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'An Open Revolt against the Authority of Reid': Thomas Brown and the Developments of Common-Sense Philosophy

Cristina Paoletti

Defined as 'the last of common sense philosophers' in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Thomas Brown's collocation within the common sense school is quite problematical and his role in the tradition of Scottish philosophy appears puzzling.[1]

Born in Edinburgh in 1778, Brown studied medicine under the supervision of James Gregory, Reid's relative and author of an essay on moral causes, and graduated in 1804.[2] His first contribution to the philosophical debate was a lengthy review of Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*, published in 1798.[3] In the following years, Brown joined the *Academy of Physics*, a learned society established by a few of Dugald Stewart's pupils who were especially fond of chemistry and eager to discuss the latest discoveries in natural philosophy.[4] The same group – which included Henry Brougham, William Erskine, John Leyden, James Reddie, Francis Horner, Francis Jeffrey – also founded the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802. As Dugald Stewart's pupil and *protegé*, Brown taught moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh from 1810 to 1820.[5] He supported a non-materialistic view of the mind and endorsed the existence of original beliefs; for these reasons he is usually affiliated to the common sense school.

Although Brown is nowadays a neglected figure, he was a widely read author in the nineteenth century. His *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* were republished more than thirty times between 1820 and 1860 and were used as a textbook in British and American universities. Brown's philosophy was admired for its lively and insightful description of human sentiments and

[1] Christopher Bryant, 'Thomas Brown', *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London, 1998).

[2] James Gregory, *Philosophical and Literary Essays* (Edinburgh, 1792).

[3] Thomas Brown, *Observations on the Zoonomia of Erasmus Darwin* (Edinburgh, 1798).

[4] On the pivotal role played by the *Academy of Physics* in the early nineteenth-century Scottish culture see G. N. Cantor, 'The Academy of Physics at Edinburgh 1797–1800', *Social History of Science*, 5 (1975), 109–34.

[5] Brown's lectures were published in 1820 as *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*; quotations are from the second edition (Edinburgh, 1828).

its positive influence on the young. Thomas Chalmers, minister of the Free Church of Scotland, edited an abridged edition of Brown's *Lectures* as they afforded an important description of mental powers and were conducive to the elevation of the soul.[6] As Samuel Butler had written more than a century earlier, introspection was the faculty by which humans discover virtue, and Brown, Chalmers thought, gave a palatable and helpful description of the human mind.

Chalmers' edition of Brown contributed to the spread of common sense philosophy among non-philosophers: popular in Evangelical and Unitarian communities, Brown's physiology of mind was the standard view on the intellectual powers and their proper education. Unconcerned about the possible strictures in psychology and epistemology, these readers were captured by Brown's flowing prose, rhetorical talent and impressive efficacy in picturing the treasures of the human mind. Religious readers seemed not to be interested in deciding whether Brown was a worthy member of the common sense school and enjoyed Brown's books as attractive didactic works.

Brown and Scottish philosophy

Brown was the first to suggest the Positivist interpretation of the Humean account of causality as uniform temporal relation. In a set of papers written between 1805 and 1818, Brown defended Hume's correct understanding of causality as temporal connection.[7] He summarised Hume's doctrine in three

[6] 'There is no author who has not expressly treated of revelation, whose mental philosophy suggests so many accordances between the science of mind and the subject-matter of Christianity. From the wide territory of thought over which he expatiates, there is no enlightened student, enlightened we mean both in philosophy and holy writ, who might not gather from it fresh proofs and illustrations on the side of the Christian argument' (Thomas Chalmers, 'Preface', in Thomas Chalmers (ed.), Thomas Brown, *Lectures on Ethics*, (Edinburgh 1846), XXII–XXIII). On the reception of Brown's philosophy among Evangelicals see Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions. The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge, 2003).

[7] Thomas Brown, *Observations on the Nature and Tendency of the Doctrine of Mr. Hume, concerning the Relation of Cause and Effect* (Edinburgh, 1805 and 1806, 2nd edn); *Inquiry into the Relation of Cause and Effect* (Edinburgh, 1818). The first two papers were occasioned by the 'Leslie affair', the election of John Leslie to the chair of natural philosophy against the wishes of the Church of Scotland. Leslie was accused of atheism for quoting Hume in his book on heat, *An Experimental Inquiry into the Nature and Propagation of Heat* (London, 1804), and was defended by Dugald Stewart (see Dugald Stewart, *A Short Statement of Some Important Facts, relative to the Late Election of a Mathematical Professor in the University of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, 1805).

basic statements:

> the first proposition of Mr. Hume's theory, [is] that *the relation of cause and effect cannot be* discovered a priori [...] [The second proposition] is, that, *even after experience, the relation of cause and effect cannot be discovered by reason* [...] the third proposition of Mr Hume's theory is, that, *the relation of cause and effect is an object of belief alone*.[8]

Brown's goal was to show that Hume was correct in denying that we can perceive active powers and efficient causes and that the only intelligible definition of cause is a uniform and invariable antecedent. Unlike Reid, who thought that Hume's account is correct only if restricted to natural philosophy, Brown maintained that it should be extended to moral causes. John Stuart Mill explicitly placed the origin of British Positivism in Brown's restatement of Hume's theory of causality and the definition of cause as uniform antecedent was deemed its only scientific description. Modern readers have several reasons to be suspicious about Brown's interpretation of Hume, but it is worth noting that Brown praised Hume, an attitude quite uncommon among common sense philosophers.

Moreover, Brown accepted an associationistic explanation of the complex operations of the mind. Brown complained that the Scottish school – that is common sense philosophy – had unreasonably increased the faculties or powers of the mind:

> The great defect of [this] System of Philosophy [...] seems to me to be a redundancy of division, arising partly indeed from imperfect analyses of the complex phenomena of thought which a nicer observation might have shewn to be in their elements the same, but still more from indistinct notions attached to the words *Faculty* or *Power* of the Mind, and to the processes that are termed *Operations* or *Acts* of those Powers; by which, a sort of mystery has been thrown over the simple sequences of the Phenomena of the Mind, the relations of which to each other or to certain bodily changes, are all which those words can be justly employed to denote.[9]

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[8] Brown, *Observations on the Nature and Tendency of the Doctrine of Mr. Hume*, 1805, 2–3, 9, emphasis in original.

[9] Thomas Brown, *Sketch of a System of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (Edinburgh, 1820), X.

Brown substantially supported an associationistic philosophy of mind when he employed 'suggestion' to describe mental activity. The term was borrowed from Reid, who used it to express the immediate relation arising in the mind between a sensation and the object producing it. Brown adopted the term to replace the old-fashioned word association and reject two aspects commonly related to associationism. Firstly, mental association is not deemed the result of a convergence of cerebral traces or the combination of nervous vibrations and 'implied too gross an analogy with corporeal things'.[10] The material origin of mental association was also affirmed by Reid, who used it to prove that association of ideas cannot account for the whole of mental activity.[11] Brown more broadly rejected that mental life might be explained in terms of cerebral or nervous activity; he thought of materialism as a misinterpretation of the interaction between mind and body. Moreover, the phrase *association of ideas* 'seem[s] to confine the tendency of suggestion to our ideas alone', or, in Humean words, to the faint representations of external objects.[12] On the contrary, Brown also considered passions and emotions: his philosophy of mind stressed the connections among ideas – that is mental states which afford new knowledge about the material world, such as perception, memory, judgement – and feelings, sentiments and emotions. Brown allowed suggestion a wider range of reference than association usually referred to, included non-cognitive mental states and stressed the function of emotions in mental life.

By considering just these few elements, we can well understand why James Mackintosh defined Brown's philosophy as 'an open revolt against the authority of Reid': Reid's efforts to disprove Hume's account of perception seemed unsuccessful insofar as Brown revitalised association and considered fruitless Reid's polemic against the *way of ideas*.[13] Brown could agree with Reid that we do not need representations in order to have an adequate knowledge of the world, but, unlike Reid, Brown affirmed that no philosopher had truly claimed the 'theory of ideas'. Descartes, for example, endeavoured to prove that there are three elements in perception:

> The presence of the external body, the organic change […] and the affections of the mind, which he expressly asserts to have no

[10] Brown, *Lectures*, 257.

[11] See especially Reid's analysis of Hartley's psychology in D. R. Brookes and K. Haakonssen (eds), Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 2002), 80–7.

[12] Brown, *Lectures*, 254.

[13] James Macintosh, *Dissertation and Progress of Ethical Philosophy* (Edinburgh, 1836), 345.

> resemblance whatever to the motion that gave occasion to it,–these are all which he conceives to constitute the process of perception, without any idea, as a thing distinct,–a fourth thing intervening between the organic and the mental change.[14]

In stressing a 'Cartesian' non-idealistic account of perception, Brown was actually proposing his own interpretation of mental states as mental objects not representing or resembling the external world. Warmed by passions and emotions, Brown's mental states were a large class of mental phenomena among which mental images were an irrelevant group. Brown thought of Reid's historical account of philosophy as an overestimation of the role of ideas and in doing so he dismissed Reid's attempts as a sort of chasing after shadows. Brown repeated that Reid had interpreted literally phrases and examples that were to be better understood metaphorically and minimised the differences between Reid and Hume, maintaining that both were interested in a naturalistic account of the human mind. Their creed, Brown affirmed,

> was composed of two propositions and of the same two propositions, the first of which is, that the existence of a system of things, such as we understand when we speak of an external world, cannot be proved by argument; and the second that the belief of it is of a force which is […] absolutely irresistible. The difference, and the only difference is that, in asserting the two propositions, the sceptic pronounces the first in a loud tone of voice, and the second in a whisper, while his supposed antagonist passes rapidly over the first, and dwells on the second with a tone of confidence.[15]

Brown and the 'Common Sense School'

Brown's idiosyncratic reading of common sense philosophy was bitterly criticised by William Hamilton in his lectures and in a famous essay which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in the 1830.[16]

[14] Brown, *Lectures*, 172.

[15] Brown, *Lectures*, 177.

[16] Savina Tropea (ed.), William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics* (Bristol, 2001), I, 132–3 and *Philosophy of Perception*, in Savina Tropea (ed.), *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform* (Bristol, 2001), 39–99 (firstly published in *Edinburgh Review*, October 1830).

Hamilton did not share Brown's aim to afford a mental physiology, a naturalistic account of the spontaneous tendencies of the human mind and its obscure or unnoticed episodes. As Brown wrote,

> as by observation and experiment, we endeavour to trace those series of changes which are constantly taking place in our material part, from the first moment of animation to the moment of death; so, by observation, and in some measure also by experiment, we endeavour to trace the series of changes that take place in the mind, fugitive as these successions are, and rendered doubly perplexing by the reciprocal combination into which they flow.[17]

Brown afforded a naturalistic account of the operations of the mind, observed in different occasions and circumstances. As a matter of fact observation and experiment were praised by Reid as the mark of a 'Newtonian' science of mind,[18] but were actually rejected by Hamilton, who preferred to develop a philosophy of mind, or psychology, and to stress the several differences between the study of the mind and the investigation of nature:

> the words Physiology and Physics have been specially limited to denote sciences conversant about these laws as regulating the organic and inorganic bodies. The empire of nature is the empire of a mechanical necessity; the necessity of nature, in philosophy, stands opposed to the liberty of intelligence. Those, accordingly, who do not allow that mind is matter […] must regard the application of the terms Physiology and Physics to the doctrine of the mind as singularly inappropriate, or as significant as a false hypothesis in regard to the character of the thinking principle.[19]

As a consequence, Hamilton undervalued the observation and description of the mental phenomena, aiming rather at their assessment and evaluation. Eager to pursue the Kantian critique of mental faculties, he focused on the necessary conditions of human knowledge and thought of 'necessity' in terms of logical contradiction. The result was an unfortunate attempt to justify the

[17] Brown, *Lectures*, 3.

[18] Derek R. Brookes (ed.), Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (Edinburgh, 1997), 11–12.

[19] Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 133.

principles of common sense through Kantian philosophy: mental states were investigated in order to point out those necessary and essential conditions whose negation would imply a logical contradiction. According to Hamilton, the science of mind was no longer empirical and experimental, but truly theoretical and metaphysical; Brown's physiology of mind became therefore a disappointing and misleading attempt to account for intellectual powers.

Hamilton's polemic against Brown reveals different attitudes towards the science of mind: Brown was the heir of the British tradition aiming, like Locke in his *Essay*, to give a naturalistic description of human nature. On the contrary, Hamilton tried to reconcile Reid's common sense and German philosophy and actually reshaped the definition of common sense, excluding the natural history of the mind. Hamilton was also annoyed by Brown's attempts to mitigate Reid's polemic against the way of ideas and accused Brown of being one of the 'ideal philosophers'[20]. In fact, according to Hamilton, Brown's emphasis on mental states was an unsolicited restoration of the ideas, since the direct object of knowledge was not the material world, but a particular modification of the mind. Although not a mental image, the mental state was however a mental medium and Hamilton supposed it to be akin to Cartesian ideas. As a matter of fact, Brown carefully contrasted his account of perception with Reid's description of the theory of ideas. By the words 'idea' and 'perception',

> nothing more were meant to be expressed than [the] two parts of the [perceptive] process – the organic change, whatever it might be, and the subsequent mental change – without the necessary intervention of something distinct from both.[21]

Brown's philosophy was praised by John Stuart Mill, who defended Brown from Hamilton's charges. Mill shared Brown's interest in a naturalistic analysis of the mind and struggled to prove that Brown's account of perception was not part of the *theory of ideas*. On the contrary, Mill found it a correct

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[20] 'On the supposition, that Reid views in the immediate object of perception a mental modification, and not a material quality, Brown is fully warranted in asserting, that he left the foundations of idealism, precisely as he found them. Let it once be granted, that the object known in perception, is not convertible with the reality existing; idealism reposes in equal security on the hypothesis of a representative perception,–whether the representative image be a modification of consciousness itself,–or whether it have an existence independent either of mind or of the act of thought (Hamilton, *Philosophy of Perception*, 91).

[21] Brown, *Lectures*, 169.

consequence of Reid's statement that mental representations are not essential to human knowledge. In fact, Reid and Brown

> thought that certain sensations, irresistibly, and by a law of our nature, suggest, without any process of reasoning, and without the intervention of any *tertium quid*, the notion of something external, and an invincible belief in its real existence.[22]

Mill noted that Reid's criticism of mental representations or images also proposed a sort of twofold account of knowledge in which there is no medium between the mind and the material world. Brown actually described mental activity, but did not imply that mental states separate the mind and the object. He clearly stated that mental states are not images and emphasised the role played by emotions, phenomena that could hardly be represented through an image. Therefore, Mill concluded that Brown was one of Reid's accurate readers and Hamilton was misunderstanding Brown when accusing him of restoring the way of ideas.

It is striking that Mill is here praising Brown for adhering to Reid's philosophy. Despite his 'classical' criticism of common sense philosophy, Mill agreed with Reid on the naturalistic outlook on the mental faculties and the descriptive style of the philosophy of mind. Mill was especially concerned about the Kantian turn of the European philosophy and thought of Reid as an opponent to critical philosophy.

Brown and John Stuart Mill

Though accepting a 'Reidian' method in psychology, Mill was still critical of the role of experience and Mill's source was again Brown. Both Brown and Mill were eager to challenge Reid's theory according to which matter is a relative notion, bringing together its several sensible qualities.[23] Brown borrowed from the French *Ideologue* Destutt de Tracy the theory of the origin of the notion of matter through muscular sense, by which we perceive the resistance of bodies to our actions. Matter, Brown wrote, can be simply defined as 'that which

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[22] Alan Ryan (ed.), John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, in J.M. Robson (ed.), *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto, 1979), IX, 231.

[23] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, 217–21.

has parts, and that which resists to our effort to grasp it'.[24] Brown explained that newborn children gain the first notion of external bodies as something that resists, limits or impedes their voluntary motion. Children firstly think of matter as an obstacle to their will and, out of matter's opposition to muscular efforts, children think that something exists *out* of them. The muscular sensations of resistance, Brown admits, are not as clear and informative as visual or tactile sensations, but are weak and easily obscured. For this reason, muscular sensations can be easily mingled with other sensations and often become unnoticed and no longer perceived.

Brown's revolt against the authority of Reid is in this case clear: according to Reid, matter is the unknown substratum of sensations, insofar as sensations point out qualities or properties of matter and its independent existence is an original belief provided by common sense. On the contrary, Brown maintained that the notion of matter has an empirical origin and is afforded by a particular, though overlooked, class of sensations. Brown was proposing an original interpretation of realism, which circumvented both Berkeley's criticism of the common notion of matter as derived from touch and sight and Reid's appeal to common sense principles. Moreover Brown was rejecting the Reidian definition of primary and secondary qualities, a topic which Hamilton failed to note properly. Brown in fact denied that we can have an immediate and distinct knowledge of primary qualities, as any mental state suggests *a* quality of objects, but none truly asserts that the quality exists as we perceive it. Mental states, therefore, do not allow us to believe in the existence of primary and secondary qualities, but just in feelings produced by external objects. Brown was not rejecting realism, but he was founding it on original evidence: as S.A. Grave noted, according to Brown the existence of the world is not proved by its independent reality, but by our own perceptions, coming from material objects.[25] Brown's new challenge was to explain how the presence of the external world can be inferred from mental states, that is how the 'outsideness' of the world can be derived from mental phenomena. This point was emphasised by Mill, who in a note to his *System of Logic*, affirmed that Brown reacted to Reid's appeal to a supposed original belief in the existence of matter and

> applying greater powers of analysis than had previously been applied to the notions of extension and figure, pointed out that the sensations

[24] Brown, *Lectures*, 150; see also Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy, *Éléments d'idèologie* (Paris, 1970), I, 107–42.

[25] Selwin A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Westport, 1970), 182–3.

> from which those notions are derived, are sensations of touch combined with sensations of a class previously too little adverted to by metaphysicians, those which have their seat in our muscular frame.[26]

In the same chapter, Mill stressed that any possible account of matter must be grounded on experience and alluded to the definition of matter as the permanent possibility of sensations as a consequence of Brown's views. Unlike all other sensations, muscular sensations afford the notion of a permanent 'something' outside the mind: as the sensation of resistance is unexpected, unwelcome and unpleasant, it is also the most suitable for supporting the idea that objects exist independently of our minds.

Conclusion

Brown's case seems to generate an apparent incongruity in the tradition of common sense: attacked by Hamilton, universally recognised as the most important and influential defender of Scottish philosophy in the nineteenth century, he was read and praised by non common sense philosophers and Mill's definition of matter is a bizarre consequence of Brown's philosophy. An adversary of any intuitionist psychology, Mill felt that his philosophy was closely connected with a common sense philosopher like Brown, by whom he was influenced in one of his most famous discoveries. Mill was here receiving that part of Reid's philosophy which was neglected by Hamilton, that is naturalism. Mill's conclusions were remarkably different from Reid's ones, but like Reid he encouraged philosophers to observe human the mind and describe it through general laws.

The question that may be raised is, which kind of common sense was popularised by Brown's heterodox interpretation and how could it be so influential for the radical philosopher John Stuart Mill.

One possible answer is that Brown, unlike Hamilton, did not intend common sense as a philosophical school, but rather as an 'open question' or a set of open questions. Familiar with authors whom Reid could not know, Brown actually broadened the field of inquiry of common sense philosophy, examining the cognitive value of emotions or the sophisticated merging of expectation and belief. Brown provided his numerous and variegated readers

[26] John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, in J.M. Robson (ed.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto, 1974), VII, 61.

with a fruitful view of the philosophy of mind, in which he included relevant non-cognitive mental phenomena, also recognising their function in mental life. Brown stimulated a curiosity and a sensitiveness for the philosophy of mind, which was later to become a matter of discussion for the general public. Moreover, Brown thought of the philosophy of mind as an inductive science, grounded on the observation of psychic phenomena and aiming to establish general laws. His physiology of mind was akin to the developments which psychology was to undergo later in the nineteenth century through the application of the scientific method. Brown's common sense was therefore neither a doctrine nor a creed, but more generally a series of issues on the philosophy of mind.

Moreover, although he was a rebel disciple of the Scottish school, Brown popularised and kept alive those elements of Reid's philosophy that Hamilton rejected or overlooked. Brown's philosophy was of help to all those who interpreted mental phenomena as part of the natural world. Therefore Dissenters used to read Brown, as he provided an updated image of the gifted human mind, its possible developments and its harmony with Nature. On the other hand, Brown was of interest for those philosophers who encouraged a scientific approach to the study of the mind. Mill is again an exemplary figure: he borrowed from Brown a naturalistic and non-materialistic approach to the mind. Mill was indeed reluctant to admit the existence of original beliefs or principles of common sense, even though he thought that the bias of Scottish philosophy was not to support innate, original principles, but rather to infer from them a supernatural and non-empirical knowledge.[27] Mill's targets were Hamilton and the Frenchman Victor Cousin, who discussed how consciousness could suggest the notions of God and infinite. Among Scottish philosophers, Brown was the least susceptible to this criticism: he emphasised the processes of acquisition of beliefs and he appealed to the principles of common sense in order to avoid fruitless controversies.

The benefit Brown brought to the philosophical community was not the forcible defence of the identity of the Scottish school or the exploration of its possible connections with the new German philosophy, a mission which Hamilton undertook. On the contrary, Brown was influenced by philosophers

[27] '[The Common Sense philosophers] hold, that some knowledge, more or less, of objective existences and their laws, is attainable by man, and that it is obtained by way of inference from the constitution of the human mind [...] when they inculcate this doctrine, do not so as psychologists, but as ontologists' (John Stuart Mill, *Bain's Psychology*, in J.M. Robson (ed.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto 1978), XI, 343).

who were unsympathetic to Reid's disciples, so that his idiosyncratic and heterodox version of Scottish philosophy could also be appreciated by its critics.

Finally, Brown's reinvention of common sense contributed to widen the audience, if not the supporters, of the Scottish philosophy and to popularise in a broader context one of the most important Scottish discoveries, the science of mind.

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