I argue that Reid adopts a form of Meinongianism about fictional objects because of, not in spite of, his common sense philosophy. According to 'the way of ideas', thoughts take representational states as their immediate intentional objects. In contrast, Reid endorses a direct theory of conception and a heady thesis of first-person privileged access to the contents of our thoughts. He claims that thoughts about centaurs are thoughts of non-existent objects, not thoughts about mental intermediaries, adverbial states or general concepts. In part this is because of the common sense semantics he adopts for fictional-object terms. I show that it is reasonable for Reid to endorse Meinongianism, given his epistemological priorities, for he took the way of ideas to imply that his view about first-person privileged access to our mental contents was false.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our criticisms of historical philosophers, when not of a constructive nature, typically fall into one of two classes. First, one might say of a historical theory that it is incoherent, which I take to indicate not mere inconsistency, but rather unmitigated inconsistency at the conceptual heart of a theory. On occasion, this type of criticism is said to apply not merely to a theory but to a historical philosopher's entire system, an accusation Catherine Wilson brings against Leibniz, for example.1 Secondly, one might say that a historical theory is false, even though coherent. While we may have good reason to think that some of Reid's theories are false, one rarely sees criticisms alleging that they are incoherent, or that his philosophical system taken as a whole is. In part this is because Reid thinks systematically and keeps himself apprised of the logical relations that one position bears to others which he adopts. But if S.A. Grave is correct, then a large portion of Reid's work is incoherent. Grave rhetorically asks

What does Reid mean when he says that a centaur is the direct object of the conception of a centaur and that there are no centaurs, that the circle does not exist and

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

Grave thinks that either Reid fails to understand his own theory of conception, or (less provocatively) Reid’s theory of conception as applied to fictional objects is incoherent.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Reid’s analysis of the mind’s ability to conceive of fictional objects coheres with his other philosophical commitments. This necessitates (a) showing that, to put it anachronistically, Reid is a Meinongian. Reid believes that we can conceive of and attach predicates to non-existent objects — objects that are not names, general concepts, properties or mental ficta. Part of the interest in this thesis lies in the way in which I expect many will react to it: ‘Reid, standard-bearer of the common sense tradition, champion of empirical methods in philosophy, a Meinongian? Surely not.’ This is why I shall (b) show that endorsing Meinongianism accords with Reid’s philosophical goals, once we fully appreciate the nature of his rejection of the way of ideas. In addition to illuminating what Reid himself regarded as a keystone of his response to the way of ideas, and showing that he is not the prosaic common sense philosopher we often think he is, a further purpose of this project arises from a desire to defend Reid against Grave’s allegation.

II. DEFLATIONISM, INFLATIONISM AND MEINONGIANISM

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

1. p is about unicorns
2. Unicorns must exist in some sense in order for p to be about them
3. If unicorns exist in any sense, p is false
4. Therefore p is false.

Cartwright identifies possible responses to the argument, on the basis of which premise we deny. There are inflationist, deflationist and Meinongian responses to this argument. Each position must choose between conflicting inclinations. On the one hand, we seem to have the ability to predicate properties of fictional creatures (‘Pegasus is white’), and to individuate them

(Pegasus is distinct from his offspring). On the other hand, unicorns and winged horses do not exist, and to predicate anything of them seems to require maintaining that they have some type of intentional or mental existence.

Inflationists claim that to predicate anything at all of unicorns, even in negative existential claims, unicorns must have some measure of existence; this is to affirm (2). They also claim that \( p \) is about unicorns. They thus deny (3), and argue that unicorns 'subsist' or have some other mode of existence. What is lost by the inflationist in increasing our ontological commitments is gained by being able to explain our linguistic ability to individuate and say things about unicorns. But spelling out what these different modes of existence are has always been an intractable problem.

