

CRITICAL NOTICE

Philip de Bary, *Thomas Reid and Skepticism: His Reliabilist Response*, London, Routledge, 2002, 203 pp. Hardback, \$90.00, ISBN 0-415-26339-5

Reid's response to epistemological skepticism has itself generally received two types of response. The first type – voiced by Thomas Brown and others – is that Reid fails to furnish a satisfying reply to skepticism in large part because he concedes too much to the skeptic. The second type of response – offered by contemporary philosophers such as William Alston – is that Reid develops one of the most penetrating responses to skepticism in the history of philosophy. Philip de Bary's book falls more nearly into the latter camp. Although not slow to point out the problems with Reid's position, de Bary contends that Reid develops a sophisticated externalist reply to epistemological skepticism that merits close study.

Central to de Bary's book is the thesis that Reid's response to skepticism does not primarily proceed piecemeal by replying to particular skeptical arguments, but is the application of a general epistemic framework. In de Bary's terminology, this framework is one that is weakly foundationalist, reliabilist, and fallibilist.

Reid's position is a version of weak foundationalism insofar as Reid holds that a good many of our beliefs are non-inferentially warranted, but not by virtue of the fact that they are infallible, incorrigible, or indubitable. Employing a metaphor from civil engineering, de Bary suggests that Reid's strategy is more akin to someone who builds on shallow concrete 'rafts' rather than excavate deep below the surface of the earth for rock that may or may not be present (30). Reid's position is a version of reliabilism insofar it implies that an agent's belief is warranted just in case it is produced by a reliable (or properly functioning) belief-forming faculty operating in the appropriate environment and the agent 'has no good reason to doubt' this belief (86). Reliabilism of this variety, suggests de Bary, is tightly connected with Reid's fallibilism. The idea is that, contrary to what others have supposed, the first principles of common sense with respect to perception and

memory¹ tell us not that perceptual and memorial beliefs are true – 'perception' and the like are not success terms for Reid – but only that they are reliably formed. As de Bary puts it, first principles of this sort are not universal, but general truths (60). To which de Bary adds the following qualification: while this general epistemic framework may be particularly at home in a theistic worldview, it does not require such a framework (chap. 10).

Having laid bare the epistemic framework within which Reid operates, the shape of Reid's response to skepticism emerges: Start by assuming that many of our beliefs are reliably formed and, thus, warranted, provided we have no good reason to doubt them. Then address the issue of whether our beliefs are vulnerable to skeptical threats. If Reid is right, this means engaging the so-called Way of Ideas – roughly, the thesis that what we are presented with in perceptual experience are not external objects, but mental images – since this position lies behind the skeptical arguments offered by Hume and others. In one of the most interesting chapters of the book (chap. 7), de Bary defends the thesis that Reid's attack on the Way of Ideas is not misdirected. While the Way of Ideas is probably a more variegated theory than Reid allows, it is plausible to find the theory in some form in Descartes, Malebranche, Arnauld, and Locke (and presumably, Hume). Moreover, de Bary continues, at least some of Reid's arguments against the Way of Ideas are persuasive.

This is, briefly put, the general line of argument advanced in de Bary's book. And there is much to recommend this book. It is crisply argued, historically nuanced, informed by developments in recent epistemology and Reid scholarship, and includes skilful interpretations of Reid (especially noteworthy is de Bary's treatment of Keith Lehrer's 'metaprinciple' in chap. 5). Accordingly, I believe anyone interested in Reid's epistemology would benefit from reading it. That said, in what remains, I wish to take issue with two claims that de Bary makes in his book.²

The first claim is found in the book's first chapter, where de Bary complains that Reid's frequent protestations that the skeptic's practice is inconsistent with his precept is 'shallow' (7). De Bary writes:

What has emerged from the discussion so far is mainly negative. It is that one of Reid's favourite objections to scepticism – that sceptical conduct is deplorably inconsistent with sceptical principle – is superficial. Reid is disingenuous in his characterization of both the conduct and the principle; and it seems fair to conclude that his accusations of inconsistency between them are part of his polemic, not his reasoned arguments, against scepticism. (12)

De Bary is entirely correct to emphasize that Reid is fond of pointing out that, despite their claims not to believe the testimony of their senses, skeptics generally try to keep out of harm's way by not banging their heads against posts or stepping into fires. But, contrary to de Bary, I believe that Reid's point about the ways in

which skeptics' conduct themselves is not a case of his engaging in *ad hominem* polemics, but part of his reasoned engagement with skepticism.

