mistake is enshrined in our using terms to describe a sensation that properly speaking pick out qualities of the object; we say, 'it feels smooth,' for instance. In what follows in the text, Reid uses these claims to reach two conclusions: first, those qualities of which one is aware as a result of the sensory experience of pressing one's hand to an object are nothing like the sensory experience itself, and, second, there is no 'rational' or necessary connection between the sensation and the quality we are convinced is possessed by the object on having the sensation. Thus it seems that the thing that one finds in one's head when attending to the sensation is not the sort of thing that could play the role given to ideas in the theory of ideas; it's not the sort of thing that is fitted to bridge a gap between mind and object of the sort that the theory of ideas takes to be present. This paves the way for Reid's alternative view of sensory perception.

Even if we think it a bit rash of Reid to reach such strong anti-representationalist conclusions on the basis of this experiment, we might be attracted, as I think we should be, to two claims about the relationship between consciousness and attention that underlie the experiment and others of its kind, namely (1) it is possible to be conscious of something

to which you do not attend, and (2) by attending to something of which you are conscious you can discover what properties it possessed before and after you attended to it. If the experiment of pressing one's hand against a table and attending to the sensation while not attending to the qualities of the table is to tell us anything of interest about the sensation, it must tell us something about what the sensation is like *before and after* we attended to it. Otherwise, Reid is only entitled, at best, to the very weak conclusion that the thing one notices *when one attends* is not fitted to bridge the mind-object gap in the way ideas are supposed to. If this were all he had the right to claim based on the experiment, we might conclude that for all we know the mental object encountered in conscious experience when we are not attending to it has all the qualities that the theory of ideas requires. What he wants is the much more interesting conclusion that the sensation is not fitted to bridge the mind-object gap *whether or not one attends to it*. Whether or not Reid is entitled to think his experiment favors his own theory of perception over the theory of ideas is one thing — perhaps we will instead reach the conclusion that, when we attend to the sensation, we find that it is, indeed, *an idea* in the sense that the theory of ideas requires. But the thought that attention to the sensation can tell us about the qualities possessed by the sensation *even when we're not attending to it* seems to be something we would not want to reject, no matter what we think of the theory of ideas or of Reid's alternative conception of sensory perception. Attention to the creatures of the mind — those things whose very existence consists in our being conscious of them — can tell us what those creatures are like. This, anyway, is an appealing thought.

At least, the thought seems appealing until one looks at the full range of things that Reid concludes about the creatures of the mind through employing the method of attention. Consider another one of Reid's experiments, one of his favorites, which he describes in one place like so:

[Y]ou may find a man that can say with a good conscience, that he never saw things double all his life; yet this very man, put...with his finger between him and [a] candle [ten feet away], and desired to attend to the appearance of the object which he does not look at, will, upon the first trial, see the candle double, when he looks at his finger; and his finger double, when he looks at the candle. Does he now see otherwise than he saw before? No, surely; but he now attends to what he never attended to before. The same double appearance of an object hath been a thousand times presented to his eye before now; but he did not attend to it; and so it is as little an object of reflection and memory, as if it had never happened. (INQ 6.13, 134)

In the tactile case, our attention is ordinarily drawn to the qualities of the object we touch. However, Reid thinks that we can direct our attention, instead, to the sensation that we have on touching it; that's what the tactile experiment asks us to do. In the visual case, our attention is ordinarily drawn to (the visual image of) the object at which our eyes

are pointed, but with a bit of effort we can direct our attention, instead, to (a visual image of) a different object in our visual field.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, by redirecting our attention to an object not ordinarily attended to we learn something striking, Reid thinks, about that object: in the one case, we learn that it's nothing like the object touched; in the other, we learn that it's double. And, importantly, in both cases we learn about what the object we attend to is like even when it is not being attended to. Thus it seems that if Reid's conclusion in the double-vision case can be defended, then the conclusion he reaches in the tactile case is on better ground, and so too is his theory of sensory perception. But can his conclusion in the double vision case be defended?<sup>10</sup> To be sure, when I look at the candle and attend to my finger I find that there are two images of my finger. But when I look at the candle *and attend to the candle* I cannot say with confidence that my visual image *of my finger* is double. It seems, instead, that at best the finger looks blurry, or vague, or something like that. Perhaps its image is triple or quadruple, or perhaps the boundaries of its image are simply fuzzy. Without attending to the image of the finger I'm not in a position confidently to assert anything about it, much less that it's double. What reason is there to believe that attending to the image of my finger, while looking at the candle, doesn't actually alter the visual image of the finger?

It's important to see that Reid admits, in a different context, that directing attention towards an object of consciousness can alter it. He writes,

[W]hen the mind is agitated by any passion, as soon as we turn our attention from the object to the passion itself, the passion subsides or vanishes, and by that means escapes our enquiry. This, indeed, is common to almost every operation of mind: When it is exerted, we are conscious of it; but then we do not attend to the operation, but to its object. When the mind is drawn off from the object to attend to its own operation, that operation ceases, and escapes our notice. (EIP I.6, 61)

9 There's a question as to whether Reid would allow there to be things like 'visual images.' He is likely to oppose such talk, opting, instead, to talk of the appearance properties of the thing itself. So understood, there is no double image of the candle in one's mind when one is looking at the finger; rather, one encounters a particular property of the candle: the property of appearing double. I don't intend to be taking any stand on the question of whether or not Reid would allow there to be visual images here. Rather, all talk of visual images should be translatable into (the much more awkward) talk of appearance properties.

10 There is a small but useful secondary literature on Reid's discussion of the double vision experiment and the problem about attention raised here. See Richard Taylor and Timothy Duggan, 'On Seeing Double' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 8, 1958, pp. 171-4; David Carl Blumenfeld, 'On Not Seeing Double' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 9, 1959, pp. 264-266.

Reid never explicitly says why passions (not to mention ‘almost all operations of mind’) should be different from tactile sensations and visual images. Why not admit the possibility, at least, that turning one’s attention towards one’s sensations alters them in much the way that turning one’s attention towards one’s emotional states alters them? The point here, however, is not to suggest that Reid is inconsistent (although he may be). The point, instead, is that we have a further desideratum against which to test a solution, of the sort to be offered in section III, to the problem just posed: if a solution would have the implication that passions do not ‘escape our enquiry’ when attention is turned towards them, then it is an inadequate solution. As we’ll see, the solution to be offered in section III does not have this implication; on the contrary, when we understand fully what Reid takes attention to be, and couple it with some appealing claims about the nature of many emotions, it is no surprise that turning one’s attention towards one’s emotional state extinguishes that emotional state even though attending to a sensation does not alter it.

