Common Sense and First Principles : Dispelling an Ambiguity

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Abstract

In his discussion of scepticism, Reid often appeals to "original principles of belief" and "principles of common sense". He also refers to "first principles of truth" and more simply to "common sense". The terminology does not seem clearly fixed. Is it all the same? If not, shall we accuse him of a lack of coherence? My contention is that *common sense* is a power of knowledge and *first principles* are propositions taken for granted. The dispelling of this ambiguity sheds a new light on Reid's position on the epistemic scene. Indeed, these two readings (the "faculty-line-of-thought" and the "basic propositions-line-of-thought") correspond to Reid's different targets: while he sometimes considers the sceptical attitude, aiming at *dissolving* it, at other moments he is rather involved in the discussion of sceptical arguments, striving to *raise an objection* to them. Finally, I claim that the question to know whether principles of common sense are natural psychological tendencies or rather first truths, on which the structure of knowledge is erected, is not adequate. If we usually separate these two threads, Reid's epistemic finalism (according to which, by the original constitution of our nature, we are designed to truth) quite naturally weaves them. I propose a third line of thought, drawing from Wittgenstein's remarks on "hinge propositions".

Introduction

In his analysis of the powers of the human mind and in his discussion of scepticism, Reid constantly refers to the "principles of common sense". But he is well aware of the ambiguity of the phrase "common sense". Taking it as a "common judgment", he makes this quite despairing comment in the chapter dedicated to it in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*[1]:

[1] 1785, ed. D. R. Brookes, University Park, The Pennsylvania State UP (2002). Thereafter (EIP, book, chapter, page).

> What the precise limits are which divide common judgment from what is beyond it on the one hand, and from what falls short of it on the other, may be difficult to determine; and men may agree in the meaning of the word who have different opinions about those limits or who even never thought of fixing them. This is as intelligible as, that all Englishmen should mean the same thing by the county of York, though perhaps not a hundredth part of them can point out its precise limits. (EIP, VI, 2, 427)

It seems that the content of the concept of "common sense" can be precisely defined, but that there is still room for discussion as far as its extension is concerned. It is as if the phrase "common sense" functioned as a lure: we all think that we have a good understanding of it, but its precise delimitation raises many disagreements. Reid aims at drawing the precise limits of this concept. He admits that we can manage without it, that we can converse and transact business without delimitating its precise extension. Nevertheless, in some tricky circumstances, it can be very helpful. For instance, suppose you intend to buy a house, it may be very important for you (for taxes concerns) to know whether it is located in the county of York or in the Derbyshire. Likewise, in philosophical debates, we need to know what counts as belonging to the jurisdiction of common sense. When we strive to establish a frontier between what belongs to common sense and that which is beyond it or falls short of it, we proceed to the enumeration of the first principles. To draw the list of these principles comes to drawing the map of common sense. Their enumeration will function as a rule to apprehend the extension of common sense.

Things could be quite simple if Reid were consistent in his use of the concept. But it's getting worse when we notice that he appeals to different expressions, whose meanings do not always overlap. For instance, he regularly refers to the "original principles of belief" or to the "first principles of truth". The terminology does not seem clearly fixed. The question is to know whether it is all the same. If not, shall we accuse him of a lack of coherence? Depending on Reid's aims, are some expressions more appropriate than others? Should we say that, although it is the core of his philosophy, the concept of "common sense" is what is "unthought" in his philosophy[2]?

In what follows, I will begin by considering common sense as a power of knowledge (I). Then I will understand first principles as referring to propositions at the basis

[2] Nicholas Wolterstorff , "Reid on Common Sense", in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. T. Cuneo and R. Van Woudenberg, Cambridge UP, 2004, p. 78.

of our reasoning (II). The dispelling of this ambiguity should explain why Reid's arguments have been pulled into so many directions. But to my mind, we must go further. We must go beyond the alternative between principles of common sense as "general facts of human nature" and principles as "first truths on which the structure of knowledge is erected". If we usually separate these two threads, Reid quite naturally weaves them. I locate the source of this marriage in his epistemic finalism according to which, by the original constitution of our nature, we are designed to truth. This will enable me to present a third way of conceiving common sense and its principles (III), a conception that reconciles the approach of "common sense-as-a-faculty" with the normative dimension proper to any epistemological project.

I – What is this Thing called Common Sense?

The occurrences of the phrase "common sense" are so innumerable that, at the end, the meaning of this watchword dissolves in a kind of nebula. Relatively to Reid's concerns, whatever the questions we may ask, we are pretty sure that the answer locates in common sense. But what does he really mean by it? Does he refer to a specific faculty (I.2) or to the products of this faculty? If the latter, are they particular judgments (I.3) or general principles (II)?

I.1) Principles of Common Sense as Powers of the Human Mind

If we dwell upon *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*[3], the principles of common sense above all refer to the different original powers of the human mind. Principles of common sense correspond to our *shared faculties of judgment*, and more particularly those that are original. They are common to all of us who are not severely mentally impaired and who have left the age of infancy. Reid does not include idiosyncratic belief-formation faculties in his enquiry. As he writes about sensation and memory: they "are simple, original, and perfectly distinct operations of the mind, and (...) original principles of belief" (IHM, 2, 4, 29). "Original principles of belief" are explicitly understood as belief-forming faculties. This implies a use of the word "principle" which may seem quite surprising

[3] 1764, ed. D. R. Brookes, University Park, The Pennsylvania State UP (1997). Thereafter (IHM, chapter, section, page).

today. The principle is not to be taken as a fundamental proposition, nor as a basic general truth, but as an original power of the mind. This is clearly expressed in the first section:

