

SKEPTICISM, REASON AND REIDIANISM

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Abstract

The traditional problems of epistemology have often been thought to be properly solved only by the provision of an argument, with premises justified by rational intuition and introspection, for the probable truth of our beliefs in the problematic domains. Following the lead of Thomas Reid, a sizable number of contemporary epistemologists, including many proponents of so-called "Reformed epistemology" regarding religious belief, reject as arbitrary the preferential treatment of reason and introspection implicit in the traditional view of the problems. These "Reidians" insist that the traditional problems cannot be solved in the expected manner, but they go on to suggest that this result is of little significance because similar skeptical questions can be raised regarding *a priori* and introspective justification.

After making clear the significance of the Reidian objection, I endeavor to defend the traditional preference for rational intuition over our other sources of belief by demonstrating that the usual skeptical worries *cannot* be equally raised against *a priori* justification. Then, after a brief consideration of some unduly neglected passages in Reid's writings in which he appears to concede that the traditional partiality to reason and introspection is not, in fact, arbitrary, I argue that it is the Reidians who are guilty of arbitrary partiality.

Keywords

A Priori, Skepticism, Thomas Reid, Reformed Epistemology

1. The Cartesian Perspective and the Traditional Epistemological Problems

The traditional problems of epistemology include the problems of justifying our perceptual beliefs, our beliefs regarding other minds, our inductive beliefs, our testimonial beliefs, and our beliefs in unobservable entities. These beliefs of ours are thought to give rise to justificatory problems sharing a common structure. In each case, the epistemologist (at least one gripped by the problem in the traditional way) seeks a rationally cogent argument from the truth of propositions in one domain to the truth of propositions in another domain. For example, in the most prominent of these problems—the problem of the external world—what is sought is a reason for thinking that ordinary physical objects exist and have roughly the properties we believe them to have. This reason must, it is usually assumed by the tradition, take the form of a reason to think that the occurrence and character of our introspectible experiences make suitably probable a significant percentage of our commonsense beliefs regarding ordinary physical objects and their properties. Something similar holds of the other problems as well, as we are to begin from a set of justified propositions (regarding the behavior of other bodies or past observable correlations or experimental results) and to provide a reason for thinking that the truth of those propositions make it sufficiently probable that some other proposition (regarding the mental states of other persons or the probability of some future correlation or the existence of some unobservable particle) is true.

In spite of the undeniable historical importance and the persisting influence of this traditional picture of epistemology and its proper tasks, many epistemologists now reject such a picture. My focus in this paper will be on a particular group of philosophers—consisting of

Thomas Reid and a number of contemporary philosophers who claim a kinship with Reid — who seek to undermine the notion that there is a distinctive justificatory problem with respect to any of the beliefs previously mentioned. They do not claim that the tasks set out in these traditional problems can be accomplished. Instead, they vigorously maintain that they cannot be. However, they reject as arbitrary, and hence unjustified, the deference to *a priori* intuition and introspection on which the traditional problems are based.

In the first part of this paper, I'll explain why Reid, and those "Neo-Reidian" philosophers on which I shall here focus, reject the standard formulation of these problems. In the second part of the paper, I will attempt to defend the traditional perspective on these problems against the Reidians, a perspective on which *a priori* justification is absolutely fundamental and deserves its privileged position as a source of evidence on which all others must be grounded. I'll close with a brief account of some inconsistent concessions of Reid's to the traditional perspective and an argument that it is actually the Reidians who are guilty of arbitrariness.

Many of the epistemological problems mentioned above arise only on the assumption that other problems are solved. The problem of other minds, for example, typically presupposes that we are justified in propositions regarding the existence and behavior of bodies which are themselves the topic of concern in the traditional problem of the external world. Likewise, standard formulations of the problem of induction or testimony normally suppose us to be justified in believing in past correlations and in the existence of other minds. It is natural to think that because these problems form an interlocking structure in which justification for believing one class of propositions rests on justification for believing another class, sufficient

effort will reveal to us a set of propositions the justification of which does not depend on having justification to believe some other proposition. Let us call these propositions "the foundationally justified propositions."¹

Many traditional epistemologists take the foundationally justified propositions to be of a very limited sort and would endorse the following principle:

The Narrow Foundations Principle (NFP): The only foundationally justified propositions are propositions about one's present state of consciousness and propositions which are the contents of *a priori* intuitions.

In addition, many would impose a similar constraint on what is required of a rationally acceptable support relation, endorsing something like the following principle:

The Inferential Justification Principle (IJP): Beliefs in propositions which are not foundationally justified are justified only if there are foundationally justified propositions which entail that such non-foundational propositions are sufficiently probable.

The conjunction of these two claims constitute what I shall call "The Cartesian Perspective." In so designating it, I do not mean to claim that Descartes agreed with both of

¹ My focus throughout is on propositional rather than doxastic justification—on whether we have justification for our beliefs rather than on whether our beliefs are properly based on

these claims. Furthermore, this perspective (or something relevantly similar) is shared by philosophers such as Locke, Berkeley and Hume, who may not count, at least on some influential taxonomies, as Cartesians. Still, in spite of these qualifications, it is clear that this perspective, and the attendant problems to which it gives rise, have been shared by a great number of past and present epistemologists.²

That these principles are definitive of the position under attack by the Reidians is shown by the following passages in which Reid characterizes his target. First, from the *Inquiry*:

That our thoughts, our sensations, and everything of which we are conscious, hath a real existence, is admitted to this system as a first principle; but everything else must be made evident by the light of reason. Reason must rear the whole fabric of knowledge upon this single principle of consciousness. (1967, 206)

And from the *Essays*:

This, therefore, may be considered as the spirit of modern philosophy, to allow of no first principles of contingent truths but this one, that the thoughts and operations of our own minds, of which we are conscious, are self-evidently real and true; but that everything else that is contingent is to be proved by argument. (1967, 464)

such a justification.

This "method of philosophising," Reid avers is "common to Des Cartes, Malebranche, Arnauld, Locke, Norris, Collier, Berkeley, and Hume" (1967, 468).