Notice that the challenge posed — give reasons for thinking that attending to the objects of consciousness does not alter them — is particularly difficult to meet if one thinks of presence in the mind, inherence in the mind, as constituted by awareness. If what is in the mind *is* just what one is aware of being in the mind, then there’s every reason to think that by altering one’s experience of being aware — as one does when shifting one’s attention to, for instance, the finger while continuing to point one’s eyes at the candle — one thereby alters what is in one’s mind. A person who turns her head alters what she is conscious of and thereby alters what’s in her mind. Why should turning one’s head have this effect, but not turning one’s attention?

There’s a quick solution to the challenge that deserves consideration. We might think that Reid holds that the properties of a sensation strongly supervene on the properties of the physical sense organs that give rise to the sensation. If so, then we might say that since attending to the tactile sensation does not alter the state of the hand, and since attending to the visual image of the finger does not alter the state of either retina, there is no reason to think that the sensory states springing from the pressure on the hand or the stimulation of the retinas alters when attended to. Notice that if this were Reid’s approach, then he wouldn’t need to actually perform the double-vision experiment in order to reach the conclusion that he wants (namely that people see double all the time, even though they don’t notice that they do). He could simply note that when one’s optic axes are pointed at the candle, regardless of what one attends to, the finger stimulates points on the two retinas that are not similarly positioned; the two retinas are stimulated asymmetrically by the light emanating from the finger. Add to this

the claim that seen position is a function of the position on the retina of the stimulated points — something which can be discovered just by correlating seen position with retinal stimulation in a single eye — and we reach the conclusion Reid wants. We wouldn't need to do the work that the experiment specifies; even if we wanted to empirically verify the result we could do so by empirically verifying the premises from which it is derivable. There's very good evidence, however, to suggest that Reid himself did not follow this alternative procedure. There is evidence, that is, that far from concluding that there's double vision from the fact that there's asymmetrical retinal stimulation, Reid concluded that there's asymmetrical retinal stimulation from discovering, through careful attention, that there's double vision. The best evidence for this claim comes from recognizing a mistake that Reid makes when running a different experiment about binocular vision, a mistake that he would make — in fact that's very natural to make — only if he were using attention to his sensations as his guide, rather than reasoning from his knowledge of the state of his sense organs to conclusions about the content of his conscious experience.

Here's the experiment:

[O]bjects at the same distance from the eyes as that to which their axes are directed, do also appear single. Thus, if I direct my eyes to a candle placed at the distance of ten feet; and, while I look at this candle, another stands at the same distance from my eyes, within the field of vision; I can, while I look at the first candle, attend to the appearance which the second makes to the eye; and I find that in this case it always appears single. (INQ 6.13, 133)

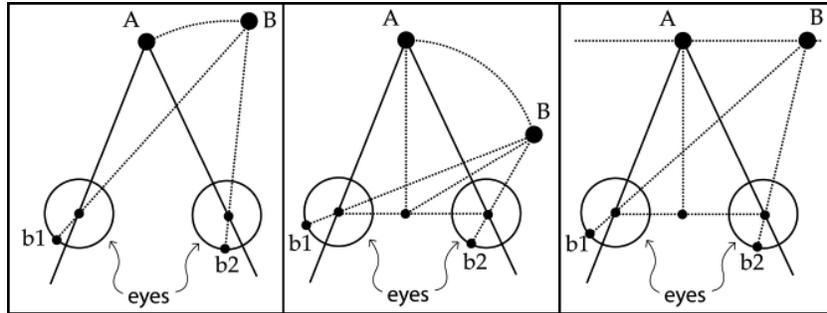
Reid draws the following moral from this experiment: 'every point in one *retina* corresponds with that which is similarly situate in the other' (INQ 6.13, 133). The term 'corresponds' here is used in a technical sense: a point on the left retina and a point on the right 'correspond' if an object that stimulates both is seen singly. So, Reid is drawing the conclusion that objects that stimulate points on the two retinas that are located in the same place relative to the centers of the two retinas ('similarly situate') are seen singly. Supposedly, he reaches this conclusion by first determining through careful attention which objects are seen singly while focussing on the candle. He then notes their locations, plots the points on the retinas that they stimulate and discovers that the points are 'similarly situated.' It's extraordinarily difficult to do this, as anyone who tries will discover. It is hard enough to pronounce as to the single-ness or double-ness of an object that one is attending to without looking at it; it is doubly difficult to tell if single appearances become double when the object is moved short distances further or closer to the eyes. If one is looking at a candle 10 feet away, does a candle that one is not looking at, but is located, say, 10 and a half feet away appear

double or single? Are the only single appearances those that are located exactly 10 feet away? Although I'm no expert at the art of attending to my visual field, I wouldn't say with confidence that objects farther away and closer to me than those at which I look don't appear singly when I attend to them.

Nonetheless, there's good reason to think that Reid attempted to accomplish this difficult task. The reason is that Reid is mistaken in his contention that all those objects that are the same distance from his eyes as the candle at which he looks stimulate similarly situated points on his retinas. Reid is asserting that when one attends carefully one discovers that some objects other than those lying at the intersection of the axes of the two eyes are seen singly. But where are these objects, according to Reid? He claims that the candle standing at 'the same distance from [his] eyes' as the one at which he looks, appears single when attended to. However, it is not entirely clear where one is to position the second candle so as to test Reid's claim. Here are three possibilities: (1) the second candle should be placed 10 feet from the right eye, and at any distance one likes from the left (or vice versa); (2) the second candle should be placed 10 feet from the bridge of the nose (that is, the midpoint between the two eyes); (3) the second candle should be placed on any point on a line 10 feet from the line connecting the two eyes and parallel to it. In fact, were it the case that the second candle placed in any of these three locations were seen singly when attended to, the conclusion Reid hopes to establish would not be supported. In all three cases, the points on the two retinas that are stimulated by the second candle are not situated in the same place with respect to the centers of the two retinas. These claims are illustrated in Figure 1: In the left panel, point B is the same distance from the right eye as point A (they both lie on a circle whose center is the center of the right eye), but the retinal points it stimulates, b1 and b2, are not similarly situated; b1 is much closer to the left eye's axis than b2 is to the right's. In the middle panel, point B is the same distance from the midpoint between the two eyes as point A (they both lie on a circle centered at the midpoint between the two eyes), but the retinal points it stimulates, b1 and b2, are not similarly situated; again, b1 is closer to the left eye's axis than b2 is to the right's. And in the right panel, point B lies on a line parallel to the line connecting the two eyes, and passing through point A but, again, b1 and b2 are not similarly situated.<sup>11</sup>

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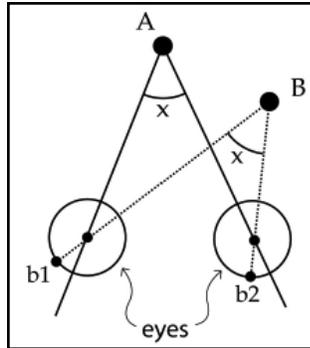
<sup>11</sup> For a proof, see the next footnote.



