

Comments on Formanek: Thomas Reid & the Priority Thesis: A Defence against Turri

In Benjamin Formanek's piece, he aims to defend Thomas Reid's argument about the priority of natural (read: innate or instinctual) language over artificial language (the class of languages that we would normally term "natural") from an objection offered by John Turri. The crux of Formanek's response to Turri is the observation that "Turri's two primary objections all target the contextually-gappy formalized reconstruction of Reid's argument for PT. As I argue, this formalization is nothing Reid expresses, and it neglects a conceptual distinction between signs *generally*, and signs *within a language*."

In these comments, I don't want to take sides between Turri on the one hand, and Formanek and Reid, on the other, because I think the heart of the dispute is actually quite a difficult one to resolve. While Formanek is charging Turri with misconstruing Reid's argument, I think that Turri's examples and Formanek's response are actually both litigating the core issue of the priority argument, but they are presenting it in a way that obscures some of what is crucially at stake for Reid, so I want to try to bring out how they have gotten to the heart of what Reid cares about, and, hopefully, illuminate the core of their dispute in a way that will help us understand what I think is at stake for Reid, Turri and Formanek on this issue: *irreducibly social mental operations*.

Here is, briefly, my reconstruction of the Priority Argument as it is offered in Reid's *Inquiry*:¹

- P1. All artificial language requires some prior compact/agreement.
- P2. So, some compacts/agreements must precede the existence of artificial language.
- P3. All compacts/agreements require the use of language.
- P4. So, in order for there to be artificial language, there must be language that is not artificial language.
- P5. Any language that is not artificial is natural.
- P6. So, in order for there to be artificial language, there must be natural language.
- P7. So, there must be natural language prior to artificial language.

So, this reconstruction is not too far off from Turri's, really, but fixes the main complaint raised by Formanek (avoiding the invocation of signs outside the context of language). Turri's objections to the argument are wide-ranging and involve consideration of things like essentially private languages, circumstances in which there is massively coincidental coordination of use, but not genuine concord or agreement, and the like. If I ask myself where Turri would charge that this argument goes awry, it seems that, depending on what we mean by compact or agreement, he would be most worried about premises (P1) or (P3). If we have a low bar for compact or agreement, then premise (P3) is suspect, and if we have a high bar for compact or agreement, then premise (P1) is suspect. For example, if compacts/agreements are a robust interpersonal act involving genuine meeting of the minds and knowledge of someone else's intentions, then Turri's example of agreeing with oneself is a non-starter, and so, that example would be a clear challenge to (P1). If agreement among users just requires that the users are in fact using the terms the same way, but not that they plan to and recognize that they are, etc., then, we'd be fine with (P1), but Turri would be challenging (P3).

¹ Formanek doesn't offer his own reconstruction, so I have produced this one, which a) is how I would have reconstructed Reid's argument to begin with, and b) avoids Formanek's main charge against Turri's reconstruction.

If I am Turri, or a defender of Turri, and I am armed with these sorts of examples, I may well press my case by asking, why does Reid get to build a requirement for “robust agreement” into the conditions for language? If mere coordination is sufficient to get interpersonal communication going, why isn’t that good enough to call it a language? Or in other words: why can’t we construct a real language out of coordinated systems of individual sign use?²

I think it can be really helpful to understand what’s going on for Reid here, to look at his discussion of compacts and agreements, in order to understand what he thinks is at stake. And I think it helps show us what Formanek is getting right about Reid’s concerns, vis a vis Turri’s objections, and to reorient the debate a bit around (what I take to be) Reid’s main concern: social operations of the mind.

As we’ve noted, and as highlighted by Formanek, the crucial feature of a language vs. just some signs in general, is the presence of a “compact” or “agreement” among the users. Reid discusses the nature of compact/contract/agreement, in the *Essays on the Active Powers*. The context, here, broadly speaking is that Reid thinks Hume’s (and others’) grand mistake in understanding the nature of a promise, and part of why they are so befuddled by the nature of the act of promising, is because they are trying to reduce this fundamentally social mental act to a solitary act of mind. And, so, of course *something* will be lost when you try to reduce the irreducibly social and treat it as fundamentally individualized. It is, in some ways, unsurprising that he also presents a version of the priority argument there and spends several pages discussing natural language in this context (I cannot quote the entire chapter, for reasons of time and space, so I will quote one particularly relevant portion here):

“If nature had not made man capable of such social operations of mind, and furnished him with a language to express them, he might think, and reason, and deliberate, and will; he might have desires and aversions, joy and sorrow; in a word, he might exert all those operations of mind, which the writers in logic and pneumatology have so copiously described; but, at the same time, he would still be a solitary being, even when in a crowd; it would be impossible for him to put a question, or give a command, to ask a favour, or testify a fact, to make a promise or a bargain.

I take it to be the common opinion of Philosophers, That the social operations of the human mind are not specifically different from the solitary, and that they are only various modifications or compositions of our solitary operations, and may be resolved into them. It is, for this reason probably, that, in enumerating the operations of the mind, the solitary only are mentioned, and no notice at all taken of the social, though they are familiar to every man, and have names in all languages.

I apprehend, however, it will be found extremely difficult, if not impossible, to resolve our social operations into any modification or composition of the solitary: And that an attempt to do this, would prove as ineffectual as the attempts that have been made to resolve all our social affections into the selfish. The social operations appear to be as simple in their nature as the solitary. They are found in every individual of the species, even before the use of reason.” (EAP, p. 330)

² Reid’s target here, if we think he had one in mind, is likely to be Locke, since Locke’s account of language literally is that individuals attempt to coordinate their idiolects with each other, in order to have a common language that we are all speaking, but really, at bottom, we are each using our own individual sign system, and just trying to make sure it matches everyone else’s as much as possible.

The conflict between Turri and Reid/Formanek comes into sharper relief here: Turri is attempting to bootstrap intersocial sign-systems from purely solitary uses of signs and purely solitary mental operations. Reid's priority argument is fundamentally intended to show that if we don't have some underlying coordinated social operations of mind, we cannot construct coordinated sign systems of the sort we call languages. This is why mere alignment of use in some cases shouldn't be sufficient for a language.

So earlier I said I don't want to weigh in on the core of the debate between Turri and Reid/Formanek, and that is because I think the question of whether the social is reducible to the solitary is a very difficult one, and Reid's argument here is highly compressed. I think Reid's stance on this point is a worthwhile one to investigate, and his case that we need to have some baseline socially structured mental operations in order to make our higher-level social behaviors and mental life (like language, contracts, promising and such) work, is a stronger outlook than his early modern opponents tended to appreciate. At the same time, Turri's response can be understood as properly challenging Reid if we take it to simply be an attempt to provide a solitary-operation based reduction of language, in which case, the surface level issues with his reconstruction of the argument are a distraction from the deeper issue between him and Formanek/Reid. Ultimately, I think the strength and substance of this dispute is made much clearer by the expanded focus on the social nature of the relevant operations of mind in the EAP discussion, and I hope to hear what Formanek has to say about the passage quoted above and/or the surrounding texts I wasn't able to quote here.