Thomas Reid & the Priority Thesis: A Defence against Turri

Introduction

Central to Thomas Reid's philosophy of language is his account of *signs* and *signification*. According to Reid, signs are those things that give rise to thoughts or otherwise indicate other entities to our minds. Where our capacity to understand that which is signified by certain signs is sometimes cultivated through experience, in other cases, this capacity may be what Reid calls a principle of our own nature.

For Reid, language consists of all those signs which are used by humankind to communicate with one another. Concerning the signs that constitute human language, Reid divides them into two sorts. Where natural language consists of those natural signs whose meanings are universally and inherently understood by all persons by a principle of their nature (e.g. a smile signifying happiness, pointing signifying attention to whatever is pointed at, etc.), artificial language consists of those artificial signs which have no meaning outside of what is agreed upon by those who use them (e.g. the word 'cat' signifying a cat).[1] Reid's distinction between natural and artificial signs, and the priority he gives to the former, allowed him to circumvent a number of issues that plagued other writers in the period who believed there to be necessary connections or resemblances between signs and things signified. Additionally, such a

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[1] Reid explicitly gives his definition of language, and the two heads under which those signs that constitute it may fall in the following quote. He writes "By language I understand all those signs which mankind use in order to communicate *to others* their thoughts and intentions, their purposes and desires. And *such signs* may be conceived to be of two kinds: First, *such as have no meaning, but what is affixed to them by compact or agreement among those who use them*; these are artificial signs: Secondly, such as, previous to all compact or agreement, have a meaning which every man understands by the principles of his nature. Language, so far as it consists of artificial signs, may be called *artificial*; so far as it consists of natural signs, I call it *natural*." Reid, Thomas. *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. *Sourcebook in the History of Philosophy of Language*. Ed. Margaret Cameron, Benjamin Hill, Robert J. Stainton. Springer, 2017. (SB 810).

distinction is utilized to explain how the development and use of artificial languages, such as English or French, owe to a more fundamental communicative capacity: *natural language*.

Reid tells us that "[T]here must be a natural language before any artificial language can be invented...".[2] Artificial language's genealogical dependence upon natural language is what has been called the *priority thesis* (hereafter abbreviated as PT). In this paper I defend PT from criticisms offered by John Turri in his paper "Reid on the Priority of Natural Language." I argue that Turri's two main objections rely on a conflation between signs *generally*, and signs *within a language*.

(I) The Priority Thesis

In *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Reid argued for the genealogical dependence that artificial language has on natural language:

> It is demonstrable, that *if mankind had not a natural language, they could never have invented an artificial one* by their reason and ingenuity. All artificial language supposes some compact or agreement *to affix a certain meaning to certain signs*; therefore there must be compacts and agreements before the use of artificial signs; but there can be no compact or agreement without signs, nor without language; and therefore there must be a natural language before any artificial language can be invented: Which was to be demonstrated.[3]

The final sentence is PT, and what precedes it is his argument for that conclusion. Turri formalizes Reid's argument for PT in the following way:

1) Humans invented artificial signs. (Assumption)
2) The invention of artificial signs requires earlier agreement among those who invented them. (Premise)
3) There can be no agreement without the use of signs. (Premise)
4) So among themselves humans earlier used signs, whose meaning preceded the invention of artificial signs. (From 1-3)
5) Signs whose meaning precedes the use of artificial signs are natural signs. (Premise)
6) So among themselves humans earlier used natural signs. (From 4-5)

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[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*. Emphasis added.

7) So if humans invented artificial signs, then among themselves they earlier used natural signs. (From 1-6)[4]

At a glance, nothing appears incorrect in this formalization insofar as it attributed to Reid a valid argument. Despite its validity, a few of the premises are taken out of context, and as such, they omit crucial features of Reid's views. We must pay attention to the language Reid employed, and the precise formulation of the thesis itself. What "was to be demonstrated" is that natural *language* is necessary for the invention of artificial *language*; in this formulation (in addition to the arguments that Turri later provides), Reid's repeated mention of artificial language's dependence upon natural language is done away with.