**Figure 1.** The retinal points stimulated by point B, b1 and b2, are not similarly situated in any of these three cases.

In fact, whether Reid knew it or not, a point will stimulate similarly situated retinal points only if lines drawn from the centers of the eyes to it make an angle equal to the angle made by the optic axes. (This is illustrated in Figure 2.) However, when this is the case, the point *never* lies at exactly the same distance from the eyes (in any of the senses represented in Figure 1) as the point at which one looks. In Figure 2, point B is not the same distance from either eye, nor from the midpoint between them, nor from the line connecting them, as point A, the point at which the person looks. However, eyes are close together, and in Reid's experiment, the candles are a relatively large distance away. When these two conditions are met, the angle of the optic axes is very close to the angle made by points that are the same distance from the eyes as the object at which the subject looks (in all three senses of 'distance from the eyes'). What this implies is that someone trying to attend to the singleness and doubleness of visual images other than that at which he looks would be very likely to reach the geometrically mistaken conclusion that Reid reaches, whichever of the three view represented in Figure 1 he had in mind. By contrast, and this is the important point for our purposes, had Reid assumed that similar retinal stimulation would result in single vision, he would have reached a different conclusion from the one which he takes his experiment to support, for a bit of geometry teaches that points the same distance from the eyes as the point at which the subject looks do not stimulate similarly situated retinal points.<sup>12</sup>

12 Here's a rough proof. Referring to Figure 2, let the center of the left eye be called point 'C' and the center of the right 'D.' Let the point of intersection of lines AD and BC be point 'E.' Points b1 and b2 are similarly situated *if and only if* Angle



**Figure 2.**  
The retinal points stimulated by point B, b1 and b2, are similarly situated.

The moral is that Reid is not making any assumption to the effect that shifts of attention have no effect on retinal stimulation (or on the impression of an object on the hand, as in the tactile case). Imagine that it were shown that shifts in attention alter retinal stimulation for some reason — perhaps when one shifts attention one strains the muscles of the eye, distorting the lens, and thus distorting the path of light to the retina. By holding fast to the results of his experiment, and by accepting, also, that attention can tell us the nature of the objects of consciousness before and after they are attended to, Reid would be committed simply to denying, in this case, that the visual experience one has is determined solely by retinal stimulation. With respect to the experiment revealing, purportedly, that we all see double all the time, Reid would reason like this: Since (by hypothesis) different retinal points are stimulated by the finger when one attends to the candle than are stimulated by the finger when one attends to the finger, and since we see that the finger is double when we attend to it, it follows that the stimulation of different retinal points gives rise to the same experience of double vision on different occasions. He would be committed to saying, that is, that retinal points that correspond (in his technical sense of the term) when one is attending differ from retinal points that correspond when one is not. For Reid, the psychological guides our hypotheses about the physiological, and not vice versa. He is, thus, deeply committed to the

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$ACB = \text{Angle } ADB$ . But  $\text{Angle } ACB = \text{Angle } ADB$  if and only if  $\text{Angle } CAD = \text{Angle } CBD$ . Why?  $ACB + CAD + AEC = 180 = ADB + CBD + BED$ . Since  $AEC = BED$ , it follows that  $ACB + CAD = ADB + CBD$ . So  $ACB = ADB$  if and only if  $CAD = CBD$ . So points b1 and b2 are similarly situated if and only if  $CAD = CBD$ . Notice that in neither of the two panels in Figure 1 is it the case that  $CAD = CBD$ ; it follows that in neither of those cases are b1 and b2 similarly situated.

idea that attending to our conscious states can tell us what they are like even when not attended to, quite independently of any physiological facts. He cannot defend his methodology for learning about his mind — the method of attending to the objects of consciousness — on the grounds that attention has no effect on the stimulation of our sensory organs.

To summarize the argument just offered: We might think that Reid trusts attention to tell him about the nature of his sensory states because he accepts the following argument:

- (1) Sensory experience supervenes on the state of the sense organs.
- (2) The sense organs are unaffected by changes in attention.
- ∴ Sensory experience is unaffected by changes in attention.

This is what I've called 'the quick solution' to the challenge posed to the method of learning about one's mind through attention. However, were Reid willing to accept premise (1) in this argument, then he would have reasoned like so about single vision:

- (1') The stimulation of similarly situated retinal points gives rise to single vision.
- (2') Geometry tells us that points 'at the same distance from the eyes' as the point at which one's eyes are pointed do not stimulate similarly situated retinal points.
- ∴ Points 'at the same distance from the eyes' as the point at which one's eyes are pointed do not give rise to single vision.

Reid specifically denies the conclusion of this argument, but accepts, or would have accepted, both the premises. What's the explanation for his mistake? The explanation is that he was actually reasoning like so:

- (1'') Points 'at the same distance from the eyes' as the point at which one's eyes are pointed give rise to single vision.
- (2'') These points stimulate similarly situated retinal points.
- ∴ The stimulation of similarly situated retinal points gives rise to single vision.

Both premises (1'') and (2'') are false, but it is very easy to think they are true when one simply attends to one's own experience and when one considers the appearances of objects fairly far away from oneself and fairly close to the object at which one's eyes are pointed. This is what Reid seems to have done, which is why he directs his reader to place the second candle 10 feet from himself and attend to its appearance. What

this shows is that Reid did not employ the stretch of argument using premises (1) and (2). So he did not trust attention as a means to learning about the nature of his mind simply because changes in attention do not bring about changes in one's sense organs.

The challenge, then, is clear: Reid must give reasons for thinking that the objects of consciousness are not altered when attended to. His adherence to the Lockean view that presence in the mind is constituted by being an object of consciousness makes this a difficult challenge to meet. And his further commitment to the methodological priority of the psychological over the physiological — a commitment illustrated by his mistake about which objects in our visual field stimulate similarly situated points on our retinas — bars him from adopting an easy solution to the problem.

### III

Put simply, the solution to the problem is this: attention is not the kind of thing that can possibly alter the objects of consciousness. Of course, making good on this solution requires explaining what attention is, how it differs from consciousness, and why the account of attention has the implication that attending to an object of consciousness cannot alter it.