Deflationists argue instead that there is, properly speaking, no type of existence we can attribute to unicorns. They might argue that the inflationist equivocates with 'exist' by believing that unicorns do not exist, and by denying (3). Deflationists hold that \( p \) is not about unicorns, but about something else entirely. Most commonly, \( p \) is thought to be about a mental representation, e.g., one's idea of a unicorn. Alternatively one might say that \( p \) is about a property of the speaker affirming \( p \). In either case the deflationist seeks to keep our ontology parsimonious, at the expense of premise (i) and at the expense of the kind of privileged access to our mental states that Reid associates with a common sense semantics for \( p \). For Reid would argue that the deflationist position implies that people who think they are talking about unicorns when uttering propositions about unicorns do not know what they are talking about. Deflationism necessitates an explanatory artifice to account for the common tendency to predicate properties of fictional objects in these ways.

While Cartwright does not identify the third option with Meinong, James Van Cleve does.4 The third option, Meinongianism, is to deny (2). (I concur with Van Cleve that contrary to popular belief, this, not inflationism, is Meinong's mature position.) This is perhaps the most surprising of the three options, because most people think that to predicate a property of any object, it must exist under some description – whether physically, mentally or in a third realm. This is why Meinong seems scarcely coherent when writing that 'There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects'.5 The Meinongian does not need equivocal senses of 'exist', as the

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4 J. Van Cleve, 'If Meinong is Wrong, is McTaggart Right?', Philosophical Topics, 24 (1996), pp. 231–54.
inflationist does, and so can affirm (3). But unlike the deflationist, the Meinongian does not forsake privileged access to our mental states by denying (i). Inflationism allegedly sacrifices ontology for epistemology, while deflationism allegedly sacrifices epistemology for ontology. It is not clear just how the advocate of the third position understands the stakes of the debate. As a result, one might well deem the Meinongian position implausible. I shall defend the plausibility neither of Meinongianism nor of the controversial assumption that denying (i) impugns a notable variety of privileged access. Instead I shall argue that this Meinongian position is actually Reid’s position, and I shall explain why Reid adopts it. With this taxonomy, we can look at how Reid describes our apprehension of fictional objects.

III. WHY REID IS A MEINONGIAN

When we ‘barely conceive any object’, says Reid, ‘the ingredients of that conception must either be things with which we were before acquainted by some other original power of the mind, or they must be parts or attributes of such things’. Reid is aware that this doctrine is not new. He explains his accord with Locke on the matter, and then argues that Hume’s missing shade of blue is a red herring (IP IV i, p. 367b). The key difference between Reid and Locke is that for Locke, sensations (and for Hume, impressions) provide us with all our ingredients for conceptions. Reid holds that we can be acquainted with objects directly, not through sensations, in virtue of the ability of objects to cause concepts in us formally. Strictly speaking, sensations, though physically necessary, are not sufficient for the production of our concepts of bodies. That Reid endorses a direct, non-representational theory of cognition serves as an assumption for the present study. I shall say something more about this at the conclusion of this paper.

I shall first consider Reid’s affirmation of (1) and (3). Reid’s affirmation of (3), that if unicorns exist in any sense, p is false, is not nearly as explicit as his affirmation of (1), but it does not have to be. There are difficulties in showing that Reid affirms (3). First, there are difficulties of interpretation. Secondly, it does not seem that Reid has a conceptual repertoire imbued with various concepts of existence, which is needed to articulate (3). The only distinction with which he seems familiar in this context is the crude formal/objective distinction as presented by Descartes: Reid shows no awareness of Avicenna or Aquinas on this topic. Rather than being a difficulty standing in the way of showing that Reid affirms premise (3), this is actually a telling difficulty for

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showing that he denies it. For I doubt that Reid ever seriously considered
reasons for which one would deny it. His plain-spoken philosophical
vocabulary, which lies on top of his common sense methodology, militates
against any attempt to find distinctions between uses of ‘existence’ in his
work. But doing just that would be required to show that Reid denies (3).
The only option within his purview is to claim that our thoughts of unicorns
are thoughts of other thoughts, i.e., of unicorns objectively in thought. It will
become apparent presently, in my consideration of Reid’s affirmation of (1),
that he rejects this option.