2. *Reidianism and the Cartesian Perspective*

While the Cartesian Perspective has no doubt had a huge influence on the subsequent development of epistemology, many contemporary epistemologists take issue with the perspective. A recognizable group of the contemporary critics of the Cartesian Perspective explicitly claim to be developing ideas which originated in Thomas Reid's 18th-Century responses to the Cartesian Perspective. Among the most influential of these "Neo-Reidian" philosophers are Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.³ In this section, I characterize the views common to Reid and these Neo-Reidians.

In what follows, I will be especially interested in the following claims of Reid and the Neo-Reidians:

Conditional Skepticism (CS): Most of our ordinary beliefs fail to satisfy the demands of the Cartesian Perspective.⁴

² Among contemporary epistemologists, Richard Fumerton (1995; 2001) and Laurence Bonjour (1998; 2001; 2002) stand out as two of the clearest proponents of the Cartesian Perspective.

³ Bergmann (2006) is another, more recent, neo-Reidian.

⁴ Note that the two principles which constitute the Cartesian Perspective do not *themselves* state any skeptical thesis. A defense of CS requires argument involving either a demonstration that these principles entail skepticism or, more plausibly, an inductive case on the basis of the failures of various attempts to respond to the skeptical problems from within the strictures of the Cartesian Perspective.

Anti-Cartesianism (AC): The demands of the Cartesian Perspective are unjustified because they depend upon an arbitrary partiality toward *a priori* rational intuition and introspection.

Anti-Skepticism (AS): Most of our ordinary beliefs are justified.

Among the beliefs which the Reidians take to fail the demands of the Cartesian Perspective are beliefs regarding the external world, beliefs in other minds, beliefs regarding the future, and, according to Reid himself, belief in a persisting self, memorial beliefs, and beliefs based on testimony. My main focus in this paper will be on AC. AC is obviously more fundamental than CS because if it is correct, then little of real epistemological significance hangs on whether or not CS is correct. In the final section, I'll argue that there is a deep tension between these three claims of the Reidians.

One might reject the Cartesian Perspective without necessarily indicating whether one disagrees with NFP, IJP, or with both principles. It seems that the Reidians would probably reject only NFP and would accept some construal of IJP. Of course, the more one includes in the foundations, the less one needs to avail oneself of inferential routes to justified belief and so the significance of IJP is correspondingly diminished. Furthermore, if a variety of inferential principles are taken as foundationally justified, acceptable inferential routes become much more numerous. So, I will take the Reidians to be rejecting NFP but retaining the view that our

justified belief or knowledge has a foundational structure, even though their view of the basis of our knowledge and the conditions for acceptable epistemic ascent may be quite different.^{5, 6}

3. *Neo-Reidianism and Reformed Epistemology*

It will not escape notice that the philosophical triumvirate—Alvin Plantinga, William Alston and Nicholas Wolterstorff—which I'm treating as representative of Neo-Reidianism consists of the three main proponents of that movement in analytic philosophy of religion which goes by the name of "Reformed epistemology."⁷ A core commitment of Reformed epistemology is the claim that belief in the traditional theistic God, and indeed belief in the distinctive doctrines of Christian theism, is epistemically appropriate even though such beliefs do not meet the epistemic standards of the Cartesian Perspective. These Reformed epistemologists are explicit about their Reidian heritage, and to Reid's claims that beliefs formed on the basis of testimony, sympathy, sense perception, memory and induction are epistemically acceptable in spite of failing the demands of the Cartesian Perspective, they add the claim that

⁵ This is certainly Plantinga's view (1983; 1993a; 1993b; 2000). In spite of his rejection of "foundationalism" in his (1976), Wolterstorff might be better seen as rejecting only a certain sort of foundationalism with a restrictive conception of the foundationally justified propositions. Alston (1993) prefers, as befits his focus on practical rationality, to speak of our belief-forming "practices" which are demarcated in roughly the traditional ways.

⁶ It should be noted that the Neo-Reidian's occasionally write as though we need not be foundationally justified in *believing* an inferential principle which might correctly describe our inferences, preferring instead to maintain that an inferential disposition which accords with a suitable inferential principle produces justified beliefs from other foundationally justified beliefs.

⁷ While some of the elements of Reformed epistemology were present in Plantinga's "partners in guilt" argument in *God and Other Minds* (1967) and in Wolterstorff's *Reason within the Limits of Religion* (1976), it is most clearly identified with the essays in Plantinga's and Wolterstorff's edited book *Faith and Rationality* (1983).

belief in the theistic (or Christian) God is, at least under certain conditions, epistemically acceptable even though it also fails to satisfy the demands of the Cartesian Perspective.

Wolterstorff makes clear the relationship between the two views in the following passage:

[T]he deepest significance of that recent development in epistemology of religion which has come to be known as Reformed epistemology is its insistence that the failure of the religious belief of the ordinary person to measure up to the demands of The Doxastic Ideal [i.e. the Cartesian Perspective] does not, so far forth, indicate *any* sort of deficiency or impropriety in those beliefs or in the person holding them. We can now state why the "Reformed epistemologist" makes that claim. It's not an *ad hoc* thesis concerning religious beliefs; rather, it's part of the recent "revolution" in epistemology. The Reformed epistemologist stands in the Reidian tradition. Religious beliefs, in good measure, are like inductive and testimonial beliefs, in that the latter also do not exemplify The Doxastic Ideal. But that fact . . . implies *nothing at all* about the presence or absence of truth-relevant merits in such beliefs; it proves to be a *fundamentally irrelevant observation*. (1999, 317, emphasis added)

So, the Reformed epistemologists seek to run a two-part argument regarding religious belief. The first part consists of a "partners in guilt" argument for the conclusion that religious belief is no worse off with respect to the demands of the Cartesian Perspective than are beliefs

in other minds, beliefs about the future, beliefs about external objects and many other of our beliefs. All such beliefs fail the strictures of the Cartesian Perspective.

This parity claim, however, does not challenge the legitimacy of the demands of the Cartesian Perspective. In the absence of such a challenge, the theist receives only the cold comfort of knowing that her religious beliefs are as epistemically illegitimate as her beliefs regarding the external world. Of course, the passage from Wolterstorff just cited also reveals a second, and more significant, part of the neo-Reidian position: the claim that the demands of the Cartesian Perspective lack rational justification.

Let us take "Reformed epistemology" to consist of the three claims identified as commitments of Reidianism and also a specific instance of CS conjoined with a specific instance of AS:

Parity of Religious Belief (PRB): Belief in the theistic (and Christian) God fails to satisfy the demands of the Cartesian Perspective but is (often) justified.