Start with the notion of consciousness. In various places, Reid suggests that consciousness falls short as a source of knowledge about one's mind. For instance:

Consciousness, being a kind of internal sense, can no more give us distinct accurate notions of the operations of our minds, than the external senses can give of external objects. (EIP VI.1, 421)

[Consciousness] is common to all men at all times, but is insufficient of itself to give us clear and distinct notions of the operations of which we are conscious, and of their mutual relations, and minute distinctions. (EIP VI.5, 472)

In other places, Reid points to consciousness as a source of knowledge of one's own mind:

*Consciousness* is a word used by Philosophers, to signify that immediate knowledge which we have of our present thoughts and purposes, and, in general, of all the present operations of our minds. (EIP I.i, 24)

[B]y consciousness we know certainly the existence of our present thoughts and passions. (EIP I.2, 42)

We have an immediate conception of the operations of our own minds, joined with a belief of their existence; and this we call consciousness. But this is only giving a

name to this source of our knowledge. It is not a discovery of its cause. (EIP II.20, 227)

If there's an appearance of contradiction here, it is easily resolved: consciousness is a source of knowledge about the *present* states of one's mind, but consciousness tells us nothing whatsoever about the state of the mind past or future. As Reid puts the point,

[C]onsciousness is only of things present. To apply consciousness to things past, which is sometimes done in popular discourse, is to confound consciousness with memory. (EIP I.1, 24)

Further, and importantly, in its limited capacity to inform us about the contents of our minds only at the present time, consciousness is a highly limited source of knowledge, for the mind is in constant flux. The problem is that we don't have time to learn very much about the objects of consciousness in the instants in which they are present in the mind. Since the things of which we are conscious are not present for more than an instant, we don't have time to compare them to anything else or examine them with any care; we don't have time to do the sorts of things with them that are necessary if we are to learn something more about them than merely that they exist.

[Consciousness] gives the like immediate knowledge of things in the mind, that is, of our own thoughts and feelings, as the senses give us of things external. There is this difference, however, that an external object may be at rest, and the sense may be employed about it for some time. But the objects of consciousness are never at rest; the stream of thought flows like a river, without stopping a moment; the whole train of thought passes in succession under the eye of consciousness, which is always employed about the present. But is it consciousness that analyses complex operations, distinguishes their different ingredients, and combines them in distinct parcels under general names? This surely is not the work of consciousness, nor can it be performed without reflection, recollecting and judging of what we are conscious of, and distinctly remember. (EIP VI.1, 420-1)

Consciousness is a limited tool for learning about our minds since it connects us to our own minds much as a stick one holds fast in a river connects one to the river; the stick is touching a different bit of water each instant and, similarly, to be conscious of the contents of one's mind is to be aware of a different thing each instant.

It's important to distinguish between two claims that Reid makes that are distinct from one another despite the fact that they sit very comfortably together. The first is the claim that we are conscious only of the present state of our minds; the second is the claim that mental objects — the things of which we are conscious — exist only for an instant. Reid does not take the first claim to entail the second. As he says in the passage just quoted, we don't sense things that are past or

future; the senses, like consciousness, make us aware only of present things. But he thinks that objects sensed are capable of existence for more than an instant. The mere fact, that is, that a particular mental act is confined to presently existing objects does not imply that those objects are incapable of existence for more than an instant. In the passages just quoted, we see Reid asserting the first of these claims and alluding to the second. However, Reid sometimes asserts the second claim quite explicitly. For instance, he writes,

[I]dentity cannot, in its proper sense, be applied to our pains, our pleasure, our thoughts, or any operation of our minds. The pain felt this day is not the same individual pain which I felt yesterday, though they may be similar in kind and degree, and have the same cause. The same may be said of every feeling, and of every operation of the mind: They are all successive in their nature like time itself, no two moments of which can be the same moment. (EIP III.4, 263)

What this implies, and the point will become quite important to the solution to our problem, is that mental states are excluded by their very nature from the possibility of change. For a thing to change it must have one property at one time and another at another. For that to be possible it must exist at two times. But mental states, Reid is claiming, do not exist at multiple times. Each exists at exactly one and only one point in time. It is a further fact that when it exists it is something of which we are conscious. Imagine that I am aware of a feeling of pain at time  $t_1$  and aware of a slightly weaker feeling of pain at time  $t_2$ , one instant later. And imagine that I would refer to the  $t_1$ -pain and the  $t_2$ -pain as though they were identical; I might say, at  $t_2$ , 'My pain isn't as bad as it was an instant ago.' Reid is committed to saying that in that case, despite my manner of speaking, there are two distinct acts of consciousness — a  $t_1$  act and a  $t_2$  act — and two distinct objects of consciousness — a  $t_1$  pain and a  $t_2$  pain.

Both the claim that we are conscious only of what is present and the claim that mental states and objects are incapable of existing for more than an instant contribute to Reid's view that consciousness is a limited tool for learning about our minds. Consider an analogy: say I am sitting staring at a tree for some period of time. The tree exists continuously over the interval, so even if, strictly speaking, I am at each instant only aware of what is present, and not of what is past or future, I can learn a great deal about the tree by staring at it. So, although strictly speaking one senses only what is present, that fact does not pose a severe obstacle to knowledge about the objects of sense, since those objects can exist for a period of time. Now imagine that I am sitting on a moving high-speed train, staring out the window. A tree flashes by. What kind of tree was it? How many branches did it have? Were its leaves changing? If all I had to go on was the sensory perception of the tree as it flashed by, if,

in particular, I couldn't even use my memory as an aid, these questions would be all but impossible to answer. Sense, confined as it is to what is immediately before me, is limited in its ability to yield knowledge in this instance since what is before me is only there for an instant. Trying to learn about the mind from consciousness alone is like trying to learn about the world from sense alone while sitting on a high-speed train. We are aware of only what is present, and what is present is gone the next instant. The obstacle to knowledge through consciousness arises, that is, both from the nature of the act of consciousness and from the nature of the objects of consciousness.

In many places, including some of those quoted above, Reid appeals to what he calls 'reflection' as the tool for overcoming the obstacle to knowing about the mind through consciousness. What is reflection? It is in his answer to this question that attention emerges.

Reflection is a functionally defined mental operation. Reflection is that complex mental operation through which we come to have the kinds of conceptions of things that are required in order to reach conclusions about those things through reasoning. To understand this, first consider the following passage:

[R]eflection is not one power of the mind; it comprehends many; such as recollection, attention, distinguishing, comparing, judging. By these powers our minds are furnished not only with many simple and original notions, but all our notions, which are accurate and well defined, and which alone are the proper materials of reasoning. (EIP III.5, 269)

The sense in which reflection 'comprehends' many powers of the mind is just this: a whole variety of different mental operations must be exercised in different cases in order to come to have 'the proper materials of reasoning.' What makes the exercise of various powers of mind on an object into an act of *reflection* on that object is that it furnishes us with what we need in order to reason to further conclusions about that object. As it happens, various independently defined mental operations can work together to accomplish this goal.