To make this case, it will be helpful to bring to mind two points. First, Reid's skeptic is a highly stylized persona that is an admixture of Pyrrhonian, Cartesian, and Humean elements. In some passages, Reid emphasizes the skeptic's Pyrrhonian tendencies, in others the Cartesian and Humean ones.³ Second, we should note the distinction between claims that purport to address the skeptic, on the one hand, and those that purport to address skepticism, on the other. I wish to urge that, when Reid insists that the skeptic is embroiled in a pragmatic inconsistency, he is making both sorts of claim. And, thus, when Reid emphasizes the skeptic's pragmatic inconsistency, he does so with aim of making different kinds of claim against skeptics and skepticism respectively.

That Reid is engaged in something more constructive than *ad hominem* polemics when he writes that skeptics 'act the hypocrite' and 'impose upon themselves' (IHM VI.xx: 170) is supported by the following observation: All of us operate with more or less implicit principles of belief ascription. One such principle that commends itself is that, when we ascribe beliefs to others, we should observe their behavior. For, we assume, if someone genuinely believes that *p*, then she will tend to act in ways that would be appropriate if it were the case that *p*, given her goals, aversions, and other beliefs. For example, someone who excuses himself from conversation because he claims to desire to have a drink and thereupon walks to the refrigerator should (barring unusual circumstances) be ascribed the belief that the refrigerator contains drinkable items. Likewise, someone who claims to believe that there are no drinkable items, but nevertheless drinks a cold lemonade pulled from the refrigerator should (barring extraordinary circumstances) not be ascribed the belief that there are no drinkable items. Accordingly, I suggest that a plausible interpretation of what Reid is up to when he writes that skeptics 'act the hypocrite' is this: Reid is bringing to light a cluster of plausible principles about belief ascription that connect belief with action. And what the application of these principles implies, according to the present interpretation of Reid, is that we are hard pressed to find genuine skeptics – at least if a skeptic is to be identified as someone who doesn't believe the testimony of his senses. In the vast majority of cases, those who call themselves skeptics are people who merely *profess* not to believe the testimony of their senses; they 'impose upon themselves', as Reid says, and it makes little difference if they claim to be true to their principles only while in the philosophy seminar room.⁴

According to this interpretation, Reid is concerned to argue that skeptics offer mistaken descriptions of their own views. But, as already indicated, I think that Reid's remarks about the skeptic's pragmatic inconsistency are also directed toward showing that we should believe that skepticism is false. It is on this issue that I'd now like to touch.

In a series of fine chapters, de Bary argues that Reid's principles of common

sense play an important role in his argument against skepticism – where skepticism is now understood as the claim that our beliefs about the external world are not reliably formed or instances of knowledge (or at least that we have no reason to believe this). De Bary's idea is that we should distinguish between

(1) *The Innateness Claim*: '...there are certain principles...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' [108b].

and

(2) *The Truth Claim*: First principles generate, if they are not themselves already, true beliefs. (65)⁵

According to de Bary, Reid has 'to forge some sort of link between the Innateness Claim and the Truth Claim' (ibid.). If he can do so, we have the makings of the following sort of very general anti-skeptical argument:

- (3) There are certain propositions that all mature, normal adults must and do take for granted in their lives in the everyday. (The Innateness Claim)
- (4) Some of these propositions are or generate (in conjunction with properly functioning cognitive faculties) reliably formed true beliefs about the external world. (The Truth Claim)
- (5) Since (i) some of these propositions are or generate (in conjunction with properly functioning cognitive faculties) reliably formed true beliefs about the external world and (ii) we have no countervailing reasons to believe that (i) is false, then we should believe that skepticism about the external world is false.

Now, according to de Bary, much of Reid's energy is spent trying to show that certain principles are in fact innate, for establishing that there are such innate principles is the first stage in Reid's anti-skeptical argument. But how do we go about trying to establish that a principle is innate? By identifying what de Bary calls 'marks of innateness' (144). And what are the marks of innateness? De Bary highlights two marks that Reid himself emphasizes: First principles are marked by the fact that their denial is 'not only false but absurd' and thus their denial is worthy of 'ridicule' (EIP VI.iv: 462). Moreover, genuine first principles are marked by their practical indispensability. As Reid puts it, 'when an opinion is so necessary in the conduct of life, that, without the belief of it, a man must be led into a thousand absurdities in practice, such an opinion... may safely be taken for a first principle' (quoted in de Bary, 145).

But now we can see why Reid's claim that the skeptic is pragmatically inconsistent plays a crucial role in his reasoned anti-skeptical argument. By both showing that the skeptic's practices are incompatible with his professed skepticism and that the so-called skeptic thereby deserves ridicule, Reid has given us excellent reason to believe that the principles that the skeptic professes to deny are innate principles. In short, Reid's arguments from pragmatic inconsistency are not ones that themselves purport to establish that skepticism is false. Rather, they are claims that purport to provide evidence for premise (3) of the above anti-skeptical argument. Far from being 'superficial' or 'shallow', then, these points about practical inconsistency contribute importantly to Reid's general argument against skepticism.

I've pointed out that central to de Bary's interpretation of Reid is the thesis that, if Reid's anti-skeptical argument is to succeed, Reid must forge some sort of link between The Innateness and Truth Claims. De Bary argues that the best Reid can do on this matter is this:

We either 'buy' the Truth Claim or we don't. The Truth Claim is, and can only be, an externalist assumption, unamenable to proof of any sort. All Reid can do on its behalf is to urge that the assumption is more 'reasonable' than any alternative assumption about either (i) the tendency of natural faculties in respect to truth or (ii) the structure of knowledge itself. In chapter 5 we examined Reid's procedure with respect to (i), and found it best summed up in these words: 'To suppose a general deviation from truth among mankind in things self-evident, of which no cause can be assigned, is highly unreasonable'. (132-33)

The second point with which I want to take issue in de Bary's discussion is the thesis that we either simply 'buy' the Truth Claim or we don't. It is true that in replying to skepticism, Reid makes some very important moves such as rejecting the Way of Ideas, developing a novel account of perception, adopting a particular form of epistemological foundationalism, and espousing a form of reliabilism. But it would be a mistake, in my judgment, to claim that the only thing that Reid can say in favor of the anti-skeptical package he offers is that it is more 'reasonable' than its alternatives.⁶ For, as de Bary notes in the first chapter of his book, Reid develops a trilemma for the skeptic that is supposed to provide a good reason for even the skeptic to reject skepticism. As Reid formulates the argument, at the outset of inquiry, either the skeptic holds that none of our faculties are reliable, some of them are, or all of them are. According to Reid, the first position is a non-starter, while the second arbitrarily privileges some faculties as reliable. This, Reid claims, leaves the third as the only viable option. The only reasonable methodology (*ab initio*, at least) is one that assumes that the outputs of our original belief-forming faculties are innocent until proven guilty. De Bary, as I've indicated, is

aware of this Reidian trilemma, but presents it simply as an argument that Reid develops against Cartesian foundationalism. It seems to me, however, that this argument does much more work in Reid's texts than de Bary allows. It is the primary reason Reid offers in favor of accepting premise (4) of Reid's general anti-skeptical argument. As such, I take it to be the link that Reid needs between The Innateness and Truth Claims.⁷

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NOTES

- ¹ De Bary understands the first principles of common sense to be general propositions.
- ² I will be referring to the *Inquiry into the Human Mind* as 'IHM' and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* as 'EIP.' References are to the editions edited by Derek Brookes (Edinburgh University Press, 1997 and 2002, respectively).
- ³ De Bary claims that Hume is the paradigmatic example of the kind of skeptic with whom Reid wishes to engage and that Reid ignores Hume's 'naturalism' (9). There is textual evidence that supports this reading. Nonetheless, I consider it not to be the best interpretation of Reid. As I suggest above, Reid's skeptic, like the advocate of the Way of Ideas, is an ideal type.
- ⁴ I owe the foregoing line of argument to René van Woudenberg.
- ⁵ In light of the fact that de Bary claims that first principles are principles of reliability, I assume that de Bary means the Truth Claim to say that first principles reliably generate true beliefs.
- ⁶ In claiming this, I follow John Greco in 'Reid's Reply to the Skeptic' in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. T. Cuneo and R. van Woudenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- ⁷ Thanks to John Greco, Lee Hardy, James Harris and, especially, René van Woudenberg for discussion of the topic of this review.