> All that we know of the body, is owing to anatomical dissection and observation, and it must be by an anatomy of the mind that we can discover *its powers and principles*. (IHM, 1, 1, 12, my italics)

These principles are a kind of "Natural Inspiration or Revelation", they "guide" us. Reid describes them as being "such principles as are inlaid in our Nature and wrought in our frame"[4]. If they are original powers of the mind, then common sense refers to our global original constitution. It is the Reidian way to designate the natural intellectual human nature. Common sense acts like a force we cannot escape. As Reid repeatedly says, we "yield to the dominion of Common Sense" (IHM, 1, 5, 20), we are under its governance, its authority, its yoke. A deviation from it amounts to a disorder in our constitution, and is taken as a mental illness or a lunacy. The sceptic precisely suffers from that. The description of a sane mental constitution is used as a counterpoint to the sceptical frame of mind. The latter is clearly put at a distance: it is associated with melancholy, madness or "magic". The consistent and thorough sceptic even seems to be endowed with a non-human constitution. About him, Reid reports:

> The plain man will, no doubt, be apt to think him merry: but if he finds that he is serious, his next conclusion will be, that he is mad; or that philosophy, like magic, puts men into a new world, and gives them different faculties from common men. And thus common sense and philosophy are set at variance. (IHM, 2, 8, 39)

As Wittgenstein would say, the sceptical state of mind takes part to a completely different "form of life". As a consequence, Reid does not view the sceptic as someone with whom he could discuss. The sceptic cannot impose the rule of the discussion, especially when this rule recommends to assess everything according to the sole reason.

I suppose that common sense cannot but totally decline the jurisdiction of reason, because its dictates are not truths but psychological facts, they are not propositions but natural dispositions of the mind. In this perspective, how could we assess the dictates of common sense according to the criterion of reason, when the latter solely deals with truths and errors,

[4] *Manuscripts* [2131/6/III/5, 4v], in (IHM, p. 328).

justified beliefs and unjustified beliefs? Reid reminds us that the test to pass is the one of commonality, not the one of justification.

I.2) Common Sense as a Special Faculty

So far so good. But things get more complicated when we focus on certain remarks. Reid sometimes treats common sense as if it were a specific faculty. He notes that the first principles "fall within the province of common sense" (IHM, 2, 5, 32). In the *Essays*, he views common sense as that which enables us to be a competent judge in the matter of first principles (VI, 2, 426). If we are deprived of it, we cannot give any verdict and rule on the question to know whether a pretended first principle is really one. Therefore, to be endowed of common sense means that we are endowed of a specific power, putting at our disposal the knowledge of well-circumscribed principles[5].

This way of viewing implies a real change of perspective. We previously could only establish a difference of degrees between common sense and its principles. In both cases, we had to do with simple, original and shared faculties of the mind. The only difference was that common sense covered all the faculties, while the extension of each one of its principles was reduced to a part of our constitution. But now we are encouraged to establish a difference of nature between them. The principles of common sense are not any more to be treated as original belief-forming faculties, as *parts* of common sense, but they are to be considered as its *products*. And we can presume that the faculty of common sense will not produce another faculty, but judgments. The question is therefore to know what are the judgments issued from common sense.

A first way to answer is to state that the products of common sense are the first principles that Reid enumerates in the fifth and the sixth chapters of the essay dedicated to the

[5] This ambiguity is noted by Laurent Jaffro, « La rétorsion du sens commun et la possibilité du scepticisme. Contre Reid. », in M. Cohen-Halimi et H. L'Heuillet. *Comment peut-on être sceptique ?*, Honoré Champion, p. 93-116, 2010. https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00264778v2
L. Jaffro speaks of a duality in the reidian conception of common sense, a kind of fissure that Reid constantly tries to hide : « la démarche de Reid suppose une distinction entre les premiers principes du sens commun et le sens commun lui-même ou, si l'on préfère, une partie ou un niveau informel du sens commun qui n'est pas un ensemble de premiers principes. (…) [Le sens commun] est souvent présenté comme un ensemble de premiers principes ou d'intuitions communes fondamentales, mais il ne s'y réduit pas puisqu'il est encore à l'œuvre quand il n'y a pas d'accord sur les intuitions communes. Le sens commun n'est pas seulement un ensemble d'intuitions communes, mais ce qui permet de déterminer quelles sont les intuitions communes, de les reconnaître lorsqu'elles sont controversées. » (p. 5). This second way of construing common sense corresponds to what Jaffro calls the pragmatic and communicational conception of common sense. It is especially used in controversies, when we discuss about principles of common sense (the latter correspond to an ordered list of fundamental intuitions, whose content is determined and may be codified).

power of judgment in the *Essays*. Accordingly, principles are to be taken as propositions which state fundamental truths about our human intellectual condition.

However, it raises innumerable difficulties. I will content myself with alluding to one of them. Among the first principles, we find the seventh principle of contingent truths that puts "that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious" (EIP, VI, 5, 480). The problem lies in the ambiguity of the phrase: "natural faculties". Indeed, we can wonder whether common sense is included among them. Actually, we face an alternative: either we consider that it is included, but it implies that common sense guarantees its reliability on its own authority; or we consider that it is not included, and then we need to know what are the faculties intended by the seventh first principle. Considering that the reliability of our consciousness, memory and sense perception is already taken into account by the previous first principles, Philip De Bary[6] considers that the seventh first principle states the reliability of the faculties of judgment and reasoning. He supports this interpretation, arguing that the powers of memory and sense perception are each studied in a specific essay and are each the objects of a specific principle. As the powers of judgment and reasoning are put under scrutiny in separate essays, we are allowed to conclude – so goes the argument – that the seventh first principle is a "joint principle" stating their respective reliability.