Of course, in some sense of 'reasoning' *anything* we learn about an object provides us with the capacity to do some reasoning about it. What I learn about the tree I pass on the train solely from my sensory experience of it is enough to make it possible for me to reason to conclusions like 'the thing I am passing takes up space,' or 'it grows near the train track,' or other things of that nature that I'm capable of thinking of in the instant that I am sensing the tree. But Reid would not therefore conclude that my sensory perception of the tree counts as an instance of reflection on the tree. So, he must have a narrower construal of reasoning than this. The fact that we can make extremely fast inferences on the basis of our present experience is not enough for that experience

to be one of reflection. Rather, Reid seems to have in mind a narrower conception of 'reasoning' according to which to reason about a thing is to reach conclusions about its nature, or conclusions about what distinguishes it, in the deepest sense, from other things. The thought is that the capacity to reflect on a thing is the capacity to develop the kind of notion of the thing that one would need if one were to make progress on certain hard questions about the thing. This is why Reid speaks of the notions of things gotten through reflection on them as 'accurate and well defined' or in other places 'distinct' (EIP VI.1, 418). He also sometimes says that reflection supplies us with the kind of conception of a thing that is needed in order to 'analyse' (EIP VI.1, 418) or 'define' (EIP III.5, 269) it, rather than merely 'reason' about.

In the end, this conception of reflection may be somewhat muddled. It's difficult to imagine a clear criterion for determining whether inferences one makes about an object, employing one's notion of the object, are of the sort that would qualify the method one used to gain that notion as *reflection* on the object. But for our purposes this doesn't matter. What matters, rather, is the central role that attention plays in reflection. In all of his remarks about reflection, Reid suggests that one cannot reflect on an object without attending to it. Attention, then, is a large part of what helps us, he thinks, to gain the kind of 'accurate,' 'well-defined,' and 'distinct' notions of an object that are needed if we are to 'reason,' 'analyse,' or 'define' something about the object. Why? What is attention providing us that the non-attentive exercise of our mental powers cannot provide?

We get a hint of an answer in the following passage:

A distinct notion of an object, even of sense, is never got in an instant; but the sense performs its office in an instant. Time is not required to see it better, but to analyse it, to distinguish the different parts, and their relation to one another, and to the whole. (EIP VI.1, 418)

The point here is that we cannot get the kind of notion of an object that reflection delivers unless we are aware of the object for some length of time. This, after all, was what consciousness could not provide: since the mind is always changing, and since we are conscious only of what is present, we are never conscious of our mental states for long enough to have the 'distinct notions' of them that we would need in order to gain the kind of knowledge about them that reflection helps us to gain. Perhaps this is what attention remedies. This suggests the following view:

S attends to x *only if* S is aware of x for an extended period of time.

The claim is that being aware of a thing for an extended period is necessary for attending to it, not that it is sufficient. The sufficiency claim would go beyond what is suggested by the passage just quoted, and unnecessarily for our purposes. After all, for attention to remedy the problem Reid points to there — the difficulty of having a distinct notion in an instant — its enough that we don't attend to things for an instant. In addition, pre-theoretically it seems to be possible to be aware of something for an extended period of time without attending to it; if I hold a coin in my left hand and a pen in my right for a few minutes, I'm aware of the coin for those few minutes even if I spend the time attending only to the pen. It follows that one can be aware of something for an extended period without attending to it. Still if the necessity claim is true then it seems that attention might help to remedy the problem that Reid points to, although we need to do more work to see how it does.

To accept that attention necessarily takes place over an extended period of time is to reject what we might call the 'spotlight' conception of attention. According to such a view, to attend to something is analogous to shining a spotlight on it: it is to highlight it in some way which distinguishes it from other things of which one is aware. Under such a position, it seems perfectly possible to attend to something for only an instant; imagine one's visual experience at an instant, but with one section of it under a spotlight. It is a difficult question whether Reid's conception, or the spotlight conception of attention more closely captures our ordinary notion of attention. However, it is clear that if our aim is to overcome the obstacle to knowledge of objects of consciousness which derives both from the fact that those objects are present for only an instant and the fact that consciousness is confined to the present instant, then the kind of attention which is identified by the spotlight conception won't help.

Notice, however, that the claim that attention necessarily takes place over an extended period of time is not enough all by itself to solve the problem posed in the previous section of this paper. Imagine, for instance, that attending is a special kind of awareness that happens always to be awareness of the same object for an extended period of time; imagine, that is, that attending is a distinct mental organ of awareness capable of operating independently of other organs of awareness, such as consciousness. So, when I attend to, say, the visual image of the candle in the distance while looking at my finger, I am doubly aware of that visual image: I'm conscious of it, and I attend to it. This could be true, even if attending to something entails being aware of it for an extended period of time. If it is true, we are without any principled reason for thinking that the objects of consciousness don't change when attended to; perhaps there are objects of consciousness that simply can't be attended to, so that whenever one turns the eye of attention towards

them they hide both from it and from the eye of consciousness to be replaced by something else. Perhaps this is the case with the visual image of the candle present when one is attending not to it, but to the finger at which one stares; perhaps it goes away when one shifts one's attention to be replaced by a double image. However, Reid doesn't think of attention as a special kind of awareness, but, instead, as *a way of being aware*; it's a mode of the very same kind of awareness that is involved in unattentive awareness. Consider the following passage:

We reflect, when we remember, or call to mind what is past, and survey it with attention. We reflect, when we define, when we distinguish, when we judge, when we reason, whether about things material or intellectual. (EIP III.5, 269)

Reid doesn't claim here that one is reflecting when one is attending; rather, one is reflecting when one is being aware of something past (remembering it) 'with attention.' That is, remembering in a particular way, namely attentively, is reflecting. So, attending is not a self-standing, independently exercised form of awareness. A creature that senses things without being conscious is (pre-theoretically) possible; imagine, for instance, a creature who has no form of awareness of its own inner states, although it has awareness of the states of objects that impress themselves upon its sense organs. Similarly, a creature that remembers things without sensing anything is (pre-theoretically) possible. But a creature could not have the capacity to attend unless it had some other capacity to be aware; attention, that is, does not stand alongside consciousness, sensory perception and memory as a distinct sort of awareness, but, instead, attending is what one is doing when one engages in those other mental acts of awareness in a distinctive way that involves being aware of the very same object for an extended period of time.

Now Reid thinks that all forms of awareness — sensory perception, consciousness, memory — have something in common. They all involve what he calls 'conception': they are all awarenesses *of something*; they all have objects. They differ from one another primarily in the nature of the objects of which they are awarenesses.<sup>13</sup> Sensory perception involves conception of something in one's present environment that is affecting one's sense organs; consciousness involves conception of some present state of one's own mind<sup>14</sup>; memory involves conception

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13 See Rebecca Copenhaver, 'Thomas Reid's Philosophy of Mind: Consciousness and Intentionality,' in *Philosophy Compass*, v. 1 (2006) for helpful discussion.

