

Remembering Events: A Reidean Account of (Episodic) Memory*

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1 Introduction

Memory is essential to our functioning as fully developed, social individuals. Being in the world without remembering most of what we did would leave us unable to process and acquire any kind of knowledge about ourselves, the world we live in, and everyone else around us. Without memory to help us retain new information, our lives would be devoid of continuity, so that questions about our identity as persons and our place in the world would be impossible to answer.¹ According to psychologists, there are several types of memory, and one type in particular, the so-called “episodic memory”, is essential for keeping track of our relationships with things in our environment.² One project here is to determine exactly what type of things we are related to via episodic memory. Intuitively, physical objects, broadly construed, and their properties should be on the list. In addition,

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¹This paper is not about the relationship between memory and personal identity. The reader interested in Reid’s views may look for the following works that address and explain Reid’s famous criticism of Locke’s theory of personal identity: Van Woudenberg (2004), Yaffe (2009), and Van Cleve (2015b).

²Conway (2009), for instance, points out that one of the constitutive characteristics of episodic memory is the fact that it enables autobiographical remembering, at least in human agents.

events seem like good candidates. But it is difficult to understand how we can have direct access to past events, given their essentially ephemeral character.³

Thomas Reid offers an explanation of how memory of events is possible.⁴ This paper will present, criticize, and amend his view that memory not only preserves our knowledge of the external world, but also contributes to such knowledge, by being essential for the perception of events. Reid's views on memory are in line with his general anti-skeptical commitments, and thus attractive, for several reasons.⁵ One reason is that, just like perception, memory is not infallible, but it can constitute or, at least, ground knowledge. Reid argues that memory, like perception, is immediate: it gives direct access to the external world, and not to mental representations of the external world. Another reason is that Reid's explanation of how memory of events works emphasizes the importance of the divide between memory and perception and consciousness: it is one thing to perceive or be conscious of something; it is another to remember that thing.⁶ Despite these advantages, a careful study of Reid's views on memory will uncover a serious problem of general philosophical interest: it is unclear how exactly we are able to remember events episodically, since it is not settled whether we ever literally perceive events. This problem is engendered by a clash

³This paper assumes that duration is essential to events, and hence excludes the possibility of instantaneous events, which were discussed, for instance, by Lewis (1987, p. 261).

⁴All references to *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense (IHM)* are to the critical edition edited by Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). Reference follow a chapter, section, page number format.

All references to *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man (EIP)* are to the critical edition edited by Derek R. Brookes and Knud Haakonssen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002). References follow an essay, chapter, page number format.

⁵As many commentators have argued, Reid believes that we gain knowledge about the external world by using several of our mental faculties. He is, thus, opposing some of his predecessors, who, he believed, argued that knowledge can only be justified by the use of reason. By contrast, Reid believed that certain types of knowledge can be otherwise justified: for instance, by the use of perception, memory, or consciousness. To give just one example, Reid argues that it is wrong to draw a distinction, as Hume did, between so-called "ideas of memory" and "original impressions", where only the latter are thought to (at most) put the subject in a position to know anything about the external world (for a discussion of Hume's alleged skepticism, see Stanistreet (2002) and Garrett (2002)). Reid believes that a distinction like this is one source of skepticism. For a comprehensive discussion of Reid's anti-skepticism, see Lehrer (1989) and de Bary (2002).

⁶Although, to date, there has been very little scholarship devoted to explicating Reid's views on memory, several other scholars have noticed that Reid's anti-skeptical commitments come to the fore in his treatment of memory. Consequently, this is not the focus of the present paper; I'm only stressing why we should endorse the good parts of Reid's theory of memory. For more, see the (more or less) exhaustive list of works dedicated to explaining Reid's views on memory: Van Woudenberg (1999), Hamilton (2003), Van Woudenberg (2004), Copenhaver (2006), and Van Cleve (2015b).

of the following two intuitions: (i) we can perceive *only* presently existing things,⁷ and (ii) we can remember events, which usually span periods of time longer than the present (whether the present is durationless or not).

The present paper has two goals. First, to draw this conflict out, I will show that Reid's views on memory give rise to an inconsistent triad:⁸

1. Remembering events depends on having perceived (or on having been conscious of) those events. (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254-55)
2. Events cannot be perceived (and subjects cannot be conscious of them). (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270)
3. Events can be remembered. (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254)

Most of the work here will be to establish the first two sentences in the triad; as is evident from *EIP* III. 1, p. 254, Reid directly asserts the third.

Second, this paper investigates whether there are any possible solutions to this problem. To this end, I will explore three ways to defang the triad. The conclusion of this investigation is that, strictly speaking, Reid's system does not have the necessary resources to dissolve the triad: two of the proposed solutions conflict with other tenets of his philosophy, while the third is not obviously endorsed by him. The question then becomes: can a theory that has all the advantages of Reid's system, and none of its more obvious disadvantages, make some progress towards solving this issue? I will argue that the answer is affirmative, but only if we endorse a particular view of the type of events that can be remembered. To be sure, I will not attribute such a view to Reid; I only explain that the third solution comes at a price. Moreover, this paper will not explore whether such a view of events is metaphysically viable; that is the topic of another project. A central goal of the present investigation is to point out how a certain strain of anti-skepticism influences how we think about our ability to remember events.