However credible, I will not keep this interpretation. In order for this reading to be coherent, the power of consciousness should have a separate essay, which is not the case. One way of explaining this missing is to note that the power of consciousness, like the one of judgment, are special powers insofar as they are *transversal powers*. They are operations of the mind which are concomitant to the exercise of other intellectual powers. This is reinforced in the case of judgment, described as "necessarily accompanying all sensation, perception, consciousness, and memory". Reid even suggests that judgment is not a separate power, but an ingredient of these operations of the mind (EIP, VI, 1, 409-10). As a consequence, it should not be considered as a power distinct from them. It is more appropriate to conceive it as being immanent to them. This gives us the track to follow to understand the real status of common sense. Common sense is not a meta-faculty, it is implied in the use of our natural intellectual faculties. It is all the more a transversal power of knowledge, as Reid presents it as "that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business" (EIP, VI, 2, 424).

[6] *Thomas Reid and Scepticism – His Reliabilist Response*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 80.

I.3) Common Sense as a Common Degree of Judgment

According to this line of thought, common sense does not refer to our common intellectual constitution (I.1), nor to a distinct faculty delivering knowledge about the reliability of our original powers of the mind (I.2). It corresponds to a certain "degree of judgment"[7]. This way of viewing enables us to understand some of Reid's comments. Hence, about those judgments like: "a disorder in my toe occasions the pain of gout" or "there is a tree before me", he writes:

> Such original and natural judgments are therefore a part of that furniture which nature hath given to the human understanding (…). They serve to direct us in the common affairs of life, where our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark. They are a part of our constitution, and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them. They make up what is called *the common sense of mankind.* (IHP, 7, 215)

Common sense is therefore a natural and common stock of particular judgments, on which we draw in our daily life. It is "a part of our constitution" which encompasses all the judgments of nature. These judgments are also "first principles" for two reasons: because they are the immediate products of our original powers of the mind, and because they are that upon which our reasoning is grounded. As a matter of fact, Reid rarely distinguishes between these two kinds of immediacy. Both are often involved in a single sentence:

> When I hear a certain sound, I conclude immediately, without reasoning, that a coach passes by. There are no premises from which this conclusion is inferred by

[7] Marina Folescu in "Thomas Reid: Philosophy of Mind", http://www.iep.utm.edu/reidmind/#SSH4bi (2.10.2016) : "common sense is a specialized kind of judgment, understood as a faculty of the human mind. To wit, Reid thinks that common sense is that minimal degree of understanding that every adult human being possesses (or should possess), such that he can function well in this world. Common sense is concerned only with propositions that express self-evident truths (or falsehoods); judgment, more generally, is concerned with propositions that express any other kinds of truths or falsehoods."
We may have the impression that these three interpretations are not compatible. This is not the case, even if I consider that when we treat common sense as a faculty, this is "common sense as a common degree of judgment" that should be privileged. Common sense is not a supplementary or a specific faculty, it corresponds to a certain use of judgment. As this use is *transversal*, *common* to most of our intellectual faculties, it reconciles the interpretations of I.1 and I.3. But it is the accent put on this *specific* use of judgment, on this *specific* degree of judgement, that enables to combine the interpretation of I.2 with the interpretation of I.3. I thank the expert for his/her remark on this point.

> any rules of logic. It is the effect of a principle of our nature, common to us with the brutes. (IHM, 4, 1, 50)
>
> If any man asks a proof of this, I confess I can give none; there is an evidence in the proposition itself which I am unable to resist. (EIP, VI, 5, 473)

On the one hand, Reid puts the epistemological immediacy of the principles forward (he talks about "premises", "conclusion", "proof", "evidence", "rules of logic" and "rules of inference"). But on the other hand, when he notes that the natural judgments are "irresistible" and an "effect" of our constitution, he is concerned with a psychological immediacy. It is as if both kinds of immediacy implied each other.

Yet, Reid is well aware that we can take as first principles beliefs that we cannot resist any more, but which are not epistemologically immediate for all that. Correlatively, a principle can be epistemologically immediate without being irresistibly believed. I think that the possibility of a discrepancy between these two kinds of immediacy should invite us to consider the set of the natural judgments as not being equivalent to the one of the first principles. If Reid always qualifies first principles as dictates of common sense, the reverse does not seem as evident. The ambiguity lies in the way we apprehend the natural judgments. What is to be taken into consideration: is it the content of the judgment or the act of judging? Is it the propositional content, its epistemic credentials? Or is it the way the act of judging is made, in particular the fact that it is irresistible? If the latter, it seems that the judgments of common sense far outnumber those that are epistemologically immediate. Actually, referring to "first principles" directly implies epistemological concerns, whereas referring to "principles of common sense" invites to adopt a psychological perspective. In the last case, we consider the principle at work, while it governs our assent, whereas in an epistemological context, we set aside the particular circumstances which trigger its formation and we turn it into a general principle.

II – First Principles: Propositions Coined for Philosophers

In the following remarks, I will consider the first principles as propositions, and not any more as faculties of the mind or as a way of judging. To my mind, their explicit formulation answers to a special philosophical demand. Reid is concerned not so much with the practical

role of the principles in our daily life, as with their logical role in the development of knowledge.

II.1) First Principles of Reasoning

Reid qualifies the "first principles" as "intuitive judgments" and "self-evident truths". He henceforward stresses on their logical content. That's why, when they are contested, he doesn't speak any more of a lunacy, but of an absurdity.

> Opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false, but absurd (EIP, VI, 4, 462).

The absurdity refers not so much to a contradiction between what a person says and her behaviour, as to a contradiction between what she explicitly says and what is implied by what she says. Taking into account what is "judged" and taken for granted by a man, Reid casts his remarks in the same mould as the Aristotelian logic.

Very optimistically, he endeavours to enumerate the first principles. He carries out this project in the *Essays*[8]. In so doing, he answers a philosophical demand. Far from simply making fun of those philosophers who long for it, he aims at convincing them. That's why he accepts to make an incursion in the domain of reason and to speak the language of philosophers. It does not mean that Reid finally accepts that common sense be tried at the bar of reason. He rather aims at showing that common sense is compatible with reason. After all, even if one does not hold first principles for any reasons, we may still provide reasons for them. So, if Reid accepts to answer the sceptic, it should not be understood as a step backwards. If on the one hand he scorns "the artillery of the logician", laughs at the "tribunal of reason" and despises "the edicts of philosophy", on the other hand he keeps on using the tools of reason, striving to show that common sense and reason cannot be at variance:

> It is absurd to conceive that there can be any opposition between reason and common sense. It is indeed the first-born of reason, and as they are commonly joined together in speech and in writing, they are inseparable in their nature. (EIP, VI, 2, 433).

[8] Reid humbly admits that the list is a mere sampling from the totality of such principles. It's a work in progress.

Comparing with *An Inquiry*, there's an obvious change of tone. In *An Inquiry*, Reid presents reason as being the servant of common sense. He wants to tame it and to prevent it from putting common sense into question. As a last resort, the excessive reason must even be "the slave" of common sense (IHM, 5, 7, 69). But in the *Essays*, Reid presents common sense as being "the first-born of reason". Reason is not any more to be reduced to a reasoning faculty, dedicated to subtle arguments and to a discursive use, but it is considered in its intuitive use as well. In this regard, it welcomes common sense in its bosom (EIP, VI, 2, 433). Reid does not spare his effort to reassure those who could fear that yielding to the irresistible force of common sense might lead them to abandon the critical scope of reason. It is in this respect that he builds a "philosophy of common sense"[9].

II.2) Rational Means to Identify the First Principles

To develop his philosophy of common sense, Reid indulges himself in offering different marks or criterions "whereby first principles that are truly such, may be distinguished from those that assume the character without a just title" (EIP, VI, 4, 454). My contention is that we can consider these different ways of identifying a first principle as being indirect ways to convince the sceptics that one of their objections is inappropriate[10].

According to this objection, we could not say that we know the first principles, insofar as we could not give any valid reason supporting what we affirm to know. The justification we would bring forward would be untimely, because either it would launch us in a track to infinity, either it would be circular, or it would be totally dogmatic. Even if Reid doesn't explicitly refer to this objection, it's in the background[11]. Here again, he adopts a very traditional line of thought, which can be traced back to Aristotle, especially from an excerpt of the *Posterior Analytics* (I, 3, 72b5-35). Reid alludes to a part of this argument:

[9] We can also speak of a philosophy of common sense insofar as Reid underlines the methodological import of first principles. Even if first principles are inspired by our propensity to judge in a certain manner, even if they "espouse" common sense, they also *codify* a familiar and natural procedure of the understanding. They make a *rule* out of a regularity. As Reid says about Newton's *regulæ philosophandi*, they "are maxims of common sense, and are practised every day in common life; and he who philosophizes by other rules (…) mistakes his aim" (IHM, 1, 1, 12).

[10] For a presentation of the different arguments used by Reid to identify and to dialectically justify the principles, see the chapter 3 of Daniel Schulthess's book (« La justification des principes du sens commun », *Philosophie et sens commun chez Thomas Reid*, ed. Peter Lang, Berne, 1983).

[11] See "A Brief Account of Aristotle's Logic", *Thomas Reid on Logic, Rhetoric and the Fine Arts: Papers on the Culture of the Mind*, ed. A. Broadie, The Pennsylvania State UP, 2004.

> It is demonstrable, and was long ago demonstrated by Aristotle, that every proposition to which we give a *rational assent*, must either have its evidence in itself, or derive it from some antecedent proposition. And the same thing may be said of the antecedent proposition. And therefore we cannot go back to antecedent propositions without end, the evidence must at last rest upon propositions, one or more, which have their evidence in themselves, that is, upon first principles. (EIP, VI, 7, 522, my italics)

From this passage, it is clear that reason is not bypassed, since we give a *rational* assent to propositions which have their evidence in themselves. Let's analyse how first principles escape the three horns of the sceptical paradox[12], respectively the regress *ad infinitum*, the vicious circularity and the dogmatism.

- *There is no infinite regress.*

In *An Inquiry*, Reid contends that we often know without knowing that we know (therefore subscribing to an externalist conception of knowledge). For instance, children and idiots know that fire will burn them, even if they are not aware of the reliability of their sense powers. Moreover, he takes our natural judgments as being indissociable. Reid is sensitive to their coherence, to their being carried along together by the torrent of common sense. As it were, their coming in waves strengthens their epistemological weight. But, as soon as he stops considering the mass of our natural judgments in favour of the specific first principles, he adopts a different epistemological perspective. In this context, Reid is attuned with a vertical way of conceiving the relationships between propositions. He classically subscribes to a foundationalist conception of justification, using the common metaphor of the "foundation upon which the grand superstructure of human knowledge must be raised." (EIP, VI, 1, 412-3). Moreover, subscribing to an internalist conception of knowledge, he escapes the objection of the infinite regress thanks to the concept of self-evidence. It means that we have an epistemic access to the truth of the first principles not through any reasoning, but just by being aware of them. Their clarity and distinctness impose themselves upon any mind freed from prejudices.