14 It's important to see that this cannot be *definitional* of consciousness, given the claim that inherence in the mind consists in being an object of consciousness. After all, if it were definitional, there would be a vicious circularity: What is it for X to

of some past state of either the world or one's own mind. So, when one attends one might engage, strictly speaking, in a series of distinct acts of mind linked by the fact that they involve continuous conception of the same thing. There is strong evidence to think that this is how Reid thinks of attention. Consider the following passage:

Attention may be given to any object, either of sense or of intellect, in order to form a distinct notion of it, or to discover its nature, its attributes or its relations, and so great is the effect of attention, that, without it, it is impossible to acquire or retain a distinct notion of any object of thought. (EAP II.iii, 76-7)

If one can attend to both an 'object of sense' and an 'object of intellect' — if one can attend, that is, to both objects in one's environment and internal mental states — then one can attend while engaged in sensory perception of an object, or while conscious of a mental state. So, either attention involves some independent act of awareness that is not distinguished by its objects in the way that, for instance, sensory perception and consciousness are distinguished from one another by their objects, or else attention is just a way of engaging in other mental acts. The first approach does not fit well with Reid's distinguishing types of mental acts by their objects, and so it seems much more likely that he has the second view in mind. Attention is just a way of engaging in some, or some collection of, other forms of awareness.

By way of illustration, imagine that one attends to the tree that one passes on the train. At the instant that the tree is seen, one is sensing the tree, but the sensory perception of the tree ends the next instant when the tree is no longer affecting one's eyes. But if one attends to the tree (a difficult feat) then one will continue to be aware of the tree by having a memory of it. For Reid, that memory is not a memory of the visual image of the tree, or of one's experience of the tree, any more than one's sensory experience of the tree is an awareness of an idea or representation of the tree; rather, the memory is an awareness of the tree itself. Further, if one sensed the tree at time  $t_1$ , then one's memory is of *the tree at  $t_1$* .<sup>15</sup> Of course, the memory is being had at some later time, say  $t_2$ , a

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be in the mind? It is for the mind to be conscious of it. What is it for a mind to be conscious of X? Among other things, it is for X to be in the mind. Trouble. Instead, consciousness must be a form of awareness distinct from perception and memory on grounds other than the nature of its objects but which, as a matter of contingent fact, always takes internal mental states as its objects.

15 The account of memory sketched briefly here is intended to be in line with that elaborated in the following very helpful paper: Rebecca Copenhaver, 'Thomas Reid's Theory of Memory' in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Volume 23, Number 2, April 2006, pp. 171-189.

time at which one is sensing other things besides the tree one sensed at  $t_1$ . If one is continuously aware of the tree for a temporal interval that begins with sensing the tree and continues with a memory of the tree, then one attends to *the tree at  $t_1$* .

This last point needs to be emphasized. Reid argues vociferously against the claim that if, at time  $t$ , one has a conception of  $x$  then there is something (either  $x$  itself or a mental representation of  $x$ ) that exists at  $t$  and bears some kind of intimate relation to  $x$  (such as similarity).<sup>16</sup> He argues, that is, that there is no good reason to think that the conception of an object requires that the object exist or that it be spatially or temporally present to the act of conception of it, or to the mind engaging in that act.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when one remembers something, as one remembers the tree moments after it's passed, one's act of conception takes *the previously existing thing* as its object. Memory, on this view, like sensory perception, is not mediated by mental representations of the thing remembered. So attending to the tree-at- $t_1$  literally involves continuous awareness of the tree-at- $t_1$ ; it doesn't involve at  $t_1$  direct awareness of that and, at  $t_2$ , mediated awareness of that. The awareness one has of a thing when one attends is unmediated for the entire period one attends to the thing.

Further, and this is also of importance, to at  $t_2$  remember something that existed at  $t_1$  is not to be aware of something that existed earlier but has 'being' or some watered-down form of existence at  $t_2$ . If at  $t_2$  I remember the *tree at  $t_1$* , then the object of my act of awareness — my act of memory — is something that existed in the past; we might think of it as a temporal part of the tree, something that cannot, by its very nature, change over time for one of its essential properties is its time of existence. If we were to point to the moment on the timeline at which the act exists, we would point to  $t_2$ ; if we were to point to the moment at which the act's object exists, we would point to  $t_1$ . Reid thinks that there is no reason whatsoever to think that the act and the object have any form of existence at the same moment in time. To attend to something, then, is no simple trick. To attend to the *tree at  $t_1$*  for the entire  $t_1$ - $t_2$  interval, I must maintain continuous awareness of something that is not present — that does not exist and does not have any other form of being — at all the times after  $t_1$  at which I am aware of it.

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16 For instance, see INQ V.3, EIP IV.2 310-311.

17 See EIP II.14 175-8. For discussion of Reid's understanding of conception of things that don't exist, see Ryan Nichols, 'Reid on Fictional Objects and the Way of Ideas' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 52 (209), October 2002, pp. 582-601.

Things get a bit more complicated when we consider attentive awareness of one of the states of one's mind, although the fundamental idea is the same. Consider my attentive awareness of the visual image of the candle when I am pointing my eyes at my finger. Imagine that at time  $t_1$  I am attending to the finger at which I'm looking; call the visual image of the candle that I have at  $t_1$  'V1.' At time  $t_2$ , an instant later, I turn my attention towards V1. Literally speaking what 'turning my attention' means is that V1 continues to be something of which I have a conception, of which I am aware. However, this doesn't mean that I'm not conscious of a visual image of the candle at  $t_2$ ; I am. Call that visual image 'V2.' So, at  $t_1$  I am conscious of V1; at  $t_2$  I am conscious of V2 and remember V1. The  $t_1$  consciousness of V1 together with the  $t_2$  *memory* of V1 amount to an act of attending to V1, since I continuously have a conception of V1 across the  $t_1$ - $t_2$  temporal interval. What this implies is that when one attends to V1 one is not attending to the very thing that one is conscious of; there's the visual image to which I attend (V1), and the visual image that I am having (V2), and they are distinct.

It is because he accepts this description of what is transpiring when one turns one's attention to a state of which one is conscious, and it is because he holds that all mental states and objects are incapable of change — they exist only for an instant — that Reid thinks it obvious that the objects of consciousness do not change when attended to. This, that is, provides us with the solution to the problem raised in section 1. After all, if one is really attending, at  $t_2$ , to V1, then one is aware, at  $t_2$ , of *the very same thing* that one was aware of, conscious of, at  $t_1$ . *That thing's properties can't possibly* be any different at  $t_2$  than they were at  $t_1$ ; the thing one is attending to is not even in the mind at  $t_2$ ; at  $t_2$  one is literally aware of something that does not exist — it is not in the mind at  $t_2$  since one is not conscious of it at  $t_2$ , and if it is not in the mind it is nowhere at all — although it existed an instant before.