The Reformed epistemologist is, then, best viewed simply as a Neo-Reidian who goes beyond Reid in identifying an additional class of beliefs which do not meet the demands of the Cartesian Perspective but are also, allegedly, none the worse epistemically for this failing and are, in fact, justified.⁸

⁸ See Alston's admission that in focusing on what he calls the "Christian mystical practice" he "departs from Reid, who restricted himself to universal practices" (1991, 169). See Plantinga's claim that he aims to go beyond Reid in restoring the "sensus divinitatus" to the basic sources of belief (1993a, 86). See also Wolterstorff's (1999; 2001).

Notice that Reformed epistemologists do not merely claim that many people are justified in traditional theistic belief. That claim can consistently be accepted by a proponent of the Cartesian Perspective. Indeed, it was accepted by many of the early modern philosophers who Reid would describe as "Cartesians," as many of them took themselves to have good arguments for the existence of God. What distinguishes Reformed epistemology is its claim that belief in God is often justified even though it in fact fails the demands of the Cartesian Perspective. Therefore, a defense of AC is essential to the success of Reformed epistemology and, correspondingly, any successful defense of the demands of the Cartesian Perspective constitutes an undermining of Reformed epistemology.

As noted, in addition to claiming that the relevant beliefs are not shown unjustified or irrational by their failure to live up to the requirements of the Cartesian Perspective, these reformed epistemologists often claim that the relevant theistic beliefs have a suitable positive epistemic status. As indicated by PRB, I shall take the status of interest to be that of being justified. However, it should be noted that Reformed epistemologists sometimes propose that theistic beliefs (and others failing the requirements of the Cartesian Perspective) have some other positive status. Plantinga, as his views have evolved, has moved from a focus on good arguments for believing (1967) and rationality of belief (1983), to whether such beliefs have that property which separates mere true belief from knowledge (2000). Alston focuses on whether it is *prima facie* practically rational to form such beliefs on the basis of putative mystical experience of God (1993). Wolterstorff refers to the vague catch-all property of having "truth-relevant merits" (2001, 188).

4. *Conditional Skepticism and the Cartesian Perspective*

It is abundantly clear from his writings that Reid believed the demands of the Cartesian Perspective were unsatisfiable and that he took all of the epistemological problems mentioned at the beginning of this paper to be completely insoluble in their traditional form. His remarks in the *Inquiry* on Hume and Berkeley show that he believed that *if* one adheres to the Cartesian Perspective one will be driven unavoidably to skepticism about the external world and other minds:

Bishop Berkeley hath *proved, beyond the possibility of reply*, that we cannot by reasoning infer the existence of matter from our sensations; and the author of the 'Treatise of Human Nature' hath *proved no less clearly*, that we cannot by reasoning infer the existence of our own or other minds from our sensations.

(1967, 129, emphasis added)

While one might reasonably question Reid's assessment of the strength of Berkeley's and Hume's arguments, Reid clearly holds that, as traditionally construed by the Cartesian Perspective, there is no possible solution to the problem of the external world or the problem of other minds. Again and again throughout the *Inquiry* and *Essays*, Reid responds to epistemological problems with claims that if the problems are construed as the Cartesian Perspective would construe them, they are insoluble.

Indeed, in some respects he goes further than many of the proponents of the Cartesian Perspective. For example, of memory, he notes,

The same difficulty with regard to memory naturally arises from the system of ideas; and the only reason why it was not observed by philosophers, is, because they give less attention to the memory than to the senses; for, since ideas are things present, how can we, from our having a certain idea presently in our mind, conclude that an event really happened ten or twenty years ago, corresponding to it? There is the same need of arguments to prove, that the ideas of memory are pictures of things that really did happen, as that the ideas of sense are pictures of external objects which now exist. (1967, 358)

and then adds that

In both cases, it will be impossible to find any argument that has real weight. So that this hypothesis leads us to absolute scepticism, with regard to those things which we most distinctly remember, no less than with regard to the external objects of sense. (1967, 358, emphasis added)

This conditional skepticism is also shared by the contemporary philosophers I have identified as Neo-Reidians, though it appears that, unlike Reid, they take themselves to have merely inductive evidence for the view. Throughout his writings of the last three or four decades, Plantinga has repeatedly claimed that a clear lesson of the history of modern and contemporary philosophy is that most of our ordinary beliefs "cannot be seen to be supported

by, to be probable with respect to beliefs that meet" (2000, 98) the requirements of the Cartesian Perspective.⁹ In his treatment of traditional skeptical problems in *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993b) he repeatedly concedes that, relative to the classical formulation of the problems, there is no solution. This pattern of concession with regard to the classical skeptical problems appears in his treatment of our belief that we are persisting things, of our belief (on the basis of memory) that certain things have happened, of our belief that other minds exist, of beliefs formed on the basis of testimony of other persons, of perceptual belief in the external world, *a priori* beliefs, and inductive beliefs.

Conditional skepticism of the sort I've outlined above is also endorsed by Alston in his work on these topics. In *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (1993), he argues at great length for the claim that one cannot show in a satisfactory manner, on the basis of the sorts of resources allotted by the Cartesian Perspective, that sense perceptual beliefs are reliable. Wolterstorff, however, embraces a more tentative conditional skepticism about the material world as he claims that "no philosopher ... has succeeded in showing that the existence of material objects is probable on evidence consisting exclusively of items of direct awareness which we can see to be satisfactory as evidence" (1996, 178).

5. The Charge of Arbitrary Partiality

In the previous section, I demonstrated that Reid and the Neo-Reidians believe that traditional epistemological problems cannot be solved in the way which the Cartesian Perspective would require. As indicated earlier, however, neither Reid nor the Neo-Reidians

⁹ See also (1983, 59), (1993a, 85), (1993b, 97), and (2000, 221).

are skeptics. Instead, they contest the demands being made of our beliefs in the formulation of these traditional epistemological problems. In *the* canonical passage cited over and over by the Neo-Reidians, Reid writes

The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine; I ever took it upon trust, and without suspicion. Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception? They came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another? (1967, 183)

Reid's complaint is composed of two parts: a question and a claim. The *question* asks what reason one might have for believing that reason is more trustworthy than perception. The *claim* is that no reason will be forthcoming as the ground for refusing to trust sense perception without independent confirmation except the possibility of its unreliability, but then exactly the same ground suffices to undermine trust in reason. So, Reid concludes that the requirement that one show some candidate source of contingent beliefs is reliable by appeal to reason and consciousness is unjustified. It is this alleged inability to justify, in an acceptable way, the claim that our other faculties or beliefs must be held to the bar of reason and consciousness which

Reid views as the fundamental flaw in the Cartesian Perspective. On this basis, Reid concludes that the proponent of the Cartesian Perspective (and though he refers to this person as "the sceptic," there is no reason why they must be) is guilty of an arbitrary partiality in endorsing NFP.

This charge of arbitrary partiality is made even more explicit at other locations in Reid's *oeuvre*. Of Hume he writes,

The author of the 'Treatise of Human Nature' appears to me to be but a half-skeptic. He hath not followed his principles so far as they lead him; but, after having, with unparalleled intrepidity and success, combated vulgar prejudices . . . his courage fails him, . . . and [he] yields himself a captive to the most common of all vulgar prejudices—I mean the belief of his own impressions and ideas.
(1967, 129)

and of Descartes he writes,

It might have been objected to this first principle of Des Cartes, How can you know that your consciousness cannot deceive you? You have supposed that all you see, and hear, and handle, may be an illusion. Why, therefore, should the power of consciousness have this prerogative, to be believed implicitly, when all our other powers are supposed fallacious? (1967, 463)

and, finally, more generally and most explicitly,

Thus the faculties of consciousness, of memory, of external sense, and of reason, are equally the gifts of nature. *No good reason can be assigned for receiving the testimony of one of them, which is not of equal force with regard to the others.* The greatest sceptics admit the testimony of consciousness, and allow what it testifies to be held as a first principle. If, therefore, they reject the immediate testimony of sense or of memory, they are *guilty of an inconsistency.* (1967, 439, emphasis added)

These passages make clear that, as Reid saw the matter, the Cartesian Perspective is incapable of being justified because no good reason can be given for trusting some of our belief-forming tendencies but not all of them. The Cartesian Perspective, recall, takes only consciousness and *a priori* intuition as the necessary basis for the justification of all belief and then deems belief unacceptable if unsupported by those two sources. Reid's complaint is that this partiality towards consciousness and reason has no justification and so one must either be a complete antecedent skeptic with whom rational discussion is impossible and who must be left to their skepticism or one must accept all our "natural" sources of belief as *prima facie* epistemically acceptable and initially on a par.

Before proceeding to evaluate this suggestion, it is worth briefly locating it in the Neo-Reidians. Alston claims that the partial skeptic about, say, sense perception, is faced with exactly the dilemma outlined above: Either she demands an independent justification of *all*

faculties and is driven into a complete and total skepticism or she accepts some faculties without independent verification and demands a justification of others. This second horn, Alston avers, involves an *arbitrary selectivity* since "there is no rational basis for accepting some and not others without justification" (1985, 446).

Plantinga also repeatedly makes the charge of arbitrary partiality. As one example, in the context of his discussion of Bonjour's (1996) adherence to a version of the Cartesian Perspective, he writes:

[T]he question for Bonjour is this: why are simple *a priori* beliefs exempt from this demand that we must have a good reason for thinking a belief true, if it is to constitute knowledge? He seems to me to face a dilemma at this point. If he treats *a priori* belief differently from perceptual belief, belief about other minds, inductive beliefs, and the like, then he's guilty of a sort of arbitrariness . . . On the other hand, if Bonjour insists that all beliefs, *a priori* beliefs as well as others, must meet this condition, then he insists on a condition for knowledge that cannot possibly be met, at least by finite beings like us. (1996, 342)

Finally, Wolterstorff's (2001) exposition and defense of Reid's epistemology is particularly clear in presenting the Reidian point as a dilemma for the proponent of the Cartesian Perspective. The Cartesian may try to ground all of our beliefs on introspection and reason but "what difference is there, between perception and memory one the one hand, and consciousness and reason on the other, that would authorize this radical difference in

treatment?" (2001, 198). Alternatively, she may seek an independent ground for every putative source of belief and thereby demand an impossibility.

This argument suggests to the Reidians that one is justified in trusting all of one's belief-forming tendencies and divesting oneself of their deliverances only when one is rationally compelled to do so. As Alston puts it

Reid's point could be put by saying that the only (noncircular) basis we have for trusting rational intuition and introspection is that they are firmly established doxastic practices, so firmly established that we "cannot help it," and we have *exactly the same basis* for trusting sense perception, memory, nondeductive reasoning, and other sources of belief for which Descartes and Hume were demanding an external validation. (1993, 127, emphasis added)

Reason, inductive inference, perception, introspection, memory, and testimony are all of them equally appropriate sources of *prima facie* justified belief. As noted earlier, the neo-Reidian movement in the hands of the Reformed Epistemologists maintains that certain sorts of propositions entailing the existence of the traditional (and Christian) God are themselves among the foundationally justified propositions.

Whatever else may be said about them, the Reidians have succeeded in raising an extremely important foundational question in epistemology, one which the proponent of the Cartesian Perspective must address rather than evade. That question is, given any putative set of foundational resources, *why* restrict oneself to exactly *that* set of resources in an effort to

determine which of our beliefs are justified? In the next section, I shall try to argue that, contrary to the Reidians, the Cartesian Perspective has the resources to answer this question.

6. Against the Charge of Arbitrary Partiality

Prior to attempting a schematic defense of the Cartesian Perspective against the charge of arbitrary partiality, we must be clear about what is required of a such a defense. A successful defense of the Cartesian Perspective against the charge of arbitrary partiality requires two things: First, an account of the properties of reason and introspection which distinguish them from other bases of belief; Second, an account of why those differences suffice to justify and render non-arbitrary the partiality captured in NFP. In sum, what is needed is an account of what epistemologically relevant differences distinguish reason and introspection from our other faculties.

Let us begin with a consideration of the possibility that comes most quickly to mind. Perhaps it will be said that reason and introspection are to be distinguished from sense perception because of their infallibility. That is, perhaps we may say that that reason and introspection are infallible but that sense perception and other sources of belief are plainly fallible and lead us sometimes into error. The Neo-Reidians consider and reject this suggestion. Alston notes that some have claimed that "we are infallible with respect to our current states of consciousness, or at least that nothing could show that one has made a mistake about such matters" (1993, 128) and that "similar claims have been made for rational intuition" (1993, 128). His response is that it is "not at all clear" that either of these faculties is infallible or incorrigible. With respect to rational intuition, he notes that philosophical disagreement seems to indicate

that rational intuition is not infallible. These considerations show, he avers, that *it is not infallibility* that distinguishes rational intuition from sense perception and non-deductive inference.

Plantinga and Wolterstorff are also united in claiming that *a priori* reason is not infallible and so this cannot be the justifying ground of the narrow foundations principle.

"Don't the same questions arise about a priori beliefs and alleged knowledge? Can't we raise the same skeptical problems? I believe the corresponding conditional of modus ponens and that $2+1=3$; indeed, I believe each necessarily true. . . . They have about them, furthermore, the peculiar feel that a priori beliefs have--that feel that somehow they just couldn't possibly be false. But of course such a feel could be misleading. A *false* belief, obviously enough, could have that sort of feel for me; I could be mad, or a victim of an Alpha Centaurian cognitive scientist, or a brain in a vat, or a victim of a Cartesian evil demon. . . . As a matter of fact, this isn't merely an abstract possibility: some propositions that have that a priori feel about them are false, as is shown by certain versions of the Russell paradox." (Plantinga, 1996, 341)

"It happens all the time that some proposition appears to a person as a proposition that is necessarily true would appear, when it's not; or that an argument appears to a person as an argument that is valid would appear, when it's not. It's only when we go beyond how the proposition or argument presents

itself to us on that occasion, and explore its connections with other propositions and arguments, that we discover the truth of the matter. What's especially disturbing is that sometimes the members of a set of propositions all retain the 'glow' of necessary truth when we rightly come to realize that they can't all be true, let alone necessarily true: witness Russell's Paradox. This already undercuts the skeptic's injunction; if reason cannot be trusted, then the project of assembling evidence pro and con about the reliability of memory and perception can't even get off the ground." (Wolterstorff, 2001, 200)

On one point, the Neo-Reidians are clearly correct. However things may stand with introspection, it cannot be on account of their infallibility as a class that *a priori* rational intuitions are epistemically superior to putative perceptions. We know from philosophical paradox that false propositions can be the contents of *a priori* intuitions. If there is reason to favor reason over sense perception, it cannot be that the former is infallible while the latter is fallible.

However, the ground of serious skeptical worries is not mere fallibility. Instead, it is the possibility of general unreliability or even total unreliability. While perceptual judgment is fallible, it is also possible, as skeptical scenarios make clear, that each and every one of our perceptual judgments is mistaken, consistent with our experiences. So, the skeptic asks, what reason have we to think that they are even reliable?

The plausibility of the Reidian view requires that we have reason to think that it is indeed possible for *a priori* intuition to be unreliable. In the passages quoted above, Plantinga

and Wolterstorff support this claim by noting (a) that *a* false proposition could seem intuitive to one, and (b) that the Russell paradox shows that in fact some false propositions actually do seem very intuitive.¹⁰ That *a priori* intuition is fallible—that *a* false proposition can present to intuition as true—does not, however, imply that it is possible for *a priori* intuition to be utterly misleading or even unreliable. From the fact that it is possible that we go wrong about some *a priori* propositions, it doesn't at all follow that we might go wrong about all of them or, indeed, about any particular individual one. Put another way, admitting the fallibility of a faculty or source of evidence does not necessarily involve admitting that the faculty might go wrong on *any and all* particular judgments. So, the considerations advanced by the Reidians do not suffice to generate a skeptical problem for *a priori* intuition like that which arises for perception.

Moreover, not only does the possibility of unreliability not follow from the fact of actual error, there is, in the those judgments of reason which are strongest, decisive reason for thinking that reason *cannot* be entirely erroneous. When we consider such propositions as the simplest truths of arithmetic and logic, we find them maximally intuitively obvious. They strike as so clear, that we cannot even imagine how we might be wrong about them (Nagel 1997). To suggest, as the Reidians do, that reason is a piece of false ware is to suggest that even those *a priori* intuitions in which those maximally evident propositions are grasped might be mistaken. However, one sees the truth so clearly in such cases that no credibility attaches to the Reidian's assertion that one's belief in such propositions is rendered doubtful by the possibility that one is the victim of some evil demon or neurosurgeon. While such skeptical scenarios suffice to

¹⁰ Exactly the same move is made in Bergmann's work (2006, 222) when he suggests that *all* of a person's introspective beliefs and *a priori* beliefs might be mistaken on the basis of the fact

generate serious skeptical worries regarding the external world, they do nothing at all to cast doubt upon the clearest truths of reason.

The point I am endeavoring to make here is much like one touched upon by Descartes at the beginning of the Third Meditation in discussing the hyperbolic doubt introduced by God's omnipotence. In spite of his earlier claim that God (or some powerful demon) might cause him to be deceived about that which is most evident, Descartes writes:

Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think that I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. (1996, 25)

Descartes here admits that he finds himself unable to even entertain the possibility that certain propositions are false *while* considering attentively their content. Likewise, my suggestion is that the clearest truths of reason immediately and evidently falsify any skeptical hypothesis alleged to cast doubt upon them.

Following Lex Newman and Alan Nelson's (1999) insightful interpretation of this part of the Cartesian corpus, we may distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* doubt. A doubt that *p* is

that *an* introspective or *a priori* belief can be or is mistaken.

direct when it arises while one is carefully attending to *p*. As Newman and Nelson point out, it may seem that propositions which cannot be directly doubted simply cannot be doubted since any turning of one's attention away from the proposition at issue is, *ipso facto*, failing to make the proposition an object of one's consideration and thus failing to doubt the truth of *that* proposition. This would, they note, seem to make skeptical worries about the clearest truths of reason simply impossible to formulate, just as I'm suggesting.

Newman and Nelson claim, however, that Descartes' deepest doubt is a "meta-cognitive" doubt which "proceeds precisely by means of an attention shift away from the item in question and towards a (second-order) subsuming rubric referring to similarly grounded items" (1999, 375). So, they claim, one cannot doubt the clearest truths of reason while one attends to them, but one can nonetheless use such an indirect means to undermine all such truths by attending to the general rubric which subsumes them. An indirect doubt, then, is a doubt which occurs only when one is not directly considering *p*. They conclude, "in thus rendering doubtful even" my cognitive best, the meta-cognitive doubt "*ipso facto* renders doubtful—albeit indirectly—each particular item subsumed under the rubric by undermining its ground" (375).

It is worth noting that the tendency of Reid and the Neo-Reidians to refer to the *faculties* of introspection, sympathy, perception, etc., has precisely the effect of allowing the kind of attention shift required for a meta-cognitive doubt. Reid's discussion in the passage quoted above does exactly this in asking us to reflect on the possibility that our "reason" is a piece of

"false ware."¹¹ Indeed, when it comes to the *a priori*, even the typical rationalist's focus on the *type* of propositional attitude common to all *a priori* intuitions invites a similar attention shift. Having turned one's attention to such a general subsuming rubric, rather than asking about the epistemic status of a particular attitude with a particular content, one asks about the status of the faculty producing the attitude or the status of the attitude type and thereby turns one's direct attention away from the proposition which is the content of the particular mental state in question.

Though Newman and Nelson have much of interest to say regarding the proper interpretation and evaluation of Descartes' attempt to conquer such a meta-cognitive doubt, we should ask if such indirect doubt has the suggested skeptical significance in the first place. Is it, as Newman and Nelson claim, true that meta-cognitive doubt really renders doubtful the items subsumed under a rubric such as "the clearest judgments of reason"? If so, what kind of doubt is cast upon those items? Recall that it is already conceded that I cannot doubt $2 + 2 = 4$ while attending directly to the proposition. However, every time I get myself to doubt that "the clearest judgments of reason are true," have I *really* come to doubt that $2+2=4$ is true? It seems to me that I have not. In one sense, of course, I can doubt *of* the proposition that $2+2=4$ that it is true, by means of various referring descriptions such as "the proposition I thought about yesterday morning" or, as Newman and Nelson prefer, "my epistemic best." However, the question which we must ask is whether this indirect doubt is epistemically significant and

¹¹ Notice that Reid's problematic concessions to the Cartesian Perspective (see Section 7) result precisely when he directly considers the clearest truths of reason and introspection rather the relevant "faculties."

constitutes any reason at all to question the truth of the proposition and my epistemic grasp upon it.

To aid in seeing that it is not and does not, perhaps an analogy will help. Suppose I am told by someone quite trustworthy that they have found a book containing a long list of propositions. It seems, of course, quite possible that all of the propositions written in the book are false. Suppose further that many of the propositions contained in the book are propositions which I believe. It would not seem to follow that I have, in doubting that any proposition in the book is true, thereby cast epistemically significant doubt upon the truth of any of my beliefs. This means of considering and referring to the propositions in question fails to put me in a position relevant to their epistemic assessment. Just so, it seems to me, indirect doubt fails to engage a proposition *in the right manner* to generate skeptical problems.

Even if, contrary to my suggestion, such indirect doubts do produce some sort of genuine epistemic difficulty, the difficulty is a strangely insubstantial and evanescent one as it is always entirely and wholly defeated by direct attention to the propositions in question. After all, as Descartes forcefully noted, whatever doubts I may indirectly generate about the clearest propositions of reason, attention to such a particular proposition immediately *dispels* the doubt. I would add that it does so in a way which involves my seeing that such an indirect doubt was ill-founded, predicated on a failure to fully understand what it actually encompassed. Returning to the analogy above, if one thought some genuine doubt was produced by my allowing that all the proposition written in the book are false, such doubt is shown utterly mistaken by my finding the clearest truths of reason in the book. Indeed, it seems that direct

reflection on that fact justifies me in thinking that I was simply *mistaken* in thinking that my epistemic best might be mistaken.

In fact, it seems clear that the propositions which are the contents of the judgments in question ought to take precedence here. This is to say that indirect reference to a proposition ought not be allowed to undermine whatever epistemic credentials accrue to a proposition thought in *propia persona*. When I am able to make clear sense of the skeptical possibility that some "faculty" of mine produces in me false beliefs of a certain number, it can only be because I can make sense of the idea that the content of the actual judgments it produces in me are false. This, however, requires attention to the content of the judgments and to the ways in which they may be false. Indirect means of doubt are, I suggest, illegitimate as they fail to genuinely engage the content of the judgments with which one is concerned. For these reasons, then, I can't see that the sort of move which Newman and Nelson attribute to Descartes is ultimately successful in rendering coherent the possibility that my reason is entirely mistaken or constitutes, as Reid imagines, "a piece of false ware." The Reidians are, I suggest, simply mistaken in holding that my reason might be entirely unreliable.

It may be replied that I have simply failed to appreciate the lesson taught by cases of extremely intuitive but false propositions, such as the naïve comprehension axiom of the Russell Paradox. The neo-Reidians might be taken to be suggesting that the lesson of such cases is that even that which is most evident can be mistaken. However, the naïve comprehension axiom is not as clearly true as the propositions used to justify its rejection. That is to say, we are rational in thinking the comprehension axiom false only if there are other conflicting propositions (including non-contradiction) which are more clearly true. Hence, we've reason to think that

the naïve comprehension axiom is not among the *most* evident propositions and hence no reason to think that those most evident propositions of reason could be false.

If I am right, the fact that reason is infallible regarding certain basic truths can be used to turn aside the claim that reason deserves no special regard. There is nothing epistemically arbitrary in treating as foundationally justified only those propositions about which one cannot be mistaken and which reveal to one that they cannot be mistaken. This is sufficient to show that there is nothing at all arbitrary in seeking to find a reason (even a probabilistic one) for all of one's beliefs grounded in propositions with the requisite status. Hence, there is nothing epistemically arbitrary in a version of the Cartesian Perspective which limits itself to the most evident truths of reason and consciousness. Indeed, I'll show in the next section that Reid, in various asides, acknowledges such propositions have a special epistemic status.

To the forgoing, it may be rejoined that securing the most basic propositions presented by reason (and introspection) from skeptical attack might be sufficient to reject a charge of arbitrary partiality, but it is not enough to show that the Cartesian Perspective is correct. NJP, after all, makes general reference to the deliverances of rational intuition and introspection rather than to some special subclass of such deliverances. Even if there is nothing arbitrary in a standard of perfection for full or complete justification, what of lesser degrees of justification? What makes a verdict of *a priori* intuition which is less than certain more justified than a belief that one has hands? The answer, I suggest, is that *a priori* intuition is, at least when limited to intuitions of sufficient (though less than maximal) strength, necessarily reliable (Pust 2004). Such a verdict is intuitively plausible. At the very least, there is no reason to regard rational intuition as possibly unreliable, because (a) as noted above, possible general unreliability does

not follow from the fact of known error, and (b) we lack the intuitions requisite for directly justifying such a claim of possible general unreliability. However, we *can* see, in light of skeptical scenarios, that *all* of our perceptual beliefs could be mistaken, consistent with our perceptual evidence.

The Reidians' central charge of arbitrariness is predicated on the claim that cogent skeptical worries of the sort which afflict perceptual, inductive, testimonial and other ordinary beliefs also afflict *a priori* intuition and consciousness. I have argued that this is not so. Of course, such claims are themselves justified by *a priori* intuitions (or a lack thereof) and so such a procedure might be alleged, in the present context, to be question-begging. It is not. The skeptic at issue is one who provides us with reasons or arguments for her views. She claims that we can see, *by our own lights*, that our perceptual judgments might all be mistaken, consistent with the current and past course of our experiences. So, if we lack the requisite intuitions, then it is not true that by our own lights that our *a priori* intuitions might be generally erroneous and the skeptic has no rational purchase upon us. The point is not that the skeptic has some special burden of proof, but rather that skeptical arguments which are to bring *us* rationally to skeptical conclusions must be cogent by *our* lights.

7. Reid's Inconsistent Concessions to the Cartesian Perspective

Curiously, Reid's work contains a number of passages which reveal an acquiescence to the Cartesian Perspective inconsistent with his charges against it.¹² The following passages

¹² Plantinga is the most trenchant critic of the demands of the Cartesian Perspective. Though he was once willing (1993a, 102-3; 1993b, 107) to grant some epistemic superiority of reason

illustrate, in language reminiscent of the passage from Descartes' Third Meditation cited above, Reid's apparent concessions that there is something appropriate about the distinction which the Cartesian Perspective draws between our faculties:

When I compare the different kinds of evidence above-mentioned, I confess, after all, that the evidence of reasoning, and that of some necessary and self-evident truths, seems to be the least mysterious and the most perfectly comprehended; and therefore, I do not think it strange that philosophers should have endeavored to reduce all kinds of evidence to these. . . . When I see a proposition to be self-evident and necessary, and that the subject is plainly included in the predicate, there seems to be nothing more that I can desire in order to understand why I believe it. . . . The light of truth so fills my mind, in these cases, that I can neither conceive nor desire anything more satisfying.

(1967, 330)

and consciousness, he has since indicated no such conciliatory stance. Indeed, in response to Bonjour's criticism from the Cartesian Perspective, Plantinga writes, "Bonjour complains that on my accounts of induction and our knowledge of other minds, we just find ourselves believing, under certain circumstances, that the sun will rise tomorrow or that Sally is angry, without any real insight into how it is that the sun's having risen lo! these many days makes it likely that it will rise tomorrow. But are we *any* better off in the a priori case? When we contemplate the corresponding conditional of *modus ponens*, we just find ourselves with this powerful inclination to believe that this proposition is true, and indeed couldn't be false. . . . We really don't have any reasons or grounds for this belief; we simply, so to say, start with it." (1996, 342, emphasis added)

When I believe the truth of a mathematical axiom, or of a mathematical proposition, I see that it must be so: every man who has the same conception of it sees the same. There is a necessary and an evident connection between the subject and the predicate of the proposition; and I have all the evidence to support my belief which I can possibly conceive. When I believe that I washed my hands and face this morning, there appears no necessity in the truth of this proposition. It might be, or it might not be. A man may distinctly conceive it without believing it at all. (1967, 341)

and, most interestingly,

It is, no doubt, the perfection of a rational being to have no belief but what is grounded on intuitive evidence, or on just reasoning; but man, I apprehend, is not such a being; nor is it the intention of nature that he should be such a being, in every period of his existence. (1967, 332)

Among the Neo-Reidians, at least Wolterstorff appears to agree, holding that "we would be more admirable than we are if our beliefs" met the strictures of the Cartesian Perspective (2001, 194).

It is, however, inconsistent to claim that the demands of the Cartesian Perspective are epistemically arbitrary, which, as we have seen, the Reidians do, while at the same time admitting that there is something epistemically superior about having beliefs grounded in

reason as the Cartesian Perspective demands—indeed, while conceding that at least sometimes the evidence of reason (and consciousness) is the best one could possibly imagine and constitutes epistemic perfection.¹³ Surely, if one agrees that it would be a very good thing, perhaps allowing us to attain "the perfection of a rational being," if our beliefs met a certain condition, then one should not hold that requiring that condition of them is *arbitrary*.

Put another way, the following are inconsistent: (1) the philosopher, if she could show that our beliefs can be grounded in reason and consciousness, would show our epistemic condition to be the best possible and, (2) the philosopher's attempt, even if successful, would have no value, that, to use Wolterstorff's phrase, "nothing is gained" by success at such a project. Yet it seems that Reid, and among the Neo-Reidians at least Wolterstorff, are committed to both.¹⁴ What could be arbitrary about seeking the kind of evidence which one "can best comprehend, and which gives *perfect* satisfaction to an inquisitive mind" (1967, 330)? The

¹³ Notice that Reid similarly grants an epistemic superiority to consciousness, the other faculty privileged by the Cartesian Perspective:

It is impossible that there can be any fallacy in sensation: for we are conscious of all our sensations, and they can neither be any other in their nature, nor greater or less in their degree than we feel them. It is impossible that a man should be in pain, when he does not feel pain; and when he feels pain, it is impossible that his pain should not be real, and in its degree what it is felt to be; and the same thing may be said of every sensations whatsoever. (1967, 335)

For from this source of consciousness is derived all that we know, of the structure and of the powers of our own minds; from which we may conclude, that there is no branch of knowledge that stands upon a firmer foundation; for surely no kind of evidence can go beyond that of consciousness. (1967, 443)

¹⁴ Again, Plantinga demurs, apparently holding that the *only* epistemic value which would accrue to us in virtue of finding a rationally compelling argument from sensory states to the external world is that of the true belief that there is such an argument.

Cartesian Perspective seeks just such best kind of evidence that our beliefs are at least probable. Even if, as CS holds, such evidence is not to be had, its pursuit is not arbitrary, as Reid's rare, but presumably honest, concessions indicate.

8. The Arbitrary Partiality of Reidianism

The Reidians claim that the Cartesian Perspective is arbitrarily partial in its selection of foundational epistemic resources. I've argued that, at least with respect to *a priori* intuition, this charge is mistaken because *a priori* intuition is immune to the standard sorts of skeptical challenges. As I have noted, the Reidians hold not only that our ordinary beliefs are none the worse for failing the demands of the Cartesian Perspective, but also hold that such ordinary beliefs are very often justified. In this section, I'll argue that the Reidians cannot justifiably maintain AS consistent with their endorsement of CS. In other words, so long as the Reidians maintain that the Cartesian Perspective leads to broad skepticism, their own anti-skepticism must be epistemically arbitrary in its features. This suggests that Cartesian Perspective is, in the end, unavoidable for a properly justified *epistemology*.

To being with, it should be noted that the Reidians are, either explicitly by proclamation (Plantinga 1983, 75-78; Bergmann 2006, 210-211) or implicitly by their insistence that many of our actual beliefs are clearly justified, particularists. According to particularism, epistemological theories are epistemologically justified to the extent to which they properly categorize obvious cases of justified and unjustified belief. Though this often goes unnoticed, particularism is only plausible if we are justified in believing that the relevant hypothetical or actual beliefs are justified or unjustified. So, a crucial issue for the particularist, and hence the

Reidian particularist, is how it is that we are justified in believing that particular beliefs in particular circumstances are justified or unjustified.¹⁵

Once the issue is raised, it seems clear that the only plausible position is one holding that our beliefs about the justificational status of beliefs are justified by *a priori* intuitions. After all, what else could justify the claim that some actual or hypothetical belief *is justified*? However, such *a priori* intuitions are one of the two sources of justification privileged by NFP. Hence it seems impossible that the Reidian can reflectively and consistently believe that various of our ordinary beliefs are clearly justified while simultaneously maintaining that such beliefs lack support of the sort required by NFP. The Reidians appear to have mistakenly assumed that the only support which could be provided for a contingent claim, consistent with NFP, would be support consisting of an *a priori* cogent argument from the content of introspective judgments to the content of other contingent claims. However, *if* one is indeed justified by *a priori* rational intuition in believing that a particular contingent belief is justified in certain possible circumstances, then one is justified by *a priori* rational intuition in believing that such a belief is probably true in such circumstances. Moreover, if one is introspectively justified in believing that one actually is in such circumstances, then one is justified, consistent with NFP, in believing that one's own contingent belief is sufficiently probable.

I am not maintaining that one is indeed *a priori* justified in believing the various claims the Reidian particularist would require for the justification for her doctrine. Nor am I maintaining that if one is so justified, that such justification is indefeasible. One might think

¹⁵ Bergmann's defense of a Reidian position is, to his credit, sensitive to existence of the question of how the data beliefs for the particularist procedure are justified (2006, 209-211).

that skeptical arguments of various sorts proceed from premises more secure than such *a priori* intuitions regarding the justification of non-introspective beliefs with contingent content. After all, having seen that the content of the belief is some contingent proposition about the external world and that the belief could be mistakenly held on exactly the experiential grounds one has, how plausible is it that one is justified in believing it true in the absence of an argument for the probable truth of its content from the resources of NFP? Rather, my claim is that such *a priori* intuitions must *prima facie* justify claims about particular hypothetical beliefs if one is to be justified in appealing to such claims as the justificatory basis of one's positive epistemological views.

So, the Reidians cannot consistently accept CS, AC *and* AS unless they lack intuitive justification for AS. Of course, if that is so, then they cannot regard the positive epistemological position resulting from inductivist particularism as justified. Rather, the reflective Reidians must regard such a position as the product of their own (ultimately) arbitrary and unjustified beliefs regarding the extent of her justified beliefs.¹⁶ This result makes clear that the various Reidian injunctions to ignore skeptical concerns and to "simply go along with our natural

¹⁶ This result seems to me another expression of worry undergirding "the Great Pumpkin Objection" to Plantinga's defense of Reformed epistemology (1983, 65). That objection consists of the suggestion that believers in the annual return of the Great Pumpkin might equally use Plantinga's defense of the rationality of theistic belief to justify their own bizarre beliefs. (For a very early discussion of a similar concern, see Plantinga 1967, 268-20). In response, Plantinga claimed that the Christian will "of course" conclude that he has foundational justification for believing as he does while the proponent of the Great Pumpkin does not. This response neglects to address what *justification*, if any, the Christian would have for such a conclusion and so invites the objection that the proponent of some alternative view might simply begin with the assumption that her beliefs are paradigms of justified beliefs and then utilize the particularist methodology to "justify" an epistemological principle which deems them justified.

reactions of trust" (Alston 1983, 119), to accept our beliefs as "the gift of Heaven" (Reid 1967, 330), to "join with the vulgar in taking for granted the fundamental reliability of [our] intellectual faculties" (Wolterstorff 2001, 216), and to see that what we "properly take to be rational . . . depends on what sort of metaphysical and religious stance [we] adopt" (Plantinga 2000, 190), are simply an expression of an arbitrary partiality toward some existing beliefs (including, in the hands of the Reformed epistemologists, sectarian religious beliefs). They are, in the end, simply an evasion of epistemology.

9. Conclusion

The general issue raised by the Reidians—whether a non-arbitrary account can be given for thinking some putative evidential source(s) foundational while others require independent justification—is an absolutely crucial one for any epistemological project which aspires to treat anything like the traditional problems. There is, however, a rationale for rejecting the Reidian attack on the Cartesian Perspective's privileging of *a priori* intuition and introspection. Finally, the fact that the positive Reidian account must be ultimately arbitrary suggests that the Cartesian Perspective must be correct if the epistemological enterprise is to have the universal character to which it aspires.

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