We could wonder what kind of propositions have their evidence in themselves, except tautologies and some mathematical axioms. But Reid lets himself carried along by the

[12] We find an explicit formulation of this paradox in Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 15.

classical use of the concept, without taking time to adjust it to his more unconventional remarks on the evidence of sense, the evidence of memory and the evidence of consciousness. We may suppose that, in carving so accurately the category of first principles, Reid writes for the special audience of the modern philosophers[13]. If he regularly insists on the primacy of the principles, on their self-evidence and on the requirement to ground any knowledge on them, it is because they are the necessary ingredients to cook a classical theory of knowledge. According to this interpretation, Reid clearly intends to bring the philosophers back "to a common ground", even if it means using some concepts which are Cartesian-tainted.

- *There is no vicious circularity.*

On the one hand, Reid considers the laying down of the first principles as a good means to fix the frontier of common sense. But on the other hand, when we disagree about first principles, he advises us to appeal to common sense... But then, how are we to escape the circularity?

Actually, instead of a vicious circularity, we have to do with a reflective equilibrium. The rational means (EIP, VI, 4, 460) to delineate the first principles are ways of reasoning that provide first principles with an indirect confirmation.

> It may be observed, that although it is contrary to the nature of first principles to admit direct or apodictical proof; yet there are certain ways of reasoning even about them, by which those that are just and solid may be confirmed, and those that are false may be detected. (EIP, VI, 4, 463)

So, we can reason in matters of this kind. But, let's be prudent. The rational arguments given in favour of the first principles do not support them strictly speaking, they do not constitute an adequate answer to the sceptical demand of a justification, which would provide a more evident reason than the principles themselves. Anyway, they are not to be despised for all that. They "illustrate" the first principles in a roundabout way, they place them in a proper point of view, and eventually they stir the philosopher up to consciously give his assent to them. In this context, these ways of reasoning are occasions to make the light of truth of the first principles shine with more brightness.

[13] We must also keep in mind that the axiomatic fashion and the professorial tone are directly implied by the lectures Reid gave at the University of Glasgow. The *Essays* are drawn from his lectures notes.

- *There is no dogmatism.*

To appeal to self-evidence does not come to yield to dogmatism. Yet, first principles are not to be tested by reason... In these conditions, we could fear that quitting the domain of reason in favour of the one of common sense might come to quit epistemological concerns in favour of non-epistemological ones. More precisely, can't we say that it comes to naturalize epistemology? Reid's repeated remarks according to which all science and knowledge can be resolved into their sources from our natural constitution may be interpreted as a bad omen for his philosophy. Some may consider that "purely descriptive findings about (…) our predispositions to form beliefs in various ways" do not "bear upon the normative epistemological enterprise of evaluating" our beliefs[14].

But actually, it appears that this contemporary worry does not frighten Reid and that he doesn't see any gap to bridge. Reid does not separate the domain of reason (which, according to the objection, would inspect everything according to the criterion of justification) from the domain of common sense (which would be beyond what is justified or unjustified). For him, common sense, even though natural, is truth-directed. If he blends considerations about psychological facts with epistemological concerns, it is because he ultimately trusts his epistemologically-directed faculties. This is what leads him to reconcile Nature with Truth. This ecumenical way of viewing is the expression of his epistemological finalism[15]. As Reid writes, it is "better to make a virtue of necessity". In other words, it is better to transform the necessity of believing the first principles in an epistemic virtue, in an intellectual disposition to truth. Reid starts from the presupposition that human faculties are truth-tailored. More precisely:

> to suppose a general deviation from truth among mankind in things self-evident, of which no cause can be assigned, is *highly unreasonable* (EIP, VI, 4, 466, my italics).

As long as we are deprived of a proof of such a general deviation, we can presume that our original intellectual faculties are reliable. On this matter, the burden of the proof is on the sceptic's side. Indeed, if we started from the presupposition that our judging faculties are

[14] Patrick Rysiew, "Reid and Epistemic Naturalism", in *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid – A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. Haldane and S. Read, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Malden MA, 2003, p. 41.
[15] Patrick Rysiew prefers to speak of an "epistemic naturalism". Contrary to Alvin Plantinga, he does not think that Reid's trust on the epistemic dimension of our nature is necessarily tied to God's providence.

fallacious, we could never give a hear to any argument[16]. Therefore, the most rational attitude consists in acting and thinking without waiting for a positive evidence or a proof of the trustworthiness of our intellectual faculties. Our belief in their reliability is not unjustified for all that. It is *prima facie* justified. It means that we are allowed to take them for reliable so long as we have no "defeater" (no evidence of the contrary) and no "underminer" (no reason to think it can be doubted). The absence of any cogent reason to doubt the reliability of our faculties is considered as sufficient to allow us to take it for granted. It is a kind of "epistemic pass". This attitude is not uncritical: it binds us to question the reliability of our faculties, if we face some reasons to doubt their veracity. This is where our epistemic duty lies. If we don't need any reason to believe, we still need good reasons to doubt. As Reid claims about testimony:

> It is evident, that, in the matter of testimony, the balance of human judgment is by nature inclined to the side of belief; and turns to that side of itself, *when there is nothing put into the opposite scale*. (IHM, 6, 24, 194, my italics)

In other words, "when there is something put into the opposite scale", in the scale of disbelief, then we have to withdraw our assent. Testimonies and our intellectual faculties are, so to speak, innocent until proved guilty[17]. But in the absence of such reasons, we are allowed to appeal to the authority of Nature. As Wittgenstein will explain far later[18]:

> If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do." (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 217)

The natural bedrock Wittgenstein refers to corresponds to the foundation upon which first principles stand: the foundation of Nature (EIP, VI, 5, 483). Common sense, which is another name for this natural intellectual bedding, acts like deeply implanted general facts of nature. Of course, Reid adds an important element in the picture: the epistemic gardener, God. It remains that, in the perspective of his epistemic finalism (whether theistically tainted or

[16] See (IHM, 1, 8, 24) and (EIP, VI, 5, 480).
[17] Similarly, Reid writes that he "resolve[s] (…) always to pay a great regard to the dictates of common sense, and not to depart from them *without absolute necessity*" (IHM, 2, 8, 39, my italics): it binds him to depart from them if he faces good reasons to doubt them.
[18] 1945, *Philosophical Investigations I*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1972).

not), to say "This is simply what I do" does not come to withdraw from the discussion. It puts an end to the discussion, but not in a dogmatic way. The appeal to the normative dimension of nature is a rational argument, as long as we accept to consider – in an Aristotelian way – that "nature is rational".

In my last remarks, I will analyse how far we can use Wittgenstein's words to understand the way Reid conceived the role and the nature of principles of common sense.

III – The Codification of the Principles: What is at Stake?

Reid considers the codification of the first principles as an important step in his enterprise of curing the "metaphysical lunacy" of his contemporaries. He takes himself as a physician elaborating a remedy for a philosophical disease. His philosophy of common sense should act as a therapy on philosophers. In this perspective, I take his new way of conceiving the principles as his prescription.

III.1) Principles of Common Sense as Human Constitutive Rules

This new way of understanding the principles enables us to go beyond the distinction between the "faculty-line-of-thought" (I) and the "basic propositions-line-of-thought" (II). Interpreters regularly note the ambiguity of the word "principle", which is torn between the psychological meaning according to which principles of common sense are faculties of the mind, and the logical meaning according to which they are a certain kind of propositions. Let's quote for instance some of Ernest Sosa and James Van Cleve's remarks[19]:

> What exactly does Reid mean by common sense? Does he mean a shared faculty or a shared set of believed propositions? Although the answer is "mostly the latter", Reid does occasionally mean faculties, rather than beliefs, as the relevant items commonly shared. This ambiguity is most apparent where Reid takes up the reliability of our belief-forming-faculties. He speaks there of "principles of common sense", a faculty itself sometimes qualifying as a "principle", though in other passages the relevant "principles" seem rather a proposition about that

[19] "Thomas Reid", in *The Blackwell Guide to the Modern Philosophers, From Descartes to Nietzsche*, ed. S. M. Emmanuel, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2001, p. 189.

> faculty, one generally taken for granted: "that it is a reliable faculty" (…) Putting this exegetical issue aside, we concentrate for now on principles as propositions, including those concerning faculty reliability listed above as "first principles".

Here, as very often, for the sake of the interpretation, this is the "principles-as-propositions-line-of-thought" which is preferred to the "principles-as-faculties-line-of-thought"[20]. My contention is that we should not conceive these two lines of thought as confronting us to a dilemma. I think that the foundationalist flavour of Reid's remarks goes against his singular philosophical contribution. Its air of false foundationalism is a kind of bait for philosophers. But once they have bitten to the bait, we should wonder whether first principles are not more than basic propositions. Taking support from Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty*[21], I think we can consider first principles as "hinge propositions":

> 341. The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

[20] This choice is also made by :

- Nicholas Wolterstorff (*Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, Cambridge UP, New York, 2001, p. 219): "in general, though Reid usually meant to pick out certain propositions believed in common with his phrase "principles of common sense", quite clearly he sometimes meant to pick out certain belief-forming faculties shared in common. One wishes he had been more consistent. Usually, though, it won't make any difference; when it does, the context will usually resolve the ambiguity. On the ground that Reid usually means, by "principles of common sense", shared beliefs and judgments – that is, propositions believed or judged in common – let me work with that interpretation."
- William P. Alston ("Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 1985, vol. 2, n°4, p. 435): "Reid's most explicit treatment of this issue is found in his discussion of what he in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* calls "first principles" and, more commonly in his earlier work, the *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, "principles of common sense". Because of ludicrous misunderstandings of Reid to which the latter term has given rise, I shall follow the *Essays* in preferring the former designation. First principles turn out to be a heterogeneous assortment indeed. Let's leave aside the use of "principle" for a psychological faculty or disposition, and restrict ourselves to principles as certain kinds of propositions."
- Philip De Bary (*ibid.*, p. 34): "we are concerned simply to know *which* propositions Reid asserts as first principles (…), and what sort of animal a Reidian first principle actually *is*. There is no consensus among commentators about this latter question (…) No doubt this disagreement is partly due to Reid's own apparent oscillation in this matter."
- Patrick Rysiew (*ibid.*, p. 29): "it is not always easy to reconcile all of the various things Reid says about common sense. Thus (…) it appears that Reid conceives of common sense as an instinctive faculty with which we are naturally endowed. In his later writings, however, Reid more often speaks of common sense as though it were a set of epistemologically basic propositions. But perhaps we can go some way towards bringing into line these two conceptions of common sense if we think of the matter as follows: we can think of common sense as the faculty which gives rise to a set of basic propositions or beliefs. In any case, in considering Reid's epistemology, it is appropriate for us to focus on that feature of common sense (…) which Reid himself stresses in his mature work, i.e., common sense as a set of basic beliefs or fundamental propositions which serve as the foundation for all human thought, action and knowledge".