It's important to acknowledge a peculiarity about the position I am attributing to Reid. Under the position, a person who attends to V1 at  $t_2$  but thinks she is attending to the very visual image she is having at that moment, namely V2, is mistaken. In fact, it seems that most of us do indeed make this mistake when we engage in Reid's experiment. Is the fact that Reid's position paints us as systematically mistaken on this point a problem for the position? It's hard to see why it would be. Further, and importantly, the fact that the person is at  $t_2$  attending to a different visual image from the one she is conscious of might provide us with more of an explanation for why attention to the objects of consciousness can yield knowledge about them. By being aware of both V1 and V2 at  $t_2$ , the person has the opportunity to learn something about both V1 and V2 that she could not have known otherwise: she is able to learn about what properties the two visual images share by comparing them with

one another; this kind of comparison would not be possible if there is no time at which both are things of which the person has a conception. In fact, what the person learns is that the two visual images have very similar qualities, including that both are double. It is possible that this is the source of the mistaken judgement about what the person is attending to: since the two images are so similar, it is easy to mistakenly conclude that they are one and the same.

As a bit of further evidence that Reid would respond to the problem raised earlier in the way described, consider the following passage:

It is in our power, however, when we come to the years of understanding, to give attention to our own thoughts and passions, and the various operations of our minds. And when we make these the objects of our attention, either while they are present, or when they are recent and fresh in our memory, this act of mind is called *reflection*. (EIP I.2, 42)

Notice two things about this passage. First, Reid points here to an interplay, in attention, between awareness of a thing that is present, and memory of the thing in the interval following its presence. This is Reid alluding to, I suggest, although not *stating* exactly, the view I am attributing to him. Second, he claims that when one makes something an object of awareness in this way, by extending awareness of it when it is present into immediate memory of the thing, one is ‘reflecting.’ Given that he thinks of reflection as the way in which one comes to have the sort of notions of things that are needed to reason about them, and given that he thinks of memory as, literally, unmediated awareness of a past thing, there’s good reason to attribute him with the solution to the problem I propose.

Another passage that’s worthy of discussion in this connection:

While two persons are engaged in interesting discourse, the clock strikes within their hearing, to which they give no attention; what is the consequence? The next minute they know not whether the clock struck or not. Yet their ears were not shut. The usual impression was made upon the organ of hearing, and upon the auditory nerve and brain; but from inattention the sound either was not perceived, or passed in the twinkling of an eye, without leaving the least vestige in the memory. (EAP II.iii, 77)

Here, the point is primarily one about inattention: when one does not attend to  $x$ , either one is not aware of  $x$  at all, or one is aware of  $x$  only for an instant. If one attends to something, by contrast, one is aware for longer than an instant and one has a memory of the thing of which one is aware. Again, this isn’t a clear statement of the view I am attributing to Reid, but it is natural to read him as having that view in the background. Had these conversationalists attended to the strike of the clock, they would have continued to be aware of that strike from the moment

that it occurred and for some period of time following it. Notice that this would have been so even if the clock had struck a second time — they still could have been attending to the first strike — and even if the sound of the first strike had continued to reverberate; in this second instance, what they would have been attending to is the sound at the earlier time, even though they were at the same time conscious of that very sound as it continued.

There is a pressing objection to this solution to the problem, but before considering it (as I will in the Conclusion), let me pick up a loose end from section II. Recall that in section II, I quoted a passage from Reid in which he says that passions and emotions tend to disappear when attended to. I suggested that an explanation for why attending to our sensations and visual images does not alter them should not apply promiscuously to the case of passions; rather, an explanation ought to have the implication that there are peculiar difficulties in attending to our emotional states. The explanation on offer here does have that implication. The reason is that, plausibly anyway, passions of the sort that disappear when attended to are ways of being aware which preclude the possibility of being attentively aware of one's inner states. There are, of course, a great variety of emotional states, but to see the point imagine an emotional state which necessarily involves inattention to it such as, for instance, the emotional state one is in when in a panic, where 'panic' here means not just fear, but a peculiar species of fear which is accompanied by general mental discombobulation. Arguably, anyway, part of what it is to be in a panic of this sort is for one to be aware, in rapid succession, of a great variety of different things. If so, then one can't attend to the state one is in while in a panic of this sort because attending *to anything* would necessarily preclude the possibility that you are in such a panic. Put simply, attention necessarily involves steadiness in the object of one's awareness, while this kind of panic by its nature involves unsteadiness.

In other cases, an emotional state consists, in part, in one's attention being directed to something other than the state itself. Such, perhaps, is the case with some forms of fear. To be gripped by this emotion is, in part, for one's attention to be consumed by some object so completely that one cannot turn one's attention from that object without the emotion thereby disappearing. Of course, one has a peculiar concern with the object when one is afraid of it, but it is not the nature of that concern, but rather fear's involving a fixation on some object, that undermines the possibility of attending to one's own fear. In this fear is probably similar to lust and to certain forms of consuming anger. Reid makes a point along these lines, although different, in the following passage:

[W]hen any vehement passion or emotion hinders the cool application of judgment, we get no distinct notion of an object, even though the sense be long directed to it. A man who is put into a panic, by thinking he sees a ghost, may stare at it long, without having any distinct notion of it; it is his understanding, and not his sense that is disturbed by the horror. If he can lay that aside, judgment immediately enters upon its office, and examines the length and breadth, the colour, and figure, and distance of the object. Of these, while his panic lasted, he had no distinct notion, though his eyes were open all the time. (EIP VI.1, 418)

Reid's primary point could be put this way: attending to a thing isn't sufficient to gain knowledge about it. In this case, the man's fear prevents him from making thoughtful judgements about what he sees, even though he is aware of the thing for an extended period of time. In addition, Reid doesn't think that being aware of a thing for an extended period is sufficient for attending to it — so it's possible that Reid would not say that the man in the example is attending to the ghost — but even if that were sufficient, the obstacle to knowledge in this case does not arise from the fact that the thing is not an object of awareness for a sufficiently long period of time. Still, the example illustrates the point under discussion: the man's emotional state, his fear, necessarily directs his attention towards the thing of which he is aware. Attending to the emotion is thus not possible for him.