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

Reid continues ‘The philosopher says, I cannot conceive a centaur
without having an idea of it in my mind.... Perhaps he will say, that the idea
is an image of the animal, and is the immediate object of my conception,
and that the animal is the mediate or remote object.’ To this, Reid first
responds by arguing that upon inspection of the content of his thought,
there appears to be only one object of conception, not two. Secondly, the
single object of conception ‘is not the image of an animal – it is an animal. I
know what it is to conceive an image of an animal, and what it is to conceive
an animal; and I can distinguish the one of these from the other without any
danger of mistake’ (pp. 373a-b). This marks a gratuitously simplistic seman-
tics for fictional-object terms, one that I hesitate to attribute to any advocate
of the ideal theory (I shall follow Reid in referring to the way of ideas as ‘the
ideal theory’, for convenience). Leaving Reid’s abilities as a historian of
philosophy to one side, this comment marks an unequivocal affirmation
of premise (1), that a belief that unicorns do not exist is about unicorns, and
thus marks a corresponding denial of the deflationist position.

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

Deflationism is committed to an ontology with mental representations,
like ideas. Reid has given many reasons to think that ideas are not the
direct objects of our other faculties. Perceptions do not take ideas as inten-
tional objects, but rather take physical bodies and physical qualities as their
intentional objects. He says the same about memory-beliefs and about
conceptions. To think that there is a mental entity lurking within an act of
imagination, i.e., ‘to infer from this that there is really an image in the mind,
... is to be misled by an analogical expression; as if, from the phrases of
deliberating and balancing things in the mind, we should infer that there
is really a balance existing in the mind’ (IP IV ii, p. 373b). Reid’s rejection of
this kind of deflationism is of a piece with his desire to ferret out the ideal
theory’s philosophical corruptions.

We can directly conceive of creatures that have never existed, just as we
can directly conceive of structures that no longer exist, or events that have
passed. Indeed Reid claims (IP IV ii, p. 374a) that we can conceive of an
object that will never exist, a circle:

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

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

As a result of Reid’s affirmation of (1) and (3) and his denial of (2), I infer
that Reid adopts what I have described as the Meinongian position. We can
apply predicates to non-existent objects, which implies that existence is a

I develop Reid’s analysis of this process in my ‘Learning and Conceptual Content in
property, in roughly the sense which this phrase is given in ontological arguments. I shall proceed by examining possible interpretations which do not attribute this Meinongian position to Reid.

IV. TWO ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

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

First, Reid’s theory of sensation may be used here to ground an interpretation on which our conception of non-existent objects is adverbial in nature. An adverbial theory of sensation is a theory according to which sensory states are best analysed not as relations to sense-data (as on the ideal theory), nor as representational states, but as purely qualitative states, i.e., as ways in which we are aware. Paradigmatically, the sensory experience of seeing a red chair is more accurately redescribed as seeing the chair by sensing redly. Avoiding problems associated with representational theories of sensation is the principal reason for adopting an adverbial analysis.

There is abundant textual evidence for construing Reid’s theory of sensations along these lines in both major works. Reid claims that a sensation ‘can have no existence but when it is perceived, and can only be in a sentient being or mind’. Furthermore, sensation does not have an intentional object – though the perceptual event, of which the sensation is a part, is directed at an object. He says that ‘in sensation, there is no object distinct from that act of mind by which it is felt’ (IP II xvi, p. 310a), and ‘I can attend to what I feel, and the sensation is nothing else, nor has any other qualities

8 For the sake of completeness I have attempted to determine whether, in his philosophy of religion, Reid commits himself to a view about existence sympathetic to the present interpretation. Unfortunately Reid does not discuss ontological arguments. He does say that necessary existence is ‘an attribute belonging to the deity’, but that is equivocal, as are his other statements in his discussion of God’s nature: see E. Duncan (ed.), Thomas Reid’s Lectures on Natural Theology (Univ. Press of America, 1981), p. 63.

than what I feel it to have. Its esse is sentiri, and nothing can be in it that is not felt. Sensations do not exist independently of being apprehended or felt.