⁷Reid, at least, believes this much, as is evidenced by the following passage: “[T]he operations of both [perception and consciousness] are confined to the present point of time, and there can be no succession in a point of time; and on that account the motion of a body, which is a successive change of place, could not be observed by the senses alone without the aid of memory” (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270). I offer a detailed interpretation of this passage in §3. For now, suffice it to say that the claims made in this passage seem intuitive enough.

⁸So far as I know, this inconsistency and its consequences for Reid's system have not been addressed in the secondary literature. Van Cleve (2015b, p. 254) discusses a version of this inconsistent triad briefly – and I will refer to this discussion later on – but he (graciously) attributes its discovery to me.

To begin, in §2, I present Reid's views on memory, emphasizing that he mainly talks about something very similar to episodic memory. As such, to be able to remember an event, an agent must either have perceived an external event, or have been conscious of an internal one. This entails that events can be perceived and subjects can be conscious of them, but, as I show in §3, Reid disagrees. He believes that durationless events cannot exist and he also believes that we can perceive or be conscious of only the durationless present. Furthermore, he argues that events cannot be perceived and subjects cannot be conscious of them, without the aid of memory. This result does not sit well with the idea that we must have perceived or have been conscious of an event in order to be able to remember it, in the first place. So, in §4, I discuss what conditions must be satisfied to ensure that at least some types of events are on the list of things that memory provides access to.

2 Memory of Events Depends On Either Perception Or Consciousness

To understand whether events can or cannot be remembered on a view like Reid's, we must look at his writings on memory, to establish how exactly this faculty is supposed to work. In this section, I discuss the evidence supporting the claim that for Reid one cannot remember anything one hasn't perceived or experienced at a previous moment of time.

At the beginning of the essay on memory, from *EIP*, Reid writes:

Every man can distinguish the thing remembered from the remembrance of it. We may remember any thing which we have seen, or heard, or known, or done, or suffered.

Things remembered must be things formerly perceived or known. I remember the transit of Venus over the sun in the year 1769. I must therefore have perceived it at the time it happened, otherwise I could not now remember it. Our first acquaintance with any object of thought cannot be by remembrance. Memory can only produce continuance or renewal of a former acquaintance with the thing remembered. (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 1, p. 253-55)

These passages indicate that one cannot remember anything, according to Reid, unless one has

grasped that very thing by a different faculty, at a previous time. To make things precise, I would like to point out that this is regarded as an essential condition on at least one type of memory, in contemporary psychological and philosophical literature on memory. Episodic memory, by contrast with semantic memory, requires that the *previous awareness condition* on episodic memory is satisfied.⁹ Essentially, to satisfy this condition, the person who is said to remember an event episodically must have been either the agent or a witness to that event, when it happened. Both episodic and semantic memory are interesting, if we want to establish what types of things we can remember and the manner in which we have access to these things via memory. Studying these two types of long-term memory could, in principle, provide an answer to the question: is there any way to think about a past object or event singularly, or as Reid would say, “directly”? Contemporary philosophers (e.g. Burge (2003)) argue that no *de re* memory is possible in the absence of episodic memory: if one loses the ability to remember actions that one was the agent or witness of, and one can only have semantic memories of those actions, it is thought that that person will only be able to offer a *de dicto*, indirect, description of what happened. If this happens, moreover, that person’s knowledge of the external or internal world will be diminished. In this respect then, episodic memory seems to be the more fundamental type, and to ground semantic memory.¹⁰ This train of thought provides support for Reid’s intuition that one cannot remember anything that one hasn’t previously (directly) experienced.

The distinction between episodic and semantic memory is not explicitly drawn by Reid, who, as Van Cleve (2015b) points out, might have a broad previous awareness condition in mind, when

⁹According to Tulving (1983) there are two main types of long-term memory: procedural – whereby one remembers how to perform certain actions (e. g. one remembers how to ride the bike, or how to bake a cake), and declarative. This latter type is itself divided into: episodic – whereby one remembers an experience that one underwent or an event one witnessed (e. g. I remember running my first 5k race); and semantic – whereby one remembers that so-and-so is the case, where the fact remembered may be something that happened before one’s time (e. g. one remembers that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo.) Procedural memory is not of interest here: Reid has nothing remarkable to say about it.

¹⁰This claim should not be taken to mean that every semantic memory is based on a corresponding episodic memory. For instance, episodic memory is irrelevant for recalling mathematical facts that were once learned. It is, however, thought that the ability for semantic memory could not be acquired (or developed) when the ability for episodic memory is not yet developed or missing (due to brain damage). I should point out that the issue regarding which type of memory is more fundamental is somewhat controversial: contrary to what I say in the main text, there are philosophers who argue that episodic memory depends on semantic memory, e.g. Malcolm (1963).

he writes that one can only remember “things formerly perceived or known” (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254).¹¹ However, as Van Cleve (2015b, p. 243) notes, “[m]ost of Reid’s examples of memory are cases of personal or episodic memory”, and not examples of semantic memory, introduced, usually, by that-clauses. One thus forms the impression that he was mostly concerned with episodic memory. This is not surprising, given that this type of memory is the one that would enable us to know things about the past, in a manner similar to how perception enables us to know things about the present, thus making memory epistemically foundational.