[21] 1952, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1969-1975).

> 343. (…) If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

To treat first principles as propositions among others betrays a lack of sensibleness to their differences. These are not mere differences of degrees, but real differences of nature. In order to enlighten my thesis, I will dwell on Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's commentary of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*[22]. In her study, she explains that Wittgenstein warns us. Indeed, we may be misled by some propositions. Some statements have the form of empirical propositions, although they do not function as mere empirical propositions. For instance, in a normal context, the proposition "this is my hand" is not an empirical proposition about a perceived fact. It is more properly considered as a "grammar rule", that is to say as a rule which defines the domain of what can be questioned, confirmed, verified or contested. But this same rule does not belong to that domain of investigation. It seems *a priori* incongruous to wonder, while you're looking at your hand, if it is really your hand. The fact that it's your hand is one of the presuppositions on which you rest, let's say, to ask questions to your surgeon about the injured state of your hand after an accident. It is like an axis around which a body of ordinary empirical propositions rotates. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock calls these fake propositions "*Doppelgänger*", that is to say "double". Though they have a linguistic formulation, this verbal form is only a convenient way to talk about something whose manifestation is usually instinctive and behavioural. More than stating something about us, these hinge propositions make us act and think.

I think we can apply this diagnosis to the first principles. Reid coins them in a propositional form, but this is only for the sake of the argumentation. First principles are not so much propositions that are true and self-evident as *principles of truth and evidence*. The difference is essential. To be a principle of truth is to be a measure of truth. Principles of truth are like rules according to which we can qualify a proposition as true or false, justified or unjustified, but they are not themselves submitted to this assessment. Their truth and their self-evidence are, so to speak, the conditions for the epistemic game to take place. Among those rules, some are contingent: things might have been different, God might have given us different faculties. But then, we would have played another epistemic game. And it would have remained the case that, once the rule would have been settled, it would have been endowed with a normative character, so much as it is the case for us now. For instance, once

[22] "On Certainty and the Grammaticalization of Experience", in ed. *The Third Wittgenstein, the Post-Investigations Works*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK, 2004.

the rule states that "such a sensation is followed by such a perception", the link cannot be untied, even though its institution remains arbitrary.

> Our perception of objects is the result of a train of operations (…) We know very little of the nature of some of these operations; we know not at all how they are connected together, or in what way they contribute to that perception which is the result of the whole: but, *by the laws of our constitution, we perceive objects in this, and in no other way*. (IHM, 6, 21, 174, my italics)

In other words, this is simply how we do. The normative character of the rules does not imply that they are transcendent and abstract rules we strive to apply. They are constitutive rules, in the sense that they define our intellectual constitution from the inside. We don't think and act according to these rules, but we think and act through these rules. Being integrated to our nature and making it exist as it is, these principles are *psychologically instantiated norms*.

With this new reading, dictates of common sense being the conditions without which any trial could not take place, philosophy cannot put them to her bar. As Reid writes:

> Philosophy (…) has no other root but the principles of common sense; it grows out of them, and draws its nourishment from them: severed from this root, its honours wither, its sap is dried up, it dies and rots. (IHM, 1, 4, 19)

If the metaphor of the roots is so cogent, it is because roots are constantly linked with the whole vegetal organism. They are not separated from the higher parts by intermediary steps. A same vital principle links them all. Here and then, Reid suggests that this line of thought, which considers the first principles as the continuous logical framework of our reasoning, is more accurate than the line of thought which considers them as axioms or premises at the basis of a reasoning. Hence, about the seventh first principle of contingent truths, he writes that:

> If any truth can be said to be prior to all others *in the order of nature*, this seems to have the best claim; because in every instance of assent, whether upon intuitive, demonstrative, or probable evidence, the truth of our faculties is taken for granted, and is, *as it were*, one of the premises on which our assent is grounded. (EIP, VI, 5, 481, my italics)

This quotation calls for two comments: first of all, Reid distinguishes between "the order of nature" and what we may call "the order of exposition". In the order of exposition, this is only the seventh first principle, but Reid insists on our considering it as being logically "prior to all others", as if there were different degrees of primacy among first principles.

Secondly, his use of a precautionary style (with the phrase: "as it were") betrays Reid's dissatisfaction towards this way of speaking. This first principle cannot be taken as a premise strictly speaking. The reason is that the appeal to the field of demonstration obliges us to explicitly distinguish the premises from the intermediary steps and the conclusion. In other words, it implies to develop a linear and vertical thought processes, as achieved in reasoning and in syllogism. Wittgenstein's appeal to the metaphor of the river seems again relevant to take into account these remarks.

> 96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

To treat first principles as channels in which the waters of our empirical judgments circulate has many advantages. First of all, it encourages us to abandon the vertical line of thought, which tends to reduce the place of the first principles to the bottom, the basis of a reasoning. On the contrary, we shall privilege a horizontal line of thought, which conceives first principles as being "everywhere", because they are not so much the ground as the continuous framework of our judging activities.

Moreover, this way of thinking enables us to settle a debate about the nature of the first principles. Some interpreters[23] consider that we should read them along a particularist line of thought, whereas others[24] think more appropriate to read them along a generalist line of thought. For instance, when the first "first principle" states that "everything of which I am conscious exists", according to the first line of thought, we should understand that every single belief about what a person is conscious of is itself a first principle, while according to the second line of thought, we should understand that there is only one first principle, the one which states the truth of every belief about what a person is conscious of. I think that none of

[23] James Van Cleve, "Reid on the first principles of contingent truths", *Reid Studies 3*, n°1, 1999, p. 3-30.
[24] Wolterstorff (*ibid.*, 2004, p. 91-95).

them has to be privileged. Indeed, Reid never totally separates the particular natural judgments (that is to say the water) from the first principles (the channels in which the water flows). Both are indissociable. The movements of the water cannot take place somewhere else than in the river-bed, and a river-bed deprived of water is a siding, but not any more something which organises the flux of our experiences.