If we believe that Reid adopts an adverbial theory of sensation, then the way seems open to extending this interpretation to non-existent objects. According to this analysis, one’s apprehension of a unicorn would become not a matter of taking a fictional object as the intentional object of a thought, but rather as a manner of thinking. The primary advantage of an adverbial theory of the conception of non-existent objects lies in the way in which it moves such ‘objects’ into the mental realm. This move largely nullifies the perplexity of their ontological status. Reid no longer needs to deny (2). In order to escape the conclusion of our argument, the adverbial interpretation has Reid denying (1).

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

There are further reasons against endorsing this interpretation in addition to this textual point. The adverbial theory of conception must hold that conceptions, like sensations, do not have intentional objects. By taking this route, the adverbialist claims that \( p \) is not about anything, therefore \( p \) is not about unicorns. Two points show that this is implausible.

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

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10 *Inq.*, ed. Brookes, p. 258. This is drawn from an undated abstract of the *Inquiry* prepared by Reid for Hume’s review. It is addressed to Reid’s intermediary, ‘The Revd Doctor Blair’.
The second reason against the adverbialist's attempt to replace the propositional content in conceptions with phenomenological content is straightforwardly philosophical. The notion that conceptual states are purely phenomenal is not obviously coherent, which is to say that Reid's distinction between sensory and conceptual states is a good one. We tend to give Chisholm and other advocates of adverbial theories of sensation some latitude in their creative descriptions of sensory states. Certain facets of a philosophical account of sensation will be elusive, which we may attribute to the ineffable qualities of phenomenological experience. But in the case of accounting for propositional contents, we are entitled to heighten our expectations. The adverbialist fails to meet these expectations because it is difficult to understand what it means to say that I conceive that-faith-is-the-lost-virtue-ly, or that-Iain-Banks'-science-fiction-novels-are-exquisitely-crafted-works-pregnant-with-frightening-alien-possibility-ly. Such states do not seem comprehensible. Thus denying that conceptions are about anything at all fails as a strategy for showing that Reid does not endorse a Meinongian position.

The second alternative interpretation draws upon Reid's description of what he refers to as 'general conceptions'. This strategy would also require two steps. The first would be to show that Reid endorses a non-Meinongian account of general concepts (which he also calls 'universals'). This could be either a form of inflationism, holding that universals exist in a third realm, or a form of deflationism, that there is no sense in which they exist or can be predicated of real particulars. The second step would involve showing that Reid applies what he says about general concepts to fictional individuals. I shall present reasons for thinking that what he says about universals tends to sound very much like what we have already observed him to say about fictional objects, and thus that this strategy cannot progress beyond the first step just described. His considered view on universals, though, is unclear.

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

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

In fact these passages seem to point indecisively towards a Meinongian interpretation of Reid on universals, for it seems that he claims that they do not exist, even though we can talk about them. Keith Lehrer and Vann McGee see Reid as endorsing some type of view in this neighbourhood, even though they are not primarily concerned with making a textual case for this attribution: 'Reid himself was unequivocal. Universals do not exist. We conceive of universals – that is, according to Reid, we know the meanings of general terms – but when we conceive of universals, as when we conceive of centaurs, we are conceiving of something that does not exist.' For Reid, the claim 'Universals do not exist' seems to mean that universals do not exist on any of the following three options: as ideas or mental entities, as Platonic entities in a third realm, or as exemplifications in particular things. Thus when Reid does discuss universals, he takes them to be something like Meinongian objects: items to which we can attach predicates, though they do not exist.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has also addressed this issue. However, he says just the opposite: 'it's clear that Reid, in spite of linguistic appearances, was not a nominalist: there are universals'. Wolterstorff claims explicitly that Reid was not a Meinongian. However, his account of Meinongianism resembles a form of what I have been calling 'inflationism'. Wolterstorff (p. 74) says 'Reid was not a Meinongian; I see no evidence that he even so much as entertained the thought that the substances that exist might constitute a subset of those that have being'. That is true, for Reid clearly does not utilize concepts of existence, being and subsistence to explain fictional objects. But I have shown that Reid commits himself to another form of Meinongianism, no less worthy of the appellation. At different points in his career Meinong endorsed both the 'subsistence' theory Wolterstorff identifies as 'Meinongianism' and the 'non-existence, non-subsistence' view I have identified with that term. Though this point may be important for determining

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priority issues with respect to the development of theories of fictional objects, settling the matter is wholly irrelevant to my interpretation of Reid.

Wolterstorff claims that because Reid thinks that there are universals that can be objects of conception, he cannot be a nominalist. Thus perhaps he could light upon Reid saying that ‘Universals have no real existence’, and argue that, since Reid modifies ‘existence’ with ‘real’, there must be a sense of ‘existence’ appropriately predicated of universals. This, however, is not sufficient to show that Reid is not a nominalist. He might adopt a form of nominalism and contend that universals exist only in the sense that there are particulars that share attributes. Evidently, though, Wolterstorff believes Reid does not endorse nominalism in this sense, since he says flatly that he ‘was not a nominalist’. Hence, given the persuasive evidence that Reid does not think universals exist in any Platonic sense, the most charitable way to understand Wolterstorff is by reading him as claiming that universals exist in a mental realm of ideas. But if so, the texts do not significantly support his interpretation.

The principal barrier to understanding Reid’s position, and the interpretations of his commentators on this topic, is that these uses of ‘exist’ and ‘are’ are equivocal. When two of Reid’s foremost commentators, Lehrer and Wolterstorff, come to diametrically opposed interpretations, it is likely (i) that there is some serious discrepancy in the way they are using key terms, or (ii) that there is no clear truth about the matter, in this case what Reid’s analysis of universals is (or both, as I suspect). I have produced evidence to think that some fundamental ambiguities run through Reid’s discussion of universals, but in addition there is the further fact (which the disputants do not mention) that Reid himself indicates that he does not know what universals are. He remarks, for example, ‘As to the manner of how we conceive universals, I confess my ignorance’ (*IP V vi, p. 407b*). We need to recognize the strong possibility that he has no determinate view of universals. In fact, in a much more thorough study of Reid on universals than either of the two discussed thus far, Susan Castagnetto gets us no further. After her analysis she concludes ‘But there is still something odd about maintaining that there are universals even though universals don’t really exist’. This, of course, sounds just like what Reid says about fictional objects, which brings us full circle.

We have more evidence for interpreting Reidian universals as Meinongian non-existents than we have for interpreting them as mental entities, Platonic entities or sets of real particulars. However, I remain

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sceptical about finding out just what Reid's position is. Whatever view about universals we conclude is the one Reid adopts, it is sure to be significantly underdetermined. This being the case, what he says about universals cannot be successfully used to decide what he says about fictional objects.

Earlier, I mentioned that if one seeks to use Reid's discussion of universals to refute my interpretation of him as a Meinongian about fictional objects, then one would have to show first that Reid endorses a non-Meinongian theory of universals; then that, for him, fictional objects have the same ontological status as universals. Even if we were to assume that Reid endorses an inflationist or deflationist view about universals, that would still only bring my interlocutor to the end of the first stage of the process. In order to vindicate this interpretation, one must then show that Reid believes that fictional particulars like Pegasus have the same status as universals. Reid, though, does not explicitly support this move.

There are philosophical reasons against this hypothesis. Suppose Reid endorses a deflationist, nominalist interpretation. Then 'centaur' and 'horse' might refer to classes of instantiated properties in roughly the same way. However, it is not clear that this makes any sense. 'Horse' refers to the set of instances of the property called 'horse'. But the property of being a centaur has no instances, so we cannot interpret Reid's use of fictional-object-kind terms as being relevantly similar to his use of general-concept terms.

More important, though, is that any non-Meinongian account of universals will fail to preserve Reid's common sense epistemic theses. He says that when I think of a centaur, the object of that act 'is a centaur, an animal which, I believe, never existed'. The ideal theory implies that this common sense commitment is incorrect, and that instead I am thinking of an idea of a centaur, in response to which Reid asks 'What then is this idea? Is it an animal, half horse and half man? No. Then I am certain it is not the thing I conceive' (IP IV ii, p. 373a). This common sense semantics would produce the very same result were we to suppose that fictional-object terms like 'centaur' refer either to mental representations of centaurs or to a set of property instances. For I know that an animal that is half horse and half man is not merely a set of property instantiations, just as I know that a horse or a man is not merely a set of property instantiations. They are, rather, subjects of predication.

I shall explore Reid's allegiance to these common sense epistemic views presently, in order to uncover the deeper reasons for which Reid adopts Meinongianism. Why, after all, is Reid drawn to these naïve common sense claims in the first place?
V. REJECTING THE IDEAL THEORY

Whether or not Meinongianism correctly captures the nature of fictional objects, we can see that Reid exercises good judgement and attends to the internal consistency of his system in arriving at this surprising conclusion. I shall explain Reid’s central epistemological reasons for adopting Meinongianism, and I shall analyse how it arises from Reid’s rejection of the ideal theory.

Reid writes to James Gregory ‘The merit of what you are pleased to call my philosophy, lies, I think, chiefly in having called in question the common theory of ideas’.14 Reid is not merely being self-effacing: he is being honest, and for the present discussion his dictum is especially à propos. Reid’s arrival at Meinongianism follows from his examination of what he takes to be the two key commitments of the ideal theory:

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

To clarify Reid’s attributions, we can say that the ideal theory is committed to the following two propositions:

(a) For all intentional states of the mind, their immediate objects are mental representations
(b) That which does not exist cannot be the object of intentional states of the mind.

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

14 Letter reprinted in Hamilton’s edition, p. 88b. (The date of writing is not supplied.)

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By insufficiently appreciating the force of these two commitments, Grave insinuates, in the *bon mot* quoted above (pp. 582–3), that Reid does not know the contours of his own account of fictional objects. Understanding Reid's analysis in the light of (a) and (b) will help us avoid Grave's error.15

Reid believes that, amongst the advocates of the ideal theory, Hume and Locke in particular are committed to (a) and (b). Furthermore, he thinks that any such commitments will render one's theory of cognition implausible. Hume's assent to (b), for example, is obvious. Ideas and impressions must exist because, by conceiving them, we call them into existence.16 Thesis (a) may be broken down into two parts, one that affirms the immediacy of representations, and another that affirms the representative features of mental intermediaries. Hume affirms both portions of (a). As to the immediacy of representations,

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

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

By this admittedly brief case on behalf of Reid's attribution of (a) and (b) to Hume, I intend to show only that Reid does have some reason to think that his predecessors fit the mould he casts for them. (A sound case can be made for Locke's adoption of (a) and (b), although with Berkeley the situation is, for obvious reasons, not so obvious.)

I shall now turn to showing how Reid's Meinongianism stems from his repudiation of (a) and (b). Reid's empirical method in his analysis of the operation of our mental faculties leads him to conclude that (a) and (b) imply that we generally do not know what we are thinking about. This marks the failure of the ideal theory to account for what Reid takes to be an epistemological datum. Assume (a), and we can coax out of Reid the following argument:

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15 An added point of interest in this discussion is the fact that (a) resembles the central commitment of what some, Laurence BonJour, for example, identify as the predominant contemporary theory of cognition: see his 'Is Thought a Symbolic Process?', *Synthese*, 89 (1991), pp. 331–52, at p. 336.

5. 'Centaurs' refers to non-existent creatures that are half men, half horses [premise]
6. Since nothing that does not exist can be the object of thought, $S$ cannot think of centaurs [from (a) and (5)]
7. $S$ believes that he can and does think of centaurs [premise].

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

8. When $S$ has a thought which he believes is about centaurs, $S$ is mistaken in his identification of the content of his thought [from (6) and (7)].

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

9. $S$ is mistaken in identifying the content of his thought $t$ whenever $S$ believes that $t$'s content is about anything other than a mental representation [from (8) and (a)].

Reid draws the line here: common sense epistemic principles must hold sway over implications of the ideal theory.

10. It is obvious that $S$ is not systematically mistaken about the contents of thoughts about things other than $S$'s mental states [premise]
11. Therefore (a) is false [by reductio from (9) and (10)].

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

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

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

Reid also emphasizes epistemic considerations earlier in Essays on the Intellectual Powers. Speaking of a commitment to a representational theory of cognition, he says

The necessary consequence of this seems to be, that there are two objects of this thought – the idea, which is in the mind, and the person represented by that idea; the first, the immediate object of the thought, the last, the object of the same thought, but not the immediate object. This is a hard saying; for it makes every thought of things external to have a double object. Every man is conscious of his thoughts, and yet, upon attentive reflection, he perceives no such duplicity in the object he thinks about (IP II ix, p. 278b; cf. IV ii, p. 369a–b).

I take this passage as a repudiation of (9). Together, these passages show that Reid presumes a heady view about the transparency of first-person access.

I shall now consider some possible responses from Hume, in order to improve our understanding of Reid’s modus operandi. Hume would argue that instead of conceiving of something that is half horse, half man, we are actually conceiving of a mental representation of such a thing. He would affirm (5), but deny (7). He might do this by arguing for a semantics of fictional-object terms such that our dealings with centaurs come under two concepts – ‘centaur’, the use denoted in (5), and ‘centaur2’, which refers to representations of centaurs. Indeed, Reid himself could be seen as engendering such a semantics when he says

What is meant by conceiving a thing? we should very naturally answer, that it is having an image of it in the mind – and perhaps we could not explain the word better. This shews that conception, and the image of a thing in the mind, are synonymous expressions (IP IV i, p. 363a).

However, despite the fact that Reid allows imagination a role in conceiving, he is quick to observe that talk of images in the mind is strictly analogical. Common usage puts images into the mind, but, in truth,

We know nothing that is properly in the mind but thought; and, when anything else is said to be in the mind, the expression must be figurative, and signify some kind of thought (p. 363a).

Furthermore, one might think this response amounts to the factual claim that we have two concepts for all non-existent terms. Reid would argue that this does not let Hume off the hook. For (a) and (b) impel Hume to posit equivocal concepts not just for non-existent objects like centaurs, but for all sorts of other non-existent objects, like formerly existent people, and for
existent tables and chairs as well. Of course Hume does something quite like this in *Treatise* I iv 2, when he distinguishes between vulgar and philosophical views about the objects of perception. But Reid's common sense commitments prevent him from taking seriously this option, of affirming (5) and denying (7).

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

Reid would respond by arguing that, were Hume to say this, he would conflate two different mental operations. Reid holds that conception is crucially related to other mental faculties, but is not absorbed by them. This leads him to make a distinction between 'bare' and 'co-ordinated' conceptions ('co-ordinated' is my term). Reid calls some acts of conception 'bare' because that which is conceived need not be the object of any other mental faculty (*IP* IV i, p. 361a). A 'bare conception of a thing' is a conception that occurs 'without any judgement or belief about it' (p. 360a). He adds 'We may distinctly conceive a proposition, without judging it at all' (IV iii, p. 375a). It is thus possible that one merely conceives of something, whether a proposition, image, event, physical object or state of affairs. In contrast, co-ordinated conceptions are conceptions occurring in tandem with the use of other mental faculties. Since conception is a component of perception for Reid, when I perceive Durham Cathedral, for example, the event of conceiving of the cathedral is co-ordinated with the perceptual event of seeing the cathedral.

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

My aim in this discussion of two possible objections to Reid's argument
has been to give the argument some Reidian texture. The success of Reid's
argument relies upon an intrepid, though tacit, presumption of first-person
privileged access. Reid supposes that I can think of centaurs while knowing
that they do not exist. Given Reid's understanding of this presumption, he
tacitly affirms the following crude disjunction: either I am mistaken that my
thoughts about centaurs are about centaurs (and thus I must deny a robust
thesis of privileged access), or I am thinking about and attaching pre-
dicates to something that does not exist (and thus I must affirm a form of
Meinongianism).

VI. THE METAPHILOSOPHY BEHIND REID'S MEINONGIANISM

This is the dilemma Reid faced. The theories in each disjunct represent
extreme positions. Those who wish to reject the ideal theory's commitment
to a representational theory of thought (in (a) above) have many other
options. On the one hand, many would deny Reid's naive thesis of
privileged access. Merely claiming that some but not all content is internal
would mark a step towards a middle ground. On the other hand, we could
use any number of familiar tools in the philosophy of language to attempt to
skirt the problems about predication which Reid takes so seriously. These
tools include Fregean distinctions between levels of predicates, two-sense
theories that distinguish between 'exists' as applied to individuals and to
kinds, Wittgensteinian appeals to 'formal concepts', or intensional logics
purporting to account for the truth-value and logical form of propositions
about fictional objects (or perhaps combinations of these proposals). Defence
of Meinongian commitments about negative existential claims can itself be
accomplished in a considerably more straightforward manner than via
Reid's circuitous epistemological route.

A related option has been developed in this context by Marian David,
who uses work by Brentano and Chisholm to make some distinctions
between senses of ‘exists’, and then argues that if Reid’s theory is to be made plausible, he must be ‘committed to a restricted sense of “to exist” in which it expresses a property like being-red, i.e., a property in virtue of which objects are distinguished from each other’. Unfortunately Reid’s uses of ‘exists’, ‘real’ and ‘object’ do not permit an interpretation on which those terms function in the way David and others wish they did. For David’s recommendation comes at the expense of Reid’s denial of (2) above — that unicorns must exist in some sense in order for \( p \) to be about them. David thus concludes (p. 599) by saying ‘Reid should have said “name” or “singular term” when he said “object”’ (my italics). For an unprejudiced ruling on Reid, we would need to appraise certain advantages of Meinongianism more fully than is possible here, but perhaps David is correct.

Nevertheless Reid’s adoption of Meinongianism is understandable and rational, given his philosophical goals, as I hope to have shown. He is willing to accept the views about the semantics of fictional-object terms which I have described, views which are philosophically controversial, on the condition that doing so is necessary to preserve his staunch allegiance to non-negotiable epistemic principles. This underscores the epistemological nature of Reid’s rejection of the ideal theory.

In fact, Reid adopts a direct theory of cognition for similar epistemological reasons. If John Haldane’s work on Reid’s theory of cognition is correct, as I believe it is, then Reid seems to endorse a theory similar to Aquinas’, according to which objects directly and formally cause our thoughts of them. In Reid’s version of this theory, such causal powers must be attributed to existing objects only, and not to non-existent Meinongian objects, but how Reid can carry this off consistently is not obvious. Positing formal causes and the like may be thought to mark an extravagant metaphysics, but in the present day just such a possibility has been raised in this context. Laurence BonJour (p. 346), in describing his own rejection of contemporary representational theories of cognition, readies himself for an alternative theory that ‘will have to involve metaphysics of a pretty hard-core kind’. BonJour seeks a non-representational theory of cognition, for reasons in part having to do with first-person access to our contents — the sort of concerns which exercise Reid. As this study shows, Reid is indeed prepared to do metaphysics of a ‘pretty hard-core kind’ to preserve his convictions about privileged access.


Despite pervasive problems with Meinongianism, Reid none the less becomes a more interesting and better philosopher when read as endorsing this theory. Reid’s Meinongianism may reap dividends elsewhere in his philosophical system: for example, it may be capable of servicing some problems about perceptual error that plague direct theories of perception like Reid’s. In the philosophical context of this paper, I have shown that the only other textually plausible alternative reconstruction of Reid’s analysis of fictional objects is Grave’s, and by his lights Reid’s view is incoherent. In contrast, I have argued that Reid’s theory of fictional objects falls straightforwardly out of his rejection of the ideal theory. While I share some of Grave’s consternation, my misgivings about Reid’s views arise not from the belief that Reid does not understand the contours of his own theory of non-existent objects, but from worries about what positions Reid was willing to accept in the name of a common sense epistemology.¹⁹

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¹⁹ I have benefited from conversation and correspondence about these matters with Gideon Yaffe, George Pappas, Jim Van Cleve and William Taschek, and from discussions with fellow participants in the 2000 NEH seminar on Thomas Reid, at which I presented an earlier version of this paper.