There is another set of cases that is worth mentioning. These are those in which the passion by its nature directs attention towards itself. These affective states are thus extremely easy to attend to. Reid gives an example:

A gentleman of my acquaintance, in the agony of a fit of the gout, used to call for a chessboard. As he was fond of that game, he acknowledged that, as the game advanced and drew his attention, the sense of pain abated, and the time seemed much shorter. (EAP III.ii, 77)

What this example suggests is that one would expect it to be much easier to report on and know the properties of those inner states, like pain, that necessarily involve attention towards themselves than it is to report on or know others. Whether or not this is so is an empirical question, but it seems plausible. Still, the central point for our purposes is just this: in so far as different emotions necessarily involve certain objects and mental states either being or not being things of which one is aware for the duration of the emotional state, they will, necessarily, preclude certain forms of attention; this is so simply because of what those emotional states are, and of what attention is, under the account on offer here. However, things like tactile sensations and visual images are not like emotional states in this way and so there is every reason to think that they are amenable to attentive awareness in ways that many emotions are not.

#### IV Conclusion

Return now to an objection to the solution, offered in section III, to the problem described in section II. The problem, recall was this: why should we think that when we turn our attention towards something of which we were previously conscious we don't thereby alter the properties of that thing? The solution was simple: attention cannot alter an object of consciousness because one is not engaging in an act of attention to an object if the object is not the very one of which one was formerly (perhaps only instants ago) conscious. However, there is an obvious and pressing objection to this solution. It seems that we can reformulate the problem, even in the face of Reid's conception of attention, like so: Perhaps when you think you have followed Reid's instructions in the experiments — you try to turn your attention from the table to the sensation had when pressing one's hand against it, for instance, and think you've done so — you actually come to be aware of a distinct thing from that which you tried to turn your attention to. Under this version of the problem, the difficulty isn't that in attending to the sensation (or the visual image in the double vision case), you might alter it; the problem is that you might not be attending to it at all but might only think you are. At first glance, anyway, this problem seems to be only cosmetically different from the problem posed in section I and 'solved' through appeal to Reid's view of attention. It seems that the bulge in the carpet smoothed flat by Reid's account of attention has just popped up elsewhere.

Or has it? The problem posed in section I involves asserting the possible truth of the following claims made of a person (like Reid) who claims to have discovered that something (call it 'x' — a tactile sensation, a visual image) of which he was conscious at t1, and to which he attends at t2, has some property (call it 'p' — fails to resemble or represent that which causes it, is double):

- (1) At both t1 and t2, you are aware of x.
- (2) x has property p at t2, but not at t1.

Reid solves the problem, I've suggested, by denying that (2) could be true, given what attention is and given that mental states and objects exist only for an instant and so are incapable of change: attention to the thing of which one is conscious at t1 involves memory, at t2, of that very thing at t1, not awareness of some thing that persists in the mind from t1 to t2. In its new formulation the problem posed involves asserting the possible truth of a different pair of claims:

- (3) At t1, you are conscious of x. At t2, you are aware of y.
- (4) y has property p, but x does not have property p.

The problem posed by asserting the possibility of (1) and (2) allows that Reid is correct in his belief that at t2 he is aware of the same thing that he was conscious of at t1. The problem posed by (3) and (4), however, involves denying that he is justified in that belief; he thinks he's aware of the same thing as he was earlier conscious of, but he's mistaken. The problem posed by asserting the possibility of (3) and (4), therefore, is a specific form of a skeptical challenge about the veridicality of memory-based judgments of identity.

Reid is, of course, well-aware that our memories are imperfect and that, in particular, we can make mistakes about the identity between things of which we are currently aware and things which we remember; in fact, such a possibility is the basis of his famous 'brave officer' objection to Locke's view of personal identity.<sup>18</sup> However, the problem posed by asserting the possibility of (3) and (4) involves skepticism about the veridicality of memory-based judgments of identity over extremely short temporal intervals, and, in particular, across intervals that begin, by hypothesis, with awareness of the very thing that one asserts, by the end of the temporal interval, to be the object of one's awareness. For instance, the double vision experiment begins with consciousness of a visual image of the candle had while one is looking and attending to one's finger; a few instants later one takes oneself to be attending to that very visual image and not to a different one. To suggest that one is mistaken about this is to suggest something much more radical than is suggested by the possibility that an old general has forgotten that he himself was the protagonist of an ignominious event sixty years in the past.

Now in his discussion of the 'first principles of contingent truths,' Reid asserts the following:

Another first principle I take to be, That those things did really happen which I distinctly remember.

This has one of the surest marks of a first principle; for no man ever pretended to prove it, and yet no man in his wits calls it in question; the testimony of memory, like that of consciousness, is immediate; it claims our assent upon its own authority. (EIP VI.5, p. 474)

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18 See EIP III.6 276.

In asserting that this is a first principle of *contingent* truths and that ‘no man ever pretended to prove it,’ Reid is allowing that (3) and (4) might be true and that he can’t provide any undeniable refutation of the skeptic who asserts that they are. However, in asserting that the veridicality of ‘distinct’ memories — such as those had over very short intervals of time, as in the relevant experiments involving attention — is a first principle, Reid thinks he has said something about that claim that silences the skeptic; acceptance of it springs from the human constitution and can be denied only by presupposing the reliability of some faculty or set of faculties that have no better a claim to reliability than ‘distinct’ memory itself.<sup>19</sup> In short, if the problem described in section 1 — the assertion of the possible truth of (1) and (2) — lingers even in the face of Reid’s view of attention, it is because skeptical worries about memory linger. But then it appears that those of us who aren’t skeptics should take his experimental methodology to be sound. Of course, even if we accept his methodology, we shouldn’t necessarily accept the surprising results that Reid reaches through employing it — that the theory of ideas is false, that much more of what we see is seen double than single. But if we are to reject those claims it must be on independent grounds and not on the ground that his method of reaching those conclusions is flawed.

Although Locke held that presence in the mind is constituted by awareness, consciousness, a thesis that Reid, too, accepts, Locke was uncomfortable with the idea that there could be awareness without presence in the mind or, at least, presence there in representation. Thus, for him, not only are all and only those things of which one is conscious in the mind, all those things of which one is aware are either in the mind, or represented there. Given this view, it’s very natural to think that the kind of awareness of our mental states that is needed to deliver knowledge about them is of a different, higher sort than the mundane form through which we come to be aware quite generally of both things in our environment and things in our heads. We need not just to be exposed to our own mental states for more time to come to know about them; we also need to improve our representations of them. By contrast, Reid takes awareness of a thing to be possible in the absence of any form of presence in the mind, whether literal or representative. Thus, for Reid, to have the heightened form of awareness of one’s mental states needed not to qualify them as present in the mind,

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19 Obviously, this is not the place for a full elaboration of this view. For discussion, see Philip DeBary, *Thomas Reid and Scepticism : His Reliabilist Response*, London: Routledge, 2002.

but, instead, to deliver knowledge about them, one needs merely to keep the faculties of awareness one has fixed on those mental states for long enough to allow their nature to become apparent.<sup>20</sup>

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