Nevertheless, I guess Reid would not follow the Wittgenstein's line of thought all along. Its most evident flaw is to suggest a continual movement among the propositions, hard first principles becoming more and more fluid. Reid is not ready to accept such a dynamism, conceived as a relativist threat. Of course, he recognises the tentative character of his set of first principles, but he only means that it's a sketchy list. If the list is provisory, it does not imply that the principles which have been extracted so far could be excluded later. It means that the frontiers of common sense have been drawn along dotted lines, and that there may be new principles which would complete the mapping.

III.2) A Difficulty of the Reidian Project

This Reidian conviction is to be linked to his pursued aim through the codification of the first principles: the stabilisation of knowledge. As he regularly reminds us: "A clear explication and enumeration of the principles of common sense, is one of the chief *desiderata* in logic" (IHM, 7, 216). Reid wishes that we bring all the decisions of common sense "into a code".

> It would contribute greatly to the stability of human knowledge, and consequently to the improvement of it, if the first principles upon which the various parts of it are grounded were pointed out and ascertained. (EIP, VI, 4, 457)

The delimitation of the first principles will have a boosting effect on the whole structure of knowledge.

However, this delineating task raises some problems. As we have seen, in order to defeat the sceptical argument, Reid strives to codify that which operates in our mind without our ever taking it under consideration. Once they are codified, the first principles are to be conceived as the products of a specific philosophical work. They are not considered as naturally operating in our practices, but as what Reid managed to extract from them. Therefore, in the manner they are formulated, they bear Reid's mark. Besides, there is a kind

of strangeness in considering these principles for themselves, abstracted from their natural operating. The risk is that, while they are put under scrutiny, they do not continue to do their constitutive work. Even if we usually never consider them as such, as a distinctive object of analysis, Reid remarks that "some very rare occasion" can trigger another attitude towards them (EIP, III, 2, 256). This attitude, which consists for instance in explicitly taking into consideration the reliability of our sense perception, is quite uncommon and artificial. Nevertheless, Reid does not consider it as totally inappropriate. He seizes this occasion as an opportunity to turn the mind of the "sceptically-framed philosophers" into a well-disposed mood towards the fifth first principle. It remains that, while the first principles are apprehended for themselves, we may fear they might function in an unusual manner. They do not perform their usual work, which is to guide and to force our assent, but they are proposed to our understanding. In these occasions, they wait for our assent. They are made a specific object of thought and they require to be analysed not from the point of view of their natural working in practice, but from an abstract and theoretical point of view.

But then, we face a real paradox: if on the one hand, the verbal formulation of the first principles is an important step in the improvement of our knowledge, on the other hand we may fear that, when principles are put in this linguistic form, when they are not any more a rule of testing but something to test, they might not be immediately assented to. How are we to escape this dead-end? In order to bypass this difficulty, Reid distinguishes the ordinary context, in which first principles "force assent in *particular* instances", from the philosophical context, in which they are "turned into a *general* proposition" (EIP, VI, 5, 482). I think we should go further. What is important is not so much the distinction between particular natural judgments and the general form of the first principles, as the distinction between the necessary conditions to *know* something and the necessary conditions to make a knowledge *assertion*. The last are more demanding than the first. Indeed, when we are in the context of a discourse, we expect our interlocutor to be able to state the reasons why he does a knowledge assertion. This is one of the "conversational implicatures" theorised by Grice[25]. Whereas when we are not in a position to state what we know, nobody expects us to furnish any reasons for this knowledge. That's why, in the context of a discussion with a sceptic, the requirements naturally tend to rise. That's why – once the principles are explicitly stated – the sceptic is legitimate to ask what are our reasons to make such a knowledge assertion. And that's why Reid indulges himself in using rational means to make their self-evidence appear

[25] *Logic and conversation*, 1975, in Cole, P. and Morgan, J. (eds.) *Syntax and semantics*, vol. 3, New York: Academic Press.

more brightly. It remains that we can be uncertain as to whether they continue to act as principles of truth, while they are considered as truths to be confirmed and verified. It is maybe in such an artificial philosophical context that there is some movement in the river-bed, some of the channels becoming momentarily fluid. Due to the discussion with the sceptic, the aspired stability of our system of knowledge actually looks like more a moving stability[26]. Nevertheless, we can take for granted that the integrity of the epistemic system is saved, as long as the first principles are not challenged all at the same time and as long as their knowledge remains tacit[27]. In other words, it seems that the first principles cannot be *at the same time in the foreground*, functioning as premises (for philosophical purpose) and *in the background*, functioning as channels (for our natural judgments). Some of our perplexities about them precisely come from the fact that Reid did not see their heterogeneous nature in these two different contexts, as if he "wanted the first principles to do with different jobs at once"[28].

[26] This fallibilist reading may explain why the notion of common sense gives some "food for thought" to pragmatism.
[27] For the development of a contextualist foundationalism: Wilfried Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997; Michaels Williams, *Groundless Belief – An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology*, Princeton UP, New Jersey, 1977.
[28] De Bary (*ibid.*, p. 45). Reid alludes to this difficulty in (IHM, 5, 2, 57) and (IHM, 1, 2, 14-15).