After providing this formulation of Reid's argument for PT, Turri's raises "an objection, [followed by] a series of imagined replies, refinements and rebuttals."[5] He claims that this will help us to determine whether Reid's thesis, or something like it, is true. However, Turri attacks *this* formalized version of the argument in the two main objections he raises. As I will argue in the following section, this formalization is nothing Reid expresses, and, it neglects a conceptual distinction between signs generally, and signs within a language. Once this distinction is taken seriously, Reid will have been shown to be unscathed by Turri's objections.

(II) Turri's Objections

Turri's first objection consists in taking some imagined individual named Wally to decide to use the word 'wolves' to refer to wolves that lurk nearby, while we also know that the meaning of 'wolves' is not determined by a principle of our own natures. He claims, rightfully, that the invention of this artificial *sign* did not require prior compact or agreement. As such, he

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[4] Turri, John. "Reid on the Priority of Natural Language". Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Vol 41, 2011. 214-223. (217).
[5] Turri (218).

here concludes that premise 2 is false, and therefore, the invention of artificial language does not depend upon natural language and PT is false. I agree that premise 2 is certainly false, and it owes its falsity to counterexamples like Turri's. The problem is that premise 2 is nothing Reid says, and moreover, it fails to account for the conceptual division between artificial signs *within a language*, and artificial signs *generally*.

Concerning the artificial signs which constitute artificial language and those that do not, we must look to Reid's discussion of language at the beginning of Chapter 4, Section 2. Reid writes that signs *within a language* are of two sorts, and concerning those which constitute *artificial language*, they "*have no meaning but what is affixed to them by compact or agreement among those who use them.*" By his definition, therefore, an artificial sign is one that is destitute of meaning *in a language* until *a* meaning is settled upon through compacts or agreement between language users. The referent of "such signs" in his division of artificial and natural signs are those that are made use of in a language. So, an artificial sign (generally) might differ from an artificial sign *within* artificial language insofar as it is meaningless in a language. We might say then that an artificial sign becomes a piece of artificial language if and only if a common meaning is affixed to it by compacts and agreements. This suggests that there really is a difference between being a mere (or general) artificial sign, and an element of artificial language: a piece of artificial language is an artificial sign *with a collectively-affixed meaning*.

This conceptual division between what I am calling "general" artificial signs and artificial signs within a language becomes more evident if we consider Reid's remarks in the first paragraph of the section under consideration. There, he writes that "men… have been able to *contrive* artificial signs of their thoughts and purposes, *and to establish them by common*

consent."[6] This further suggests that to invent an artificial sign *generally* is one thing, but to establish them — *give them common meaning* — requires agreement amongst parties. In other words, "contriving" an artificial sign generally is conceptually prior to their establishment within a language.[7]

If we consider how a general artificial sign might originate, this last point becomes more plausible. To use an example, someone might arbitrarily ascribe the word 'cat' to a cat and utter it out loud. As the word 'cat' stands at this point, it is by Reid's definition meaningless *within a language*; as stated, an artificial sign is meaningful in a language if and only if a meaning is settled upon via compact or agreement among those who use it. Only when some nearby hearer and the speaker come to an agreement on that which is signified by the word 'cat' does it (which was once a mere general artificial sign) become an artificial sign within a language.

So, Turri's counterexample succeeds only insofar as it attacks the possible invention of *general* artificial signs — those which do not require compacts and agreements, and as such, are not pieces of artificial language. Here we can see the conflation of inventing an artificial sign, and inventing a bit of artificial language come through quite vividly. To invent a piece of artificial language is, *by definition*, to collectively settle upon a common signification for a given artificial sign; inventing a general artificial sign does not bear this requirement. Given this, we

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[6] Reid (SB 809).

[7] This conceptual distinction gains further credence from unpacking Reid's claim that states "All artificial language supposes some compact or agreement to affix a certain meaning to certain signs; therefore there must be compacts and agreements before the use of artificial signs." Reid (SB 810). The reason that artificial language "supposes some compact or agreement" consists in the fact that artificial language *just is* a collection of artificial signs whose meaning was determined *by* compacts or agreements. Compacts or agreements are necessarily antecedent to the *use* — that is, the *linguistic use* — of artificial signs because artificial signs *in a language* only garner meaning through communicating with others, and the only way to affix meaning by compact or agreement is to collectively employ other known bits of language. This is just to say that language is a prerequisite for communicating, and if natural language is a prerequisite for forming compacts and agreements — and compacts and agreements are formed *by* communicating, then natural language is conceptually *prior to* and is a prerequisite *for* the invention of artificial language.

can accept that premise 2 is false, but its falsity does not threaten Reid's PT because it is not a component of Reid's actual argument. Turri's extension of his objection through his reply to a Reidian response to the Wally example can bring out this conflation even further.

After a number of dialectical moves which Turri takes to have established that the invention of artificial signs does not depend upon natural language, he adds that we may not even be warranted in concluding that Reid himself was concerned with the dependence that the *witting and effective interpersonal use* of artificial language has on natural language.[9] This latter thesis, according to Turri is also false. Turri asks us to consider a new person, Howie, who uses the onomatopoeia 'owooo' to communicate the presence of wolves nearby to an unsuspecting stranger.

Turri takes it that Howie's utterance 'owooo' as referring to wolves nearby is not something that is known by a principle of our nature, and is thus not a natural sign in natural language. In addition, Turri claims that Howie's invention of this artificial sign (like Wally's) did not require any previous compacts nor agreements. Just following, Turri adds that when Howie cries 'owooo' to the stranger to communicate his thought, it "stands to reason" that the stranger would interpret him in precisely this way, given that any human adult around those parts would know what a wolf's cry sounds like.[8] Here, Turri concludes that not only does this seem to qualify as a witting and effective interpersonal use of artificial language, but because this communicative feat did not require any compacts nor agreements between Howie and the stranger, even the "qualified Reidian thesis" is false.

By way of objection, there are a few things to unpack and reinterpret in this example. Again, it should be noted that 'owooo' is simply not a piece of artificial language — contra

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[8] Turri (220).

Turri's insistence — in virtue of the above clarification of Reid's definition of artificial language. At best, it might be understood as a general artificial sign for Turri's purposes. In which case however, this counterexample fails in the same fashion that his preceding objection did.

On the other hand, it might be understood as a natural sign, albeit one that is not a natural sign in human language. Concerning natural signs generally, Reid divides them into three sorts, and only one of which is the kind employed in natural language. Concerning the first class, Reid writes

> The first class of natural signs comprehends those whose connection with the thing signified is established by nature, but discovered only by experience.[9]

This variety of natural signs consist of smoke as a sign of fire, or the sound of a howl as a sign of a wolf, wherein our capacity to understand the connection between sign and the thing signified is, as Powell helpfully puts it, "independent of human minds, and we must acquire a sensitivity to the signification through experience of the repeated conjunction of the sign and the thing signified."[10]

> A Second class is that wherein the connection between the sign and thing signified, is not only established by nature, but discovered to us by a natural principle, without reasoning or experience.[11]

This variety is starkly contrasted with the first insofar as our capacity to understand the connection between the sign and thing signified is innately within us. These sorts of natural signs include certain physical gestures, facial expressions, vocal tones, laughter, and crying; all of the phenomena that these sorts of signs signify are those which we already have mental access to by

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[9] Reid (SB 812).
[10] Powell, Lewis. "Thomas Reid on Signs and Language." Philosophy Compass, 2016. (2).
[11] Reid (SB 813).

a principle of our own nature. From the foregoing, it should be clear that the class of signs Reid refers to as those which are included in natural language are the second class — those signs which have a connection between sign and thing signified known by a *principle of our natures*.

When distinguishing natural from artificial language, recall that Reid states that the natural signs which constitute natural language "have a meaning which every man understands by *the principles of his nature*."[12] Here, "meaning" ought to be understood as that which is *signified* by the sign within the language. To the same end, in his explication of second class natural signs, Reid claims that they "have already been mentioned as *the natural language of mankind*."[13]

From these classes of natural signs, Turri simply cannot say that 'owooo' is an instance of the second sort. If he were to bite this bullet, the teeth of his argument would be rendered useless; for the second class of natural signs have a sign-to-thing-signified relation known through a principle of our own nature, and this is the class wherein natural language falls. So, if the strangers understand Howie, they understand him via natural language. Weirder yet, Howie's howling is understood inherently by everyone to be a sign of wolves lurking nearby, via a principle of our own natures. This certainly cannot be the case, because Turri himself noted that experience was required to understand Howie in that one needed to be an adult human living in the immediate area.

Recalling that Turri does outrightly claim that 'owooo' is *not* understood by a principle of our own nature (and is therefore not an instance of natural language), he nevertheless conceptually neglects other varieties of natural signs when he assumes that it must then be an instance of an artificial sign. Here, rather than seeing Turri conflate general artificial signs with

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[12] Reid (SB 810).
[13] Reid (SB 813).

artificial signs in a language, he is conflating natural signs in a language with natural signs generally. In this last example specifically, Turri neglects Reid's first class of natural signs which have a sign-to-thing-signified relationship that is discoverable only by experience. If the stranger, as well as Howie (indeed, any adult person in "those parts" in the example), know what a wolf sounds like in virtue of natural experience alone, 'owooo' might be understood as an instance of a first class Reidian natural sign. If so, Turri still has not shown that the witting and effective interpersonal use of artificial language does not depend on natural language — for no artificial *language* was invented nor employed in the example he provided.

Secondly, it is entirely unclear why, indeed even *if* it "stands to reason" that the stranger would interpret Howie's utterance as signifying the presence of wolves nearby. In the event that the stranger was familiarly acquainted with the howl of a wolf, Howie's mimicking cry *may* elicit the thought of a wolf in the stranger's mind (and this of course would be due to the sound being the first type of Reidian natural sign), but it seems extremely suspect to suggest that the cry *alone* signifies the *presence of wolves lurking nearby*. What is it about Howie crying 'owooo' that *also* signifies the presence of wolves nearby, rather than the mere thought of a wolf, indeed *any* extensive meaning involving wolves (i.e. wolves existing, wolves have gone extinct, etc.)?

The most plausible suggestion to the foregoing likely consists in other relevant features of Howie's demeanor that the stranger can recognize *by a principle of his own nature:* signs in natural language consisting in gestures, facial expressions, etc. In the event that Howie's attempted communication succeeds in the way Turri suggests it would, it does so in virtue of a *natural sign* of the first type in tandem with other relevant features of Howie's demeanor — that is, bits of natural language. If this reinterpretation is correct, then instead of proving that we may

wittingly and effectively use artificial language interpersonally without prior compacts or agreements, Turri has actually fortified Reid's argument by way of his example.

(IV) Conclusion

Through an analysis of both Thomas Reid's remarks concerning signs and signification generally and his account of language, I endeavored to mark out an important facet of the specific sorts of signs that Reid meant to include in language, and those that are non-linguistic. In doing so, I interpret Reid only to include artificial signs which have collectively-affixed meaning in artificial language, and only second class natural signs in natural language.

I have argued that Turri's arguments pay inadequate attention to this restricted scope of language, and as a result, conflates signs *generally* with signs *within a language*. The contextually gappy formalized reconstruction of Reid's argument for the priority thesis, in tandem with the aforementioned conflation, yield illicit consequences that lend themselves to objections with no bearing on Reid's priority thesis as Reid himself states and argues for it.

Works Cited

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