Van Woudenberg (2004, p. 207), in fact, argues that Reid is concerned *only* with episodic memory, and that he discusses no cases of semantic memory: we have “reason to believe that Reid thinks of memory as being objectual in nature”. Copenhaver (2006, p. 183), however, disagrees; she thinks that Reid is concerned with both types of memory, but that episodic memory is seen by him as fundamental.¹² Van Cleve (2015b) sides with Copenhaver (2006), and I do, too. In support of this, Van Cleve (2015b, p. 243) cites the following passage, where Reid uses a that-clause to report a memory that he has: “I believe that I washed my hands and face this morning [...] [because] I remember it distinctly” (*EIP* III. 1, p. 255-56). Van Cleve goes on to argue that “it” in the quote is bound by the that-clause in the previous sentence, i. e. “that I washed my hands and face this morning”, and that, since Reid says that he remembers that he washed in the morning, he means that he remembers the actual event of washing his hands and face, except not episodically. Van Cleve points out that if Reid didn’t have any memory of this event, as Van Woudenberg would have it, because of the non-episodic character of this act of remembering, Reid would have said instead that he *knows* he washed his hands and face in the morning. This is how Reid talks about things that he is certain of having happened in the past, even though he is unable to remember them, e.g. : “I know who bare me, and suckled me, but I do not remember these events” (*EIP* III.

¹¹What Reid says a on the previous page is also telling, in this respect: “We may remember any thing which we have seen, or heard, *or known*, or done, or suffered” (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 1, p. 253).

¹²I’m somewhat simplifying Copenhaver’s interpretation here: she argues for a negative thesis. Copenhaver (2006, p. 183) writes: “Reid is not claiming that I cannot have a semantic memory that I dined with my brother.” But, she adds, such a state would probably be better characterized as a belief formed on the basis of an episodic memory, rather than as a memory *tout court*. Still, this account is different from Van Woudenberg’s, who insists that Reid only talks about episodic memory.

4, p. 264).

Although I think that Copenhaver (2006) and Van Cleve (2015b) are right, I would like to point out, on behalf of Van Woudenberg (2004), that the evidence for the claim that the distinction between episodic and semantic memory is implicit in Reid's writings is not that strong. In the passage quoted above, Reid says first that he *believes* that he washed his hands and face in the morning, and not that he remembers doing so. And then he adds that his belief is supported by the fact that he has a memory of something related to that belief. This indicates that the distinction between the belief component of a memory and a belief formed on the basis of a memory, which Van Woudenberg (2004, p. 208) draws, may be correct. Read in this light, this passage would show that Reid is remembering an event – the washing of the hands and face – and has a belief *that* he washed his hands and face formed on the basis of remembering that event. If this is correct, Van Woudenberg (2004) is right that all cases of memory are cases of episodic memory for Reid, and that, in addition, Reid thinks that we can form explicit beliefs, different from the memories we have, on the basis of the memories themselves.

This debate shows how important episodic memory is taken to be in Reid scholarship; the problems I am about to discuss will be thought to be more acute if we believe that episodic memory is the only type of memory Reid talks about, since this type of memory relates us to events that took place in the past. To remember a fact one once learned, it does not seem important to be able to remember *having* learned it. To remember *visiting* an art show on opening night, however, one must remember, episodically, participating in that event, and maybe even what it was like to witness it. And this is where the troubles start: episodic memory is concerned with events witnessed, while semantic memory is concerned with facts learned.¹³ Given that episodic memory is characterized

¹³One way to think about episodic memory is as representing “time slices of experience” (Conway (2009, p. 2306)). This makes sense on the assumption that facts are thought to be equivalent to states of affairs, represented by propositions; one could be said to witness a state of affairs, but more often than not, one is said to learn that a certain state of affairs obtained. Moreover, episodic memory tells us something about how a certain person (the one who remembers) interacted with a certain state of affairs; this interaction is best described as an event, of which the state of affairs in question is a constitutive part. This distinction corresponds to the intrinsic distinction between state and experience, e.g. one has a certain state, whereas one is undergoing a certain experience. (These are not just linguistic distinctions: they capture something about how the human mind is supposed to work). If this seems to be too closely tied to intuitions about language, we could adopt the terminology proposed in Van Cleve (2015b, p. 243), fn. 5: “I prefer “factual” [memory] to “semantic” [memory] so as not to build into one’s terminology the substantive assumption that

in part by (something sufficiently similar to) the previous awareness condition, according to Reid, and given that Reid thinks that we *do* remember events, it follows that we must be able to witness events. Furthermore, this entails that we are capable both of perceiving events, if they are going on in the external world, and of being aware of mental events, if they are going on in the internal world. Consciousness is thought by Reid to function like perception, except that it takes as objects occurrent operations of our minds, and not things in the outside world (*EIP* I. 2, p. 41–2).

It seems intuitively true that we can perceive certain types of events and be conscious of other types of events.¹⁴ No matter how intuitive this idea seems, it is not supported by what Reid says, for a very simple reason. He believes that both perception and consciousness are confined to the present moment, and that no succession can ever be perceived and, moreover, subjects cannot be conscious of successions, either:

Our senses and our consciousness are continually shifting from one object to another; their operations are transient and momentary, and leave no distinct notion of their objects, until they are recalled by *memory*, examined with attention and compared with other things. (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 5, p. 269)

Moreover, Reid also claims that we can episodically remember events which have duration: “I remember the transit of Venus over the sun in the year 1769. I must therefore have *perceived* it at the time it happened” (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 1, p. 254). These two passages, when taken together, entail a contradiction: one of the passages indicates that we can perceive (or be conscious of) events (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254), while the other indicates that we cannot perceive (or be conscious of) events (*EIP* III. 5, p. 269). In the next section, I point out why Reid thinks that we cannot either

memory that p is tied to language”. Van Cleve’s assumption, which I share, is that factual memory is concerned with facts, not with events. Episodic memory, by contrast, is concerned with ways of interacting with the world. I am inclined to keep the original terminology in place where “episodic” is opposed to “semantic” – since this way of speaking is widespread in the psychological literature on memory, starting with Tulving (1983). I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for asking me to clarify why episodic memory takes events as objects, and not also facts, and semantic/factual memory takes facts as objects, and not also events.

