

**Consciousness and Common Sense:  
From Claude Buffier to Thomas Brown**

By

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1. Introduction

According to the Scottish Common Sense philosophers, such as James Beattie, Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, there are certain fundamental or “first” principles which have to be taken for granted and accepted as true. These are self-evident and require no argument or proof; they are immediately and intuitively known and consented to by all humankind. As James Beattie puts it, “all reasoning terminates in first principles. All evidence is ultimately intuitive”. And these “first principles” are “dictates of our nature”<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Reid argues that the power of judging self-evident propositions is “purely natural” and requires only “ripeness of understanding, and freedom from prejudice”<sup>2</sup>. These principles are part of “Common Sense” which is, according to Reid, “that degree of judgment which is common to men”, common to those at least “with whom we can converse and transact business” (*EIP*, p. 424).

The Common Sense thinkers appeal to such first principles as foundational for thought and knowledge, and, negatively, as part of arguments against scepticism in general and against Hume’s version of scepticism in particular. Reid gives the most detailed account, distinguishing between two basic kinds of first principles:

“They are either necessary and immutable truths, whose contrary is impossible; or they are contingent and mutable, depending on some effect of will and power, which had a beginning, and may have an end” (*EIP*, p. 468).

First principles of necessary truths include axioms in mathematics, fundamental principles of logic, metaphysics and morality. First principles of contingent truths concern “in a great measure, but not altogether” truths that express “matters of fact, or real existences” (*EIP*, p. 469). Thus, the first principles of contingent truths relate to my own existence, that of other minds and the external world, the content of memory and my own personal identity and other “matters of fact”.

1 J. Beattie: *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*, Edinburgh 1770 (abbr.: *Truth*), pp. 54, 76.

2 T. Reid: *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), ed. by Derek R. Brookes and Knud Haakonssen, Edinburgh 2002 (abbr.: *EIP*), p. 453.

The notion of consciousness plays a central role in several of the principles of contingent truths. Here are the first two of these principles:

“I hold, as a first principle, the existence of every thing of which I am conscious” (*EIP*, p. 470).  
 “Another first principle [...] is, That the thoughts of which I am conscious are the thoughts of a being which I call *myself*, *my mind*, *my person*” (*EIP*, p. 472).

Indeed, consciousness is a central notion in most Common Sense philosophers. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that the topic does not feature more prominently in the literature on the philosophy of Common Sense and its individual proponents<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper I attempt to explain and evaluate the Common Sense school’s contribution to the debate about consciousness. I shall focus in particular on the relationship between consciousness and self-consciousness, a topic that seems to have been especially neglected. My aims are (1) to examine and evaluate the contribution of some of the most important thinkers of the school, and (2) to explain the development of thought on this issue within this school.

The notion of a “school” of Common Sense philosophy must not mislead us, however. There is no uniform treatment of the issue of consciousness among the philosophers dealt with here. Although they are usually treated as a unity and although there are of course similarities in their various accounts, there are also significant differences. Here, my main focus will be on some of the most important thinkers, such as Henry Home (Lord Kames), James Beattie, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart and Thomas Brown. There are differences among them even relating to fundamental aspects of their positions. Some, such as Kames, do not even speak of *principles* of Common Sense, as in their view this notion links Common Sense too closely to that of reason or reasoning. Further, later Common Sense thinkers (such as Thomas Brown) thought that precisely because there is such a close link to reason the very term “Common Sense” is misleading and therefore problematic. Indeed, Thomas Brown, a pupil of Stewart’s, is not always counted as a member of the school<sup>4</sup>, and his main work was published (posthumously) as late as 1820<sup>5</sup>.

3 There are, however, recent attempts to link Reid’s conception of consciousness to present-day debates about first- and higher order theories of consciousness. Reid’s position on this issue will not be dealt with in this paper, however. See U. Thiel: “Reid and Higher Order Theories of Consciousness”, in: *Journal of Scottish Thought* 3 (2012), pp. 9-21. Compare also K. Hossack: “Reid and Brentano on Consciousness”, in: M. Textor (ed.): *The Austrian Contribution to Analytical Philosophy*, London 2006, pp. 36-63; R. Copenhaver: “Thomas Reid’s Philosophy of Mind: Consciousness and Intentionality”, in: *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006), pp. 279-289; Copenhaver: “Reid on Consciousness: HOP, HOT Or FOR?”, in: *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2007), pp. 613-634; K. Lehrer: “Consciousness and Regress”, in: *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 6 (2008), pp. 45-57; Lehrer: “Reid on Consciousness”, in: *Reid Studies* 1 (1986-1987), pp 1-9.

4 S. A. Grave, for example, argues that the differences between Brown’s philosophy and the philosophy of Reid and Stewart “were [...] sufficient to make his philosophy another philosophy” (S. A. Grave: *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense*, Oxford 1960, p. 6).

5 T. Brown: *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, vol I, [Edinburgh?] 1820 (abbr.: *Lectures*).

Still, although Brown is certainly critical of some aspects of the Common Sense school, he defends it against criticism, for example in Joseph Priestley, the well known materialist philosopher (Brown, *Lectures*, p. 284). Moreover, the philosophy of Common Sense was not entirely a Scottish affair and Claude Buffier is a particularly important early figure in this regard, with his *Traité des premières vérités*, published as early as 1724<sup>6</sup>. Although the extent of Buffier's influence on the Scottish thinkers is a matter of debate, Reid and others do explicitly refer to Buffier after an English translation of his book was published in 1780<sup>7</sup>, and consciousness certainly plays a very special part in Buffier's account; justification enough to grant his account a place in our discussion. For reasons of space, however, I shall not deal in this context with the considerable impact the Scottish Common Sense thinkers had on pre-Kantian German philosophy and in France<sup>8</sup>.

Apart from the differences, though, there are also common threads, of course. In addition to several positive views that at least some of them share, there is the common rejection of both scepticism and materialism, for example. In addition, and especially relevant in the present context there is also the fact that all the thinkers considered here critically engage with Descartes's *cogito* argument. Further, and independently of whether or not they knew of Christian Wolff, most of them read Descartes's *cogito*, very much like Wolff, in terms of an inference, rather than as a matter of immediate intuition<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Common Sense and Consciousness as *sentiment intime*: Buffier

In Buffier Common Sense is not the only source of first truths, and consciousness is not essentially involved in Common Sense. Rather, Buffier distinguishes between Common Sense and what he calls the "sentiment intime" as two distinct

- 6 C. Buffier: *Traité des premières vérités, et de la source de nos jugemens*, Paris 1724 (abbr.: *Traité*).
- 7 See, for example, Reid, *EIP*, pp. 13, 427, 524-526. The English translation of Buffier's work is entitled *First Truths, and the Origin of our Opinions explained*, London 1780 (abbr.: *First Truths*). It has a preface which claims that the Scottish Common Sense thinkers have plagiarized from Buffier. Even the title page of the work states that "there is Plagiarism, Concealment, and Ingratitude of the Doctors Reid, Beattie, and Oswald". For a discussion of this claim, see L. Marcil-Lacoste: *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid. Two Common-Sense Philosophers*, Kingston – Montreal 1982, pp. 6-9. Marcil-Lacoste argues that, despite the similarities between Buffier's and Reid's philosophies, their views are different in several important respects. For Buffier in general, see also R. Hutchison: *Locke in France 1688-1734*, Oxford 1991, pp. 124-159.
- 8 For the important role of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in pre-Kantian German philosophy, see M. Kuehn: *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800. A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy*, Kingston – Montreal 1987. For Reid's influence in France, see J. W. Manns: *Reid and his French Disciples: Aesthetics and Metaphysics*, Leiden 1994.
- 9 See Christian Wolff: *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (1720), ed. Charles A. Corr, Hildesheim 1983 (reprint of the 1751 edition), §§ 5-7.

sources of first truths. Common Sense concerns our beliefs in the existence of our own body, the external world in general and the existence of other human beings and minds. The *sentiment intime*, by contrast, is directed at one's own self and provides us with knowledge of our own thoughts and perceptions and of the existence of our own self. This, he says, is the foundation of all other truths and the basis of all human knowledge<sup>10</sup>.

What precisely is the *sentiment intime*? Plainly, as the expression suggests, it must be a kind of inner experience. Of course Buffier was not the first in early modern philosophy to appeal to inner experience as a source of knowledge of the self. Both Locke and his followers and thinkers in the Cartesian tradition, such as Malebranche and Louis de La Forge, did so. But what kind of inner experience is the *sentiment intime*? In the seventeenth-century La Forge and Malebranche employ a similar terminology: "sentiment intérieur"<sup>11</sup>. In their writings this term is used synonymously with "conscience", understood in a non-evaluative, non-moral sense. Thus Malebranche says that we know our own thoughts and souls through a "sentiment intérieur" or "conscience"<sup>12</sup>. Pierre Coste, whose French translation of Locke's *Essay* first appeared in 1700, translates Locke's "consciousness" as "con-science". In later editions Coste remarks that Malebranche's "conscience" corresponds to Locke's "consciousness"<sup>13</sup>. It is most likely, however, that Buffier's *sentiment intime* belongs the tradition of Malebranche and La Forge (this is in spite of the fact that Buffier is critical of several aspects of Malebranchian metaphysics).

The terminology of "sentiment" or "feeling" proved to be immensely influential in eighteenth-century thought. With the exception of Buffier, however, it is only from the mid-eighteenth century onwards that notions such as *sentiment intime* are elaborated and used widely in discussions of the self – Lelarge de

10 "La première source & le premier principe de toute vérité dont nous soyons susceptibles, est le sentiment intime qu'a chacun de nous de sa propre existence, & de ce qu'il en éprouve en lui-même. C'est là dis-je la base de toute autre vérité & de toute science humaine" (Buffier, *Traité*, pt. I, p. 9).

11 La Forge speaks of "cette conscience, ce témoignage, & ce sentiment intérieur par lequel l'Esprit est aduertie de tout ce qu'il fait ou qu'il souffre", P. Claire (ed.): *Louis de La Forge (1632-1666). Œuvres philosophiques*, Paris 1974 (abbr.: *Œuvres philosophiques*), p. 134. The passage is from chapter six of La Forge's *Traité de l'esprit de l'homme* of 1666.

12 *De la recherche de la vérité*, in: G. Rodis-Lewis (ed.): *Œuvres de Malebranche*, vol. I, Paris 1962, III, 1,1: "on ne connoît la pensée que par sentiment intérieur ou par conscience". In III, 2,7 Malebranche says about the soul: "nous ne la connoissons que par conscience". Compare U. Thiel: *The Early Modern Subject. Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*, Oxford 2011, pp. 10, 50-52.

13 P. Coste: *Essai philosophique concernant l'entendement humain ... traduit de l'anglois de Mr. Locke*, Amsterdam 1700, p. 404. For the remark on Malebranche see for example the 5th edition, Amsterdam 1755, p. 265. For a detailed discussion of Coste's translation of Locke's 'consciousness', see C. Glyn Davies: *Conscience as Consciousness. The Idea of Self-Awareness in French Philosophical Thought from Descartes to Diderot*, Oxford 1990, pp. 26-38. Davies mentions Buffier occasionally, without however discussing his account in any detail (pp. 71, 96).

Lignac and Rousseau are of particular importance here<sup>14</sup>. Although the various French terms for inner feeling or inner experience do not always denote the same thing, it is clear that the increasing ubiquity of the language of feeling suggests that there was a perceived need to emphasize the immediacy by which we relate to our own self. But this raises further questions: what does this immediacy amount to? And is an account of relating to one's own self in terms of a largely unexplained feeling at all satisfactory?

Unlike Malebranche and La Forge, Buffier does not seem to use the term "conscience" as synonymous with "sentiment intime". The preface to the English translation of 1780, however, renders Buffier's *sentiment intime* as "internal sense or consciousness" (*First Truths*, p. xxxix). And indeed, given the link to the earlier uses of "conscience" cited, it seems plausible to translate Buffier's "sentiment intime" as consciousness. But what kind of relating to the self is the *sentiment intime* understood as consciousness? The preface to the English translation accounts for Buffier's *sentiment intime* or consciousness "as nothing more than a reflection" that one thinks and therefore exists (*First Truths*, p. xxxix). According to this reading, then, consciousness or *sentiment intime* would seem to be a second order activity directed towards other thoughts by which these are known<sup>15</sup>. Does Buffier himself, however, see the *sentiment intime* in this way, or does he regard the *sentiment intime* as an aspect of the thoughts themselves? The latter is, for example, the way that La Forge conceives of the *sentiment intérieur*. When La Forge states that the nature of thought consists in a non-evaluative *conscience* or *sentiment intérieur*, he emphasises that the relationship of *conscience* to thought is characterized by immediacy: *conscience* always and immediately accompanies mental events (*Œuvres philosophiques*, p. 134). This immediacy means that, for La Forge, *conscience* is not a separate act, but an element of thought itself: *conscience* is a reflexivity inherent in thought as such (*ibid.*). In the last analysis, Buffier does not seem to be entirely clear on this issue. Although he accounts for the *sentiment intime* in terms of immediacy, this notion does not by itself commit him to a first order account. And he does not elaborate on the notion of immediacy.

It may even seem that Buffier rejects a first order account outright. Certainly he distinguishes himself explicitly from Jean-Pierre Crousaz's account of relating to one's own perceptions, and Crousaz had argued, as Buffier himself reports, that perceptions are self-reflective in the sense that they feel and know themselves. This suggests a first order account of consciousness, but Buffier ends up rejecting Crousaz's account. He objects that a perception cannot be said to know itself,

14 See U. Thiel: "Self and Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century France: From Locke to Condillac, Rousseau and LeLarge de Lignac", in: *Intellectual History Review* (forthcoming).

15 In other places *First Truths* renders Buffier's "sentiment intime" variously as "interior sense" (p. 9), "inward sense" (p. 9), "internal sense" (p. 10), and "internal sentiment" (p. 13). These expressions seem to leave open what exactly the relationship is between the *sentiment intime* and its objects.

and that it is the *esprit*, rather, a faculty of the soul that perceives and knows<sup>16</sup>. Perceptions themselves cannot be subjects of consciousness. In modern terms Buffier seems to argue that consciousness is always “creature consciousness”, emphasizing the necessary involvement of a subject of thought that is conscious and reflects on itself and its thoughts. This would seem to be consistent, however, with a first order account in the sense that Buffier may be read as saying that our having perceptions means that by these perceptions themselves we (as subjects) are aware or conscious of them.

But what is the relationship between the consciousness of perceptions and the consciousness of self? As indicated, like the Scottish Common Senses thinkers, Buffier distinguishes his position from Descartes’s *cogito*, understood as an inference. Buffier thinks there is nothing wrong with the argument *I think, therefore I am*, but he holds that it has little merit, as one’s own existence is known prior to any such argument. One’s own existence is not discovered by the *cogito*. Rather, Buffier emphasizes the immediacy of relating to the self through the *sentiment intime*<sup>17</sup>. He does not, however, deal in any detail with the relationship between the consciousness of thoughts and experiences on the one hand and the consciousness of the self as the subject of experiences on the other. He says that both are felt through the *sentiment intime*, but he does not say if self-consciousness presupposes the consciousness of perceptions or whether we could be conscious of our own self quite independently of being conscious of perceptions or experiences. In some places he suggests that the consciousness of perceptions and that of one’s own self (in terms of its existence) are not in any way dependent on one another: “I think, I feel, I exist” are all equally self-evident in their own right (*Traité*, pt I, pp. 10-11). But when he says that it is one and the same perception or consciousness by which we are aware (1) of our thoughts or perceptions and (2) of the existence of the self as that which has thoughts and perceptions<sup>18</sup>, he seems to hold that the consciousness of self requires a *sentiment intime* of perceptions and that the former depends on the latter.

Unfortunately, Buffier asserts that the *sentiment intime* provides knowledge not only of our own existence but also of certain features of the nature of the

16 Crousaz states: “Elle nous apprendra que la Pensée est un *Acte qui se sent*. [...] La Pensée par la même qu’elle existe s’aperçoit de son existence, & ne sauroit être sans se sentir. Celui qui ne sent pas qu’il pense ne pense pas” (J.-P. Crousaz: *La logique: ou système de réflexions*, 1720 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), vol. 1, p. 14). Buffier refers to a different passage: “Il y a des perceptions qui se connoissent & se sentent simplement elles-mêmes; il y en a qui, en même tems qu’elles se sentent, servent a nous faire connoître quelque chose de différent d’elles mêmes” (ibid., p. 15). Buffier comments: “ce langage est embarrassé: la perception ne se connoît pas proprement elle même, elle n’est que l’action de l’esprit qui connoît, & elle est la connoissance même de l’esprit [...] c’est la faculté de l’ame qu’on apéle esprit qui connoît & qui agit” (Buffier, *Traité*, pt. III, vol. 2, p. 280).

17 “Ainsi cette fameuse conséquence *je pense, donc je suis*, est dans le fond vraie & légitime; mais dans le fond aussi elle ne méritoit pas trop la peine d’être faite, & méritoit encore moins qu’on la fit valoir comme une découverte” (Buffier, *Traité*, pt. I, p.12).

18 This is Buffier’s formulation: “c’est par une même perception de notre ame, que nous éprouvons le sentiment intime & de notre pensée & de notre existence” (*Traité*, pt. I, p. 11).

self, in particular of the indivisibility and incorporeity of the self (*Traité*, pt I, pp. 191-193). With such a statement Buffier goes well beyond what can plausibly be seen as an object of an immediate relating to one's own self. Still, this view, that the immaterial nature of the mind as well as its existence are given in direct inner experience, was not uncommon at the time<sup>19</sup>. It is, of course, a highly problematic position. Moreover, it would seem to imply that the self's identity through time is also an object of direct consciousness, but then Buffier does not say that personal identity is a matter of the *sentiment intime*. Indeed, apart from some very brief and dismissive remarks about Locke's account (*Traité*, pt III, vol. 2, pp. 264-265), he says very little explicitly about personal identity through time<sup>20</sup>. In his discussion of the *sentiment intime* he points out that it relates only to the present existence of the self and cannot testify to our existence in the past (*Traité*, pt I, p. 16).

As we shall see, even the claim that an awareness of the subject of thought and feeling is part of an immediate relating to thoughts and feelings was considered debatable by other Common Sense thinkers. Nevertheless, it is clear that at least some of the Scottish philosophers would have agreed with Buffier's position on this matter.

### 3. Kames (and Beattie) and "Original" Self-consciousness

Like Buffier, Henry Home, Lord Kames is of the view that we have a direct and immediate consciousness not only of perceptions or experiences but also of the self as the subject of those experiences: the latter is involved in simply having perceptions or performing actions. Kames claims that it "is an undoubted truth" that man

"hath an original perception or consciousness of himself, and of his existence; which, for the most part, accompanies every one of his perceptions and ideas, and every action of his mind and body"<sup>21</sup>.

Kames argues that there must be an independent internal sense, distinct from the external senses. The external senses, Kames argues, cannot provide us with self-consciousness, and so, if there was no internal sense we could not have self-consciousness. Since we do however, have self-consciousness, there must be a distinct internal sense. For Kames, then, consciousness and inner sense seem to be related to one another as act and faculty. His argument is directed against Hume whom he reads as denying that there is a consciousness of a self beyond

19 Compare Thiel: *The Early Modern Subject*, pp. 224 ff.

20 Buffier maintains: "de plus cette indivisibilité m'est évidente par le sentiment intime de ce que je suis; & j'apprens encore par la force du même sentiment, que ce que j'appelle moi, n'est pas proprement ce que j'appelle mon corps, ce corps pouvant être divisé & d'avec moi, & en lui-même; au lieu que moi, je ne puis être divisé de moi-même" (Buffier, *Traité*, pt II, pp.193-194).

21 Henry Home, Lord Kames: *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751), ed. by Mary Catherine Moran, Indianapolis 2005 (abbr.: *Essays*), p. 260.

a collection of perceptions. For Hume and anybody who does not accept the existence of an internal sense, Kames says, “Mankind would be in a perpetual reverie; ideas would be constantly floating in the mind; and no man be able to connect his ideas with *himself*” (*Essays*, p. 260).

Kames’s account raises the question of what this “originality” of self-consciousness is. “Originality” here seems to mean, first, that self-consciousness is derived neither from an object-related consciousness, nor from a process of reasoning. That is, like Buffier, Kames argues against Descartes’s *cogito*, emphasizing that the knowledge of my own existence is not arrived at “by any argument, or chain of reasoning” (*Essays*, p. 261). My own existence is as “self-evident” as my thinking (*ibid.*). Kames expresses this aspect of the “originality” of self-consciousness in terms of its being a “natural feeling” (*ibid.*), and for Kames natural feelings are “evidence of truth” for what is felt. Second, the claim about “originality” would seem to suggest that self-consciousness is independent not only of object-related perceptions but of any perceptions. Thus we would have a direct and immediate consciousness of self even without being conscious of perceptions. Note, however, that other formulations indicate that, for Kames, having perceptions brings along the consciousness of self so that self-consciousness is involved in the consciousness of perceptions. This of course could be read as saying that self-consciousness is not strictly “original” as it would be dependent on the consciousness of perceptions. As an aside, it is worth noting here that Kames’s expression “an original [...] consciousness of himself” led to what is probably the first occurrence in print of the German “ursprüngliches Bewusstsein von sich selbst”, as early as 1768, well prior to Kant’s critical philosophy<sup>22</sup>.

Further, although Kames (unlike Buffier) does not seem to claim that the metaphysical nature of the self or soul can be directly felt, he holds that we are immediately conscious of our diachronic personal identity. Here he goes beyond what Buffier claimed for the *sentiment intime* (which relates only to the present). For Kames, my personal identity is known to me by a “feeling of identity, which accompanies me through all my changes” (*Essays*, p. 261). Again, it remains unclear how this is to be understood. The cited passage suggests that the feeling of identity is direct and independent of other feelings. In other places, however, Kames says explicitly that the feeling of identity requires the consciousness of self and is indeed grounded in it, for example when he says that the consciousness of self “is the foundation of *personal identity*” (*Essays*, p. 261). The two claims can be read as consistent, however, when reconstructed as follows. Kames argues

22 See C. G. Rautenberg’s German translation of Kames’s *Essays*, published in 1768. Rautenberg translates Kames’s “original feeling, or consciousness of himself” (*Essays*, p. 260) as “ursprüngliche Empfindung oder Bewußtseyn von sich selbst” (*Versuche über die ersten Gründe der Sittlichkeit und der natürlichen Religion in zween Theilen von Heinrich Home*, translated by C. G. Rautenberg, Braunschweig 1768, pt II, p. 9). Kant was familiar with Kames’s work. See, for example, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. *Königlich-Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, and its successors (Berlin 1900 ff.), vol. 16, p. 688 (*Reflexion* 3160).



that the feeling of identity is “natural” (*Essays*, p. 261), but this does not mean that it is independent of other feelings; rather its naturalness means merely that it is not arrived at by a process of reasoning. And so he suggests, first, that self-consciousness is a necessary condition of the feeling of personal identity: “For a man, cannot consider himself to be the same person, in different circumstances, when he has no idea or consciousness of *himself* at all” (*Essays*, p. 260). Second, he emphasizes that it is also by self-consciousness that the feeling of identity can be explained in terms of its genesis. As the consciousness of self is a feeling “carried through all the different stages of life, and all variety of action” (*Essays*, p.261), it brings about the feeling of identity, for “it is by means” of this constant consciousness of self “that I consider myself to be the same person, in all varieties of fortunes, and every change of circumstance” (*Essays*, p. 261). It is true of course that this explanation is merely hinted at rather than developed in any detail in Kames<sup>23</sup>.

James Beattie’s account does not differ greatly from Kames’s, but it is less detailed. He, too, engages critically with Descartes’s *cogito*, arguing that it is absurd to try and prove one’s own existence. For,

“by attending to what passes in my mind, I know, not only that it exists, but also that it exerts certain powers of action and perception; which on account either of a diversity in their objects, or of a difference in their manner of operating, I consider as separate and distinct faculties” (*Truth*, pp. 68-69).

Although this suggests that an activity of attending is required for self-consciousness, elsewhere Beattie suggests that both the existence of perceptions and that of one’s own soul are direct objects of consciousness (*Truth*, pp. 69-70). Like Kames, Beattie includes one’s own diachronic identity among these objects. Consciousness provides “direct evidence”, Beattie says, “for the existence and identity of our own soul” (*Truth*, p. 75).

Beattie concedes that the existence of the self can be argued for, but that such argument is not really required. Like Buffier, he also thinks that the notion of the soul as a being “distinct from the body” arises “from nothing but consciousness”. He claims that “the evidence of this notion is intuitive; it is the evidence of internal sense. Reasoning can neither prove nor disprove it” (*Truth*, p. 78).

Thus, for all their differences in other respects, Kames and Beattie share Buffier’s view that both the perceptions or thoughts and the self as the subject of perceptions or thoughts are objects of immediate and direct consciousness. This seems to be a common position in later Scottish thought as well, often stated as a matter of course, without any explanation and elaboration<sup>24</sup>, but with this some of the leading figures of the Common Sense school disagree.

23 In the third edition of his *Essays* of 1779 Kames accounts for the evidence of personal identity in terms of self-consciousness and *memory* (*Essays*, p.127).

24 See for example the textbooks by Adam Ferguson and John Bruce. Bruce states that “Consciousness is the perception which the Mind has of itself in all its operations” (J. Bruce: *First Principles of Philosophy*, Edinburgh, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1785, p. 39). Adam Ferguson writes that “The Individual is conscious of his personal identity, in the performance of many functions,

## 4. Reid and Stewart on Consciousness and Self-consciousness

Thomas Reid provides a more detailed account of relating to one's own self than do both Kames and Beattie. He explicitly distinguishes between consciousness, memory, and reflection as three fundamental ways in which the self is able to relate to itself. While both consciousness and memory are relating to "things in the mind" (*EIP*, p. 24) and are characterized by immediacy, reflection is that act of the mind through which we make "our own thoughts and passions, and the various operations of our minds" the objects of attention, "either while they are present, or when they are recent and fresh in our memory" (*EIP*, p. 42; see also pp. 58, 421). Reflection, then, but not consciousness, objectifies the operations of the mind. Moreover, reflection is a voluntary act, while consciousness is an immediate or "intuitive" (*EIP*, p. 470) relating to one's own present thoughts and actions. As Reid puts it, it is "that immediate knowledge which we have of our present thoughts and purposes, and, in general, of all the present operations of the mind" (*EIP*, p. 24). This again, however, raises the question about the nature of immediacy because, as was indicated above, emphasizing immediacy does not necessarily involve a commitment to a first-order understanding of consciousness. Indeed, the interpretation of this aspect of Reid is a matter of debate, but it does seem that, to Reid, consciousness, like reflection, is a second-order activity, only of a different kind from reflection. Thus Reid suggests that consciousness is a mental operation that is distinct from its objects to which it relates (*EIP*, p. 44). We shall not, however, engage with this interpretative controversy here, but rather focus instead on the question of the objects of consciousness<sup>25</sup>.

According to Reid, "the objects of [consciousness] are [...] all the passions, and all the actions and operations of our own minds, while they are present" (*EIP*, p. 470). Through consciousness "we know certainly the existence of our present thoughts and passions" (*EIP*, p. 42). Unlike Buffier, Kames and Beattie, however, Reid does not hold that the self as the subject of "all the passions, and all the actions and operations of our minds" is a direct object of consciousness. Like his predecessors, Reid is very critical of Descartes's attempt to prove the existence of his own self. He holds that Descartes never "seriously doubted of his existence. For he takes it for granted in this argument, and proves nothing at all"<sup>26</sup>. Like Beattie, Reid argues that one's own existence is as certain as the existence of one's thought (Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 17). "Every man, in his wits", Reid says, is "as much determined to take his existence upon trust as his consciousness"

either merely animal, intellectual, or mixed. Consciousness is a principal attribute of mind; and is that by which it may be said to exist for itself" (A. Ferguson: *Analysis of Pneumatics and Moral Philosophy. For the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh 1766, p. 13). As both books consist of lecture notes, it must obviously be assumed, however, that the authors would have elaborated on these notes in class.

25 See Thiel: "Reid and Higher Order Theories of Consciousness" and articles listed above in note 3.

26 T. Reid: *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), ed. by Derek R. Brookes, Edinburgh 1997 (abbr.: *Inquiry*), p. 160.

(*ibid.*). And yet, although he holds that we do and must believe in the existence of such a subject of thought and action, he thinks that this belief is not based in any direct consciousness of the self as subject. What is his argument for this view?

It seems that Reid simply thinks that this is what the phenomenology of consciousness suggests. And so, in spite of his criticism of Hume's bundle theory of the mind (*EIP*, pp. 473-474), Reid appears to be in agreement with Hume that we are directly conscious only of perceptions (or "actions, passions, operations"). In an early manuscript note from 1748 Reid still speaks of self-consciousness, but indicates that it is difficult to identify its source:

"Perhaps besides the Consciousness of past & present Perceptions there is also a Consciousness or Perception of my being, which is simple & original to my Nature & cannot be explained tho it be felt by every one. If this be so it ought at least to have a Name I shall call it Self-Consciousness. It would methinks be improper to call it an Idea or an Impression at least it seems not to have been considered under either of these heads by those who have treated of them. And I apprehend it will be hard to say whether it is an Impression of Sensation or Reflexion?"<sup>27</sup>.

In this early note Reid employs both Lockean (sensation and reflection) and Humean terminology (impressions and ideas) but points out that none of these categories can capture what he calls self-consciousness here. He is, in fact, clearly doubtful as to whether there is an "original" consciousness of self at all and this would indeed seem to be consistent with Hume's position. Assuming there is such a thing as self-consciousness, Reid suggests that it would be difficult to identify its source in terms of direct inner or outer experience and if we were, following Hume, to look for an "impression" of a self beyond the perceptions, we would not be able to find it. At this time, however, Reid does not deny the existence of self-consciousness, but ten years later, in another manuscript note, Reid states explicitly that the self as subject is not an object of consciousness.

"Indeed it seems utterly inexplicable how we come by the very Idea of a Subject or to imagin that these thoughts have a necessary Relation to some thing else which we call their Subject. We are onely conscious of the thoughts, yet when we reflect upon them there arises necessarily and unavoidably a Notion of a thinking thing, & that this thought we are conscious of is its Operation or Act. [...] If any Man will affirm that thought may exist without a Subject & that the conceiving it as an Act or Operation of some Being is a vulgar or a Philosophical Prejudice, I do not see how he can be confuted but by appealing to his own Sense or the Common Sense of Mankind"<sup>28</sup>.

This note comes close to Reid's published view. It asks about the source of the notion of a self as subject, given that the latter is not directly present to consciousness. The belief in the existence of the self is arrived at neither through reasoning nor through an "original" or direct consciousness. Still, Reid says, the notion of a self as subject is *based* in the consciousness of our thoughts, operations and passions, arguing that this notion arises "necessarily and unavoidably",

27 T. Reid, Ms: "On the Self" (22 October 1748), published in Derek R. Brookes's edition of the *Inquiry*, pp. 316-318; at p. 318.

28 T. Reid, Ms from 1 December 1758, published in Derek R. Brookes's edition of Reid's *Inquiry*, pp. 320-321.

“when we *reflect*” (my italics) on the thoughts of which we are conscious. This seems to suggest that the connection between thoughts and a subject of thoughts is neither natural nor immediate, but rather a connection that requires reflection. At the same time Reid explicitly appeals to Common Sense as that which can be used to refute the idea that thoughts can exist without a subject.

In his published writings Reid argues that the notion of the self as subject develops not through an act of reflection on our conscious thoughts, but by being “suggested” to us by those thoughts or perceptions. Thus in the *Inquiry* of 1764 Reid argues that our “sensations suggest to us a sentient being to which they belong: a being which hath a permanent existence, although the sensations are transient and of short duration” (*Inquiry*, p. 60). He repeats the idea he had drafted in the quoted manuscript notes, that “the conception of a mind is neither an idea of sensation nor of reflection; for it is neither like any of our sensations, nor like any thing we are conscious of”. Rather, “the first conception of it, as well as the belief of it, and of the common relation it bears to all that we are conscious of, or remember, is suggested to every thinking being, we do not know how” (ibid.). Reid seems to concede, then, that the development of the notion of a self remains, in a sense, inexplicable, but what exactly is the notion of “suggestion” that he employs here?

The notion of suggestion is linked to what Reid calls “natural signs” in that perceptions function as “natural signs” for the existence of a perceiving subject<sup>29</sup>. That is, Reid maintains that we owe many of our simple notions (which are neither impressions nor ideas) and original principles of belief to suggestion. There are suggestions which are the result of experience and habit, but there are also suggestions that are “natural and original” (*Inquiry*, p. 38). Among the latter are those that lead to our belief in a self as mind or subject: “our sensations and thoughts do also suggest the notion of a mind, and the belief of its existence, and of its relation to our thoughts” (*Inquiry*, p. 38). For Reid, this connection between thoughts and a self or subject “is the effect of our constitution, and ought to be considered an original principle of human nature” (*Inquiry*, p. 61). This account differs from the view expressed in the early manuscript text according to which reflection is required for the belief in a self to arise. Rather Reid seems to be saying that this belief is instinctual. For he explains the notion of instinct precisely in terms of propensities that are due neither to rational motives, nor to habit and experience, but to “the constitution of the animal”<sup>30</sup>. Reid asserts, then, that instinct, rather than direct consciousness, experience, habit or inference is the source of the belief in a self as a subject of thoughts. The problem is, of course, that he thereby concedes that an explanation of self-consciousness is not available to him. As Reid notes in a passage quoted above, “we do not know how” the notion of the self as subject “is suggested to every thinking being”. He even refers to this process as a “natural kind of magic” (*Inquiry*, p. 60).

29 For Reid’s discussion of the notion of natural signs in general, see *Inquiry*, pp. 58-61.

30 T. Reid: *On the Animate Creation. Papers relating to the Life Sciences*, ed. Paul Wood, Edinburgh 1995, p. 141.

Dugald Stewart who was a pupil of Reid's provides a very similar account of consciousness, but he states the issue of self-consciousness more clearly than does his teacher<sup>31</sup>. If a particular sensation is excited in the mind, Stewart says, it (the mind) "must necessarily acquire the knowledge of two facts at once: that of the existence of *the sensation*; and that of *his own existence*, as a sentient being"<sup>32</sup>. Stewart emphasizes in line with Reid, that, strictly speaking, we are conscious only of the sensations not of the existence of the self as a subject of sensations; the latter is merely "suggested by means of" the sensations (*Elements*, p. 101). How does this idea of a "suggestion" square with that of necessity in the previous quote, two ideas that are also present in Reid? In *Philosophical Essays* of 1810 Stewart elaborates on this issue. He argues that "the belief of our *present existence* necessarily accompanies every act of consciousness" (*Works* V, p. 59), but he also holds that this is not to say that we have a direct consciousness of our own present existence:

"According to the common doctrine of our best philosophers, it is by the evidence of *consciousness* we are assured that we ourselves exist. The proposition, however, when thus stated, is not accurately true; for our own existence is not a direct or immediate object of consciousness, in the strict and logical meaning of that term. We are conscious of sensation, thought, desire, volition; but we are not conscious of the existence of mind itself" (*Works* V, p. 58).

Here Stewart first states clearly Reid's point about consciousness and the notion of a self or subject. Then he argues that a relation of necessity exists between (1) the belief in the "present existence of what is felt" and (2) the belief in "the present existence of *that*, which feels and thinks [...] of that being which I denote by the words *I* and *myself*" (ibid.). It is understandable, Stewart argues, that many philosophers hold that (2) has the same origin as (1), namely consciousness, for although our own mind as a self or subject of thought "is made known to us by a *suggestion* of the understanding *consequent* on the sensation" it is "so intimately *connected* with it, that it is not surprising that our belief of both should be generally referred to the same origin" (ibid.). These comments do not, however, explain the connection between "suggestion" and necessity. Rather, they seem to indicate that, for Stewart, "suggests" must simply be read in terms of "necessarily implies". The belief in the existence of a subject of thought is *based* in what is phenomenologically apparent in the sense that that the consciousness of thoughts or perceptions "suggests" i. e. necessarily implies belief in a subject. Reid, as we saw, appeals to "the constitution of the animal" in this context.

Importantly, however, and in stark contrast to Kames, for example, who posited a distinct and independent internal sense, Stewart emphasizes that it would not "be possible for us to arrive at the knowledge of" our own mind, "if no impression were ever to be made on our external senses" (ibid.). We could

31 D. Stewart: *Philosophical Essays* (1810), in: *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. by Sir William Hamilton, Edinburgh – London 1855 (abbr.: *Works*), vol. V, p. 56.

32 D. Stewart: *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, vol. I, London – Edinburgh 1792 (abbr.: *Elements*), p. 101.

not have the belief in our own existence if we did not have any sensations. Put differently, the belief in our own existence is not derived, as Kames and Buffier claimed, from an ‘original’ self-consciousness, distinct and independent of external sensations. Rather, what Stewart (in line with Reid) suggests is that the belief in our own existence depends on the existence of outer-directed sensations. This is how Stewart even interprets Descartes’s *cogito*. His account of the latter thus differs significantly from that of the earlier Common Sense thinkers. Stewart believes that Descartes did not really want to prove his own existence by a process of reasoning:

“To me it seems more probable, that he meant chiefly to direct the attention of his readers to a circumstance which must be allowed to be not unworthy of notice in the history of the Human Mind; – the impossibility of our ever having learned the fact of our own existence, without some sensation being excited in the mind, to awaken the faculty of thinking” (*Works* V, p.59).

On this reading, Descartes’s *cogito* simply expresses in a confused way Stewart’s own position: Outer-directed consciousness is necessarily required for having the belief in our own existence.

Elsewhere, Stewart elaborates on the relationship between consciousness of thoughts and the belief in our own existence as “sentient beings” in terms of a distinction between a temporal and a “natural” (or logical) order. Our belief in the existence of the self as subject,

“although it seems to be so inseparable from the exercise of consciousness, that it can scarcely be considered as posterior to it in the order of *time*, is yet [...] posterior to it in the order of *nature*; not only as it supposes consciousness to be already awakened by some sensation, or some other mental affection; but as it is evidently rather a judgement accompanying the exercise of that power, than one of its immediate intimations concerning its appropriate class of internal phenomena. It appears to me, therefore, more correct to call the belief of our own existence a concomitant or accessory of the exercise of consciousness, than to say, that our existence is fact falling under the immediate cognizance of consciousness, like the existence of the various agreeable or painful sensations which external objects excite in our minds” (“Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind”, vol. II (1814), in: *Works* III, pp. 41-42).

Stewart is clear, then, that he does not claim a temporal priority of outer-directed consciousness over belief in a self as subject, as the latter seems inseparable from the former from an empirical, temporal point of view. As he emphasizes the logical priority of outer-directed consciousness, however, he precludes the possibility of a “pure” or independent self-consciousness. At the same time he notes that the belief in our own existence involves intellectual activity (“a judgement”) and thus cannot consist in a mere feeling, as the earlier Common Sense philosophers thought.

##### 5. Conclusion: Thomas Brown and Necessary Conditions of Self-consciousness

It is possible, then, to identify a certain development of thought about consciousness and self-consciousness within Common Sense philosophy. The earlier thinkers claimed that we simply “feel” the self in the same way as we feel the perceptions, appealing to a (however unexplained) “original” self-consciousness.

In this context the problem arose of whether this self-consciousness is meant to be independent of other forms of consciousness, or dependent on the latter. In other words: just how “original” is original self-consciousness? The later Common Sense philosophers, however, started to reflect on the conditions of relating to the self, on what is involved in self-consciousness. Here, Hume’s point that we are directly aware only of individual perceptions or bundles of perceptions was accepted, but his bundle account was nevertheless rejected, and this gave rise to the problem of the origin of the idea of a self beyond the perceptions. According to Reid and Stewart, the belief in the self as a subject requires and is “suggested by”, i. e. implied by, the consciousness of sensations. So, rather than asserting that the self is an object of some unexplained feeling, Stewart and Reid reflect on the necessary conditions of relating to our own self as a subject of thought. In Reid, these reflections end with an appeal to instinct, while Thomas Brown takes the argument in a different direction.

That is, unlike Stewart, Brown does not adopt Reid’s understanding of consciousness (Brown, *Lectures*, pp. 244-255). In particular, he rejects Reid’s view that consciousness relates to thoughts and feelings as objects that are distinct from consciousness itself. According to Brown, there is no difference between consciousness and a sensation or thought: “Sensation is not the *object* of consciousness different from itself, but a *particular sensation* is the *consciousness of the moment*” (*Lectures*, pp. 244-245). Unlike both Reid and Stewart, then, Brown seems to argue for a first order account of consciousness of perceptions<sup>33</sup>.

In terms of the necessary conditions of relating to one’s own self as subject, Brown emphasizes the relation we have to past experiences. The knowledge of our own self, Brown argues

“as distinct from the particular feeling, implies the remembrance of former feelings, – of feelings, which, together with the present, we ascribe to *one* thinking principle, – recognizing the *principle*, the *self*, the *one*, as the *same*, amid all its transient diversities of *consciousness*” (*Lectures*, p. 248).

The notion of self is the notion of “the lasting subject of successive transient feelings” that is acquired through “the remembrance of *former* sensations or temporary diversities of consciousness” (*Lectures*, pp. 248-249). Thus, Brown’s account of relating to the self is quite different from both that of Reid and Stewart. For Brown, being able to relate to one’s own self requires more than (the consciousness of) present sensations, thoughts and feelings. The notion of a self is the notion of a subject that persists through time, and we can acquire such a notion only through relating to past thoughts and feelings. Moreover, remembrance of past perceptions implies, in turn, a belief in the identity of the self that now remembers past perceptions and the self that had those perceptions at an earlier time. This is what Brown means when he says that it is the “belief of our *identity* only, which gives us the notion of *self*, as the *subject* of *various former feelings*” (*Lectures*, p. 251). For Brown, the very notion of the self presupposes

33 See Thiel: “Reid and Higher Order Theories of Consciousness” (see note 3), pp. 20-21.

not only outer-directed beliefs but also remembrance of the past and a belief in our diachronic identity. In other words, we could not have a notion of the self without personal identity through time. For Brown, “the very word I implies that this remembrance and identification has taken place” (*Lectures*, p. 249). But does not belief in our own diachronic identity presuppose self-consciousness? Is Brown’s argument circular? We saw that Kames argues that the feeling of personal identity is based in self-consciousness, but Brown seems to turn this around, arguing that self-consciousness requires belief in personal identity. In this way he clearly seems to distinguish himself from both Stewart and Reid and the earlier thinkers such as Kames, but apart from the question of circularity, Brown’s formulations seem to oscillate between saying (1) that the *belief* in our diachronic identity is required and (2) that the *metaphysical fact* of our diachronic identity is required for self-consciousness to be possible.

Brown’s reflections on necessary conditions may even sound rather Kantian to some, as Kant argued that the identity of the self is a necessity of thought, rather than a matter of experience, but Brown was no Kantian and does not seem to have noticed the similarity of at least some of his arguments to those of the German philosopher. Indeed, he was one of the earliest British thinkers to react very critically to Kant’s philosophy<sup>34</sup>, although it should be noted that his discussion was only based on a second-hand French account.

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34 T. Brown: “Viller’s Philosophy of Kant”, in: *Edinburgh Review*, vol.1, No. 2, (January 1803), pp. 253-280.