¹⁴Psychologists believe that event segmentation is an automatic process, which is “important for perception, comprehension, problem-solving and memory” (Kurby & Jeffrey M. Zacks (2008, p. 78)). There is research on perception that indicates that “people can and do segment ongoing everyday activities into discrete events”, usually as this relates to their goals (Speer & Jeffrey M. Zacks (2005, p. 126)). This bolsters the idea that memory of events comes easily to anything with the right mental architecture – e.g. human beings.

perceive or be conscious of events. In the last section, I explain what it would take for a position like Reid's to consistently support the perception (or the ability to be conscious) of events.

3 Why Reid Thinks Events Cannot Be (Originally) Perceived

What makes Reid believe that both perception and consciousness are confined to the present moment? What exactly does this entail? I address these questions here and discuss three possible ways of amending Reid's view to help dissolve the initial inconsistent triad.

As previously indicated, Reid believes that, since both perception and consciousness are always shifting from one object to another, the only things of which we are aware are the successive positions of the objects on an axis of movement, and not the continuous movement from one object to the next.¹⁵ To be able to perceive or to be conscious of a succession, we would need to be aware of the shifting itself, but Reid thinks this is impossible. For instance, he believes that we need memory itself to help us process any type of motion; this account could, of course, apply to the processing of any kind of succession:¹⁶

It may here be observed, that if we speak strictly and philosophically, no kind of succession can be an object either of the senses, or of consciousness; because the operations of both are confined to the present point of time, and there can be no succession in a point of time; and on that account the motion of a body, which is a successive change of place, could not be observed by the senses alone without the aid of memory. (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270)

This passage raises several issues. First, the claim that subjects cannot either perceive or be

¹⁵This way of speaking is a bit infelicitous, when it comes to being aware of the objects of consciousness, since they – namely our mental operations – do not occupy *physical* positions on a certain axis of physical movement. They do occupy temporal positions on a temporal axis of succession, so that is why the two types of objects – external and internal – get the same treatment, in this context.

¹⁶This is a surprisingly accurate account of how motion is perceived. Contemporary psychologists and philosophers believe that the brain needs input from a type of short term memory, referred to as “working memory”, to process movement, where a rapid succession of places an object was at is presented to subjects. Burge (2010, p. 521) offers a good explanation of this process. I should note that Reid doesn't draw any distinction between episodic memory and working memory – his theory is not as psychologically sophisticated. I think we should allow the possibility of incorporating something like this distinction, however, since this move would give rise to the most charitable interpretation of his views on memory and perception of events. In this way, we can focus on the positives, rather than the negatives – or, at least, on the interesting negatives.

conscious of successions is a claim made by *the philosopher*, and it constitutes a departure from common sense. Reid believes that this departure from common sense is a consequence of the meaning assigned by the philosopher to the “present”, which is different from the one assigned by “the vulgar” to the same word. This is problematic, by Reid’s own lights. It is true that in the introduction to *EIP* Reid argued that departures from common sense and from the common usage of words are sometimes allowed. But such departures are allowed only if they do not render the meaning of the words unrecognizable (*EIP* I. 1, p. 20). In light of this, we are entitled to expect an argument to justify the move from natural language, whenever Reid thinks that departures from the way the vulgar talk are required. In this case, however, Reid does not offer any arguments to support the view that the present time is confined to a single “indivisible point of time, which divides the present from the past” (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270).

Moreover, Reid seems to be confused here: he says that the philosopher and the vulgar might *seem* to be contradicting each other, but that this is only an apparent contradiction, not a real one. He says that “[i]t arises from this, that Philosophers and the vulgar differ in the meaning they put upon what is called the *present* time, and are thereby led to make a different limit between sense and memory” (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270). The contradiction he mentions is quite real, however. After all, based on the meaning the philosopher ascribes to the word “present”, it follows that one *cannot* perceive any kind of succession. Whereas, based on the meaning the vulgar give to the word “present”, it follows that one *can* perceive succession. Reid seems to miss this point.

It is unclear what makes Reid have such a restrictive view of the present time. Van Cleve (2015b, p. 250–52) argues that this account might qualify Reid as a presentist, in which case he would not have a direct way out of the conundrum regarding the perception and memory of events, as I show below. On the other hand, Van Cleve acknowledges that Reid does not have a robust account of the metaphysics of time, so attributing this view to Reid, even if correct, would not accomplish a lot.¹⁷

¹⁷Van Cleve also discusses passages that might indicate that Reid was an eternalist – on such a view, it is unclear why one would think that the present is restricted in this way. So, Reid does not succeed in convincing us that this rift between philosophy and common sense is either necessary or even extant.

Another, more substantial issue raised by the passage quoted above concerns the possibility of perceiving the motion of bodies. Reid believes that, were we to speak accurately, we should not say that we perceive a body moving; what we actually do is infer that a body has moved because we see the position it is currently at and we *remember* that it occupied other positions, in the immediate past.¹⁸ There is no place for inference in perception, even when the process of drawing such an inference is more or less automatic, as it seems to be in this case.¹⁹ The following passage gives the details of this view:

[W]hen as philosophers we distinguish accurately the province of sense from that of memory, we can no more see what is past, though but a moment ago, than we can remember what is present; so that speaking philosophically, it is only by the aid of memory that we discern motion, or any succession whatsoever: We see the present place of the body; we remember the successive advance it made to that place; The first can then only give us a conception of motion, when joined to the last. (*EIP* III. 5, p. 271)

This passage is inconsistent with the views espoused earlier: “I remember the transit of Venus over the sun in the year 1769. I must therefore have perceived it at the time *it happened*, otherwise I could not now remember it” (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 1, p. 254).²⁰ Reid thinks of “the transit of

¹⁸Reid does not literally say that one cannot perceive motion without using one’s *inferential* abilities. I side with Van Cleve in attributing this view to him, based, in part, on this passage: “We see the present place of the body; we remember the successive advance it made to that place; The first can then only give us a conception of motion, *when joined to the last*” (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 5, p. 271). For more, see the discussion of the incompatibility between Reid’s position and the doctrine of the specious present, in Van Cleve (2015b, p. 253). According to some proponents of the specious present view (e.g. William James and Bertrand Russell), we have access to a little bit of the past, which is perceived as though it were present. Thus, the positions a body was at several moments earlier would temporally belong to this specious present. On this view, there would be no problem with saying that we actually perceive motion.

¹⁹For an argument that inference or any kind of reasoning doesn’t belong together with perception, according to Reid, see Van Cleve (2015a, p. 79–81).

²⁰One may object that Reid’s choice of this particular example is less than fortunate: after all, it does not seem plausible to say that one could literally observe the motion of a planet (or of any body) over such a long period of time – namely, one year. The objector may argue, furthermore, that Reid’s use of the word “perception” in this instance is somewhat loose. I agree with the objector that this particular example may not be the best, given the circumstances, and that an example involving the movement of the second hand of a watch would have been more appropriate. But I am worried about thinking that there is a looser sense of perception that involves memory. The reasons for this worry will become apparent in the discussion of the third potential solution to the triad, which claims that Reid’s position is that, in addition to regular perception, there is such a thing as “memory-aided perception”. Moreover, as Copenhaver (2006) and Van Cleve (2015b) have argued, when Reid talks about memory being able to “only produce a continuance or renewal of *a former acquaintance* with the thing remembered” (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 1, p. 254–255), he most certainly has in mind the type of acquaintance with objects that one can acquire via perception – about external objects – or consciousness – about internal objects. Given this evidence, I am reluctant to dismiss Reid’s use of “perception” as loose, in this instance.

Venus over the sun in the year 1769” as a type of event, as witnessed by the fact that he thinks that it (however we want to describe it, i.e. intrinsically involving the motion of planet Venus, or in some other way) *happened*. It is events that happen; and, Reid says here that one must perceive the event in question when it happens, in order to remember it later. There is another place where Reid makes it clear that he believes that one can remember, and hence perceive events. Here’s what he writes in *EIP* III. 1, p. 253: “We may remember any thing which we have seen, or heard, or known, or done, or suffered.” Several events are among the things enumerated: aural events (things heard) and actions (things done, and things suffered). Hence the inconsistency: we cannot perceive motion, which is a paradigmatic type of event (*EIP* III. 5, p. 271), and we can perceive events, which should include motion, e.g. the transit of Venus over the sun (*EIP* III. 1, p. 253-254).²¹ This contradiction is a result of holding fixed all of Reid’s commitments concerning perception and memory, and thus offers an opportunity for us to investigate which of these commitments could be given up and whether Reid can afford to give any up.

3.1 Three Solutions

To refresh the reader’s memory, here’s a schematic statement of the inconsistent triad:

1. Remembering events depends on having perceived (or on having been conscious of) those events.
2. Events cannot be perceived (and subjects cannot be conscious of them).
3. Events can be remembered.

So far as I can tell, there are three competing ways of getting out of such a bind. First, Reid could side with “the vulgar” and say that people *can* perceive motion. This would modify sentence (2), which now becomes: (2’) “Events can be perceived”, with the result of dissolving the inconsistency. Second, he could liberalize the previous awareness condition on episodic memory, so that

²¹I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for asking me to clarify how exactly the inconsistency obtains, given that one can understand Reid’s saying that “I remember the transit of Venus over the sun” in a particular year as implying that what I remember now (and perceived then) is not the motion of Venus, but a portion of the sun being obscured by Venus. The problem with interpreting Reid in this way is that portions of the sun being obscured by Venus are not things that happen. Whereas Reid makes it clear that he is interested in things that *happen*, and he takes the transit of Venus over the sun to be that kind of thing.

its scope would now include not only things previously perceived, but also things otherwise experienced. This would modify sentence (1) of the triad, which now becomes: (1') "Remembering events depends on having experienced those events." The inconsistency is thus eliminated: events can be experienced, and thus remembered, even though subjects cannot either (literally) perceive or be conscious of them. Third, Reid could say that there is such a thing as memory-aided perception, in which case he need not abandon the philosopher's understanding of the present, but simply say that the perception of motion needs some help from its friend memory.²² This would, again, modify sentence (2) of the triad, by affirming its negation, and thus eliminate the inconsistency between the original three sentences.

Adopting the first option results in an automatic dismissal either of the idea that perception is restricted to the present, or of the idea that the philosopher's notion of the present is different from the vulgar's one. The reasonable thing to do here is to continue to maintain that perception is restricted to the present, while adopting the view that we perceive (and are conscious of things in the specious present. If the present extends a little bit into the past, there is nothing to prevent motion from being perceived, even if perception is restricted to the present moment.²³ I'd like to note that this solution introduces an unwelcome vagueness into how the present is represented: how far is the present supposed to extend into the past? Where, and how, are we supposed to draw the line between perception and memory, given that one way of drawing the line, for Reid, is to regard memory as being about *past* objects, while perception, about *present* ones (*EIP* III. 1, p. 254)? I believe these are hard questions, which must be addressed by any proponent of this solution to the impasse Reid lands himself in. It is unclear that some events have sharp boundaries, and some psychologists argue that, sometimes, some observers of the same events disagree where the boundaries of these events are located.²⁴ Some vagueness seems, thus, to come with the territory. But we

²²The first two are discussed in Van Cleve (2015b, p. 254–256.); the third was suggested to me by Todd Buras in his comments on an earlier version of this paper, delivered at the APA – Central, in 2015. I will refer to these comments, as "Buras (Comments)".

²³This is the alternative preferred in Van Cleve (2015b, p. 256). This would help a little, but not entirely, because the specious present is supposed to extend into the past only for a little bit. I would still not be able to perceive motion, when I look at a turtle walk for over an hour. The longer the event, the less likely it is for me to be able to perceive it.

²⁴Speer & Jeffrey M. Zacks (2005, p. 126).

need a somewhat sharp line to distinguish between perception and memory, and thus a somewhat principled way of distinguishing how much of an event is located in the past and how much in the present. Otherwise we won't make a lot of progress in understanding how we remember events. Reid is aware of this much, when he claims that memory is clearly distinguished from perception (*EIP* III. 1, p. 259). This indicates that he would not be very amenable to giving up his belief that the present is confined to an "indivisible point of time, which divides the present from the past" (*EIP* III. 5, p. 270).

The second option to solve this issue is to modify the previous awareness condition, as Van Cleve (2015b) suggests: instead of arguing that people can only remember things that they previously perceived (or were conscious of), Reid could argue that people only remember things that they have previously *experienced*. Experiencing is not restricted to perceiving; experiencing may include a compound of perceiving, remembering, comparing, and even inferring. The previous awareness condition, liberalized in this way, would accommodate Reid's explanation for registering the motion of a body: one sees the different positions of a body on a trajectory, remembers the positions it already traveled through, and infers that it must have moved from one position to the other. These three things – a perception, a memory, and an inference – compose a single complex thing that is an experience of the event. To remember the motion of the body, on this view, seems to require to be connected with this past experience.

The main problem with this alternative, especially if we agree with Van Woudenberg (2004) that the only kind of memory Reid allows for is the episodic kind, is that memory itself is included in the compound of operations that form the experience described above. Let us continue to use the case of motion to illustrate the problem. In order to remember the transit of Venus over the sun in the year 1769 somebody must have *experienced* the respective transit, at a previous moment of time. That is, our subject saw several positions occupied by Venus in the course of the year 1769, remembered that Venus occupied several positions during that year, and inferred that Venus must have traveled from its original position to the position at which it arrived at the end of the year (*EIP* III. 5, p. 271.) So, memory does double-duty: in order to register motion, one must use

memory; and to remember motion, one must use memory again. Why is this a problem? Suppose that one hallucinates some of the positions the body was supposed to travel to over the course of one's experience of its movement. Based on those hallucinations, one infers that the body was at p_1 , and then at p_2 , p_3 , etc. According to the notion of experience we are working with, this should provide enough material for our subject to remember the motion of the body in question, at a later date. After all, the body was perceived to be at p_1 , hallucinated at p_2 , perceived again at p_3 , and then inferred to have moved from p_1 to p_2 and from p_2 to p_3 . On this scenario, however, it will be very difficult to gain knowledge via memory, because of all the intermediary steps, which involve hallucination and inference: there is no knowledge of the body having moved in this case although its motion has been experienced.

Now, it is true that memory, just like perception, is fallible, and thus not all memories will constitute knowledge or even be able to ground knowledge. But, the problem is that the process of acquiring a memory of an event experienced seems to not be reliable. The degree of probability that memory of events experienced will not count as knowledge is a lot higher than the degree of probability that perception of events will not count as knowledge. Here is why: on this view, memory of events experienced is not immediate, in the relevant sense. One notion of immediacy attributed to Reid by Buras (2008) appeals to the non-inferential character of the belief involved in perception and memory. However, if inference is partly constitutive of the experience of the event, this notion of immediacy is undermined, and this, in turn, has grave consequences for Reid's anti-skeptical project. As I have argued in Folescu (2015), immediacy is key to arguing against the skeptic; hence, immediacy should not be sacrificed in order to solve the contradiction.²⁵

The third option is to hold fixed the idea that the "present" just denotes an indivisible point in time and say, as indeed Reid does, that change of place "could not be observed by the senses *alone* without the aid of memory" (emphasis added; *EIP* III. 5, p. 270). As discussed in Buras (Comments), the principle of charity suggests that here Reid believes that perception of motion does exist, except it is not as simple a process as the perception of shape, or size, etc. Buras suggested

²⁵Van Cleve (2015b, p. 256) observes that this issue creates problems for any follower of common-sense, no matter how strongly affiliated with an anti-skeptical project.

that the best way to understand the mechanism of memory-aided perception is to assimilate it to acquired perception. On this understanding, the perception of temporally extended things would be no more problematic than, for instance, the perception of a three dimensional figure, by sight, which we acquire in virtue of having the original ability to perceive three dimensional figure, by touch. Applied to the case at hand, we can originally see only part of motion: the present position. But thanks to the pattern established in experience and recorded in memory, seeing an object with a position like that triggers the conception of and belief in an object with a much more complex property, i.e. motion. So, we may think that we acquire the ability to perceive motion, when we have been aided by memory enough times.

This is an interesting idea, and it has the advantage that Reid could get out of the bind without rejecting the Philosopher's understanding of the present and without rejecting the previous awareness condition on episodic memory. But, on this view, it is impossible for people to perceive motion *originally*. Granted, this is a disadvantage only on the assumption that acquired perception does not facilitate the same type of immediate and direct access to the external world as original perception. This is, indeed, an assumption I subscribe to, given all the arguments in its favor, discussed by Van Cleve (2015a, p. 79–81). Thus, our knowledge of the motion of bodies would be shakier (if at all knowledge) than our knowledge of their sizes and shapes.

So, this is where we are: strictly speaking, Reid does not have a good way of solving this contradiction; the best way, philosophically speaking – that of adopting the specious present – would blur the line between memory and perception. As previously indicated, Reid believes that there is a clear cut distinction between memory and perception, on the one hand, and memory and consciousness, on the other. In light of this, adopting the specious present view isn't a good option for Reid.

However, adopting the specious present would solve the inconsistent triad. It would, moreover, help preserve the immediacy of both perception and memory. We might think, therefore, that such a move is worth it: we adopt a solution to solve the more pressing issue – in this case, the inconsistency – and then work on exploring further how to restore a sharper distinction between

memory and perception. In this vein, the next section discusses some consequences of adopting the specious present. As we shall see, adopting it forces us to accept a very strict view of what types of events can be objects of episodic memory.

4 What Does It Take To Remember Events?

This section investigates what happens if we adopt the specious present, in order to avoid the bind Reid's theory generates, while holding fixed the requirement that memory gives us *immediate* knowledge of things past. The immediacy constraint is important, since it goes hand-in-hand with Reid's declared aim of constructing an anti-skeptical system. One of the main errors he sees in the theory of ideas is that it posits that our access to the external world is mediated by mental entities (namely, image-like entities or ideas). Since memory is so important in the acquisition of our knowledge of the external world, memory itself better not function according to the model proposed by the theory of ideas! So, the question to be answered is: can we remember episodically and immediately (i.e. without any intermediaries) events witnessed in the past? The answer to this question is affirmative, but only if we allow the events that memory ranges over to be of a special kind.

There are, of course, several different ways to understand what events are. For the present purposes, I adopt as working definition the one put forward by Kurby & Jeffrey M. Zacks (2008, p. 72): "by 'event' we mean a segment of time at a given location that is conceived by an observer to have a beginning and end." To perceive an event *as such*, an observer must clearly identify the borders of the event. Moreover, a minimal requirement for the perception of an event seems to be the possibility of witnessing both borders and the duration at the same time. The shorter the segment of time, the better the chances of *perceiving* it *as* an event; the longer the segment of time, the clearer it is that some form of memory is needed for the correct segmentation to occur.²⁶

²⁶Somewhat optimistically, in my opinion, Kurby & Jeffrey M. Zacks (2008, p. 78) claim that the structure of the world itself is such that segmentation can occur easily. This claim should not be taken to mean more than it actually does, namely that because we are endowed with mental abilities that segment the external world in certain ways necessarily implies that the external world itself is structured that way.

For example, talking to someone may be described as perceiving utterances, even though, strictly speaking, participants in a discourse require working memory in order to hear a sentence *as such*. Watching a two hour long movie, on the other hand, could hardly be described as perceiving the movie: long(er)-term memory is required to experience the whole movie.

In this section, I discuss some of the necessary conditions that make memory of events possible, starting from a problematic case, engendered by the fact that some of the operations of our minds should themselves be construed as events, with duration. This case forces us to adopt a narrow view of events, in order to maintain that events can indeed be immediately remembered as *events* – namely, as segments of time with borders.

To begin, I note that Reid holds that certain faculties of our minds should be construed as operations. As Rebecca Copenhaver pointed out to me, Reid believes that “operation” is a term of art, to be applied to our faculties while they are being exercised.²⁷ Thus, human beings are endowed with the faculty of perception, sensation, etc., and are able to perceive, sense, etc. The latter class of things should be thought of as operations: when we are perceiving, we are *operating* our faculty of perception.²⁸ This holds true for other of our mental faculties, including memory, just as it holds true for other of our mental powers, according to Reid.²⁹

We are able to be conscious of operations while they’re occurring; consciousness of events should be no more mysterious than perception of events, on the assumption that “present” is the specious present, and thus allows subjects to be said to literally perceive, be conscious of, and remember events. According to Reid, consciousness is the faculty by which we become aware of our internal life. For instance, whenever I perceive the tree outside my window, I am also aware, by consciousness, of perceiving (the tree outside my window). The distinction between perception and consciousness, in this case, is quite clear: to re-iterate, the objects of perception are external –

²⁷Private email exchange, on 10/31/2015.

²⁸Private email exchange with Rebecca Copenhaver, on 10/31/2015.

²⁹Reid distinguishes between *powers* of the mind and *faculties* of the mind, thus: only those powers that “are original and natural, and which make a part of the constitution of the mind” can properly be called “faculties” (*EIP* I. 1, p. 21). Perception, consciousness, and memory are such powers. One should note that perception comes in two flavors: original and acquired, and that it is unclear whether acquired perception qualifies as an original power of our mind and, hence, as a faculty. This last issue has no bearing on the present discussion, since this paper is concerned only with original perception, which *does* qualify as perception proper.

the tree outside my window – while those of consciousness are internal – my occurrent perception. This distinction holds even when one is confronted with external events, and not just with static objects. For example, consider the event of a car crashing into a wall. The object of my perception (as witness to this event) is the event of crashing, while the object of my consciousness is my perceiving (the event of crashing).

What happens with this distinction between perception and consciousness, when considered from the point of view of memory? It's difficult to say: one could remember *perceiving* the car crashing – i. e. an internal event – or the car *crashing* – i. e. an external event – or *both*. Once we agree that subjects can both perceive and be conscious of events – which, as pointed out, means to subscribe to the specious present view – the only necessary condition that must be satisfied for an observer to remember either event is the previous awareness condition. The previous awareness condition is satisfied in both of these cases: in the former, I was aware (by consciousness) of the internal event; in the latter, I perceived the external event. However, the distinction between the internal and the external event must be acknowledged; just because memory doesn't have to do anything special to make it possible for us to remember either event, doesn't mean that the two categories should not be kept apart.

Reid doesn't acknowledge this distinction, when he talks about memory:

Suppose that once, and only once, I smelled a tuberose in a certain room where it grew in a pot, and gave a very grateful perfume. Next day I relate what I saw and smelled. When I attend as carefully as I can to what passes in my mind in this case, it appears evident, that the very thing I saw yesterday, and the fragrance I smelled, are now the immediate objects of my mind when I remember it. [...] I beg leave to think with the vulgar, that when I remember the smell of the tuberose, that very sensation which I had yesterday, and which has no more any existence, is the immediate object of my memory. (*IHM* 2. 3, p. 28)

This passage displays the ambiguity Reid notices in the language used to talk about (at least some of) our sensations.³⁰ Consider the case of smell: we call “smell” the unknown cause of our sensing

³⁰As Van Cleve (2015b, p. 115) points out, Reid believes “that secondary quality terms are systematically ambiguous”; we use the same word to denote a type of sensation and whatever there is in the object that stirs that sensation in us (e.g. *EIP* I. 1, p. 37.) Not all secondary quality terms are like this, however: “color” is the exception here (Van Cleve

in a certain way, e. g. the physical distribution of particles in the tuberose; but we also call “smell” the very sensation that we have on the occasion of being presented with a tuberose. It’s difficult to know, based on this passage, whether Reid wants to discuss the possibility of remembering the external object – i.e. the physical quality of the tuberose – or the internal object – i.e. the sensation we had on the occasion of being presented with a tuberose. One thing is clear, though: Reid is not careful about the distinction mentioned above.

Maybe Reid’s carelessness could be explained by noting that the issue itself is in need of clarification: what exactly is the object of memory in cases like the one described in the passage above? There are several possibilities here: first, we could think that we remember the external object, while simultaneously remembering the internal one. Second, we could think that we remember the external object *in virtue of* our remembering the internal one. Last, we could think that we remember either only the internal object without remembering the external one, or only the external object, without remembering the internal one. The text itself doesn’t decide among these options; to decide which is best, we should see which conforms best to Reid’s anti-skeptical commitments.³¹

For Reid’s theory to be an alternative to a skeptical system, the object of memory must be apprehended by the mind in an immediate fashion: no mental intermediaries can intervene between the mind and the object of memory. This means that, to remember the (once perceived or sensed) external object, one need not remember having perceived it. For Reid’s theory, it cannot be the case that the only possible way of remembering the fragrance of the tuberose is to remember *smelling* the

(2015b) acknowledges this, too). Is Reid careless with his usage here simply because he seems to be unaware that he’s using ambiguous terms, or because he doesn’t acknowledge the distinction under consideration? It’s difficult to say; he should have been more careful when talking about the objects of memory, and he should have pointed out the difficulty of knowing exactly, every time we think about this, whether we are interested in remembering the internal object/event, or the external one. Looking past linguistic ambiguities, we should note, however, that the issue discussed in the main text remains the same even when the internal object of memory is a sensation or perception of a first quality, given that all perceptions of either primary or secondary qualities, for Reid, require the existence of a sensation of a quality. (According to Yaffe (2003), even our perception of visible figure is based on a sensation of a quality, albeit the quality in question is color, and not visible figure. This is the only case in which the sensation of a quality suggests the conception and belief of the existence of a different quality.)

³¹These three options are all coherent; thus, “the best” will be relative to a set of standards. The choice of anti-skepticism, here, is motivated by the overall philosophical goals that Reid espoused in his works. It may turn out that none of these options can be reconciled with Reid’s anti-skepticism, but the principle of charity should determine us to investigate whether such a reconciliation is, indeed, possible.

tuberose. If this were the case, our access to the external object of memory would be mediated by our memory of the internal event of smelling. If we want to uphold immediacy, it must be possible to remember the fragrance of the tuberose independently of remembering smelling the fragrance of the tuberose.

Is this possible? Can we remember the fragrance of the tuberose, without remembering smelling the tuberose? Recall that Reid is primarily (or entirely, if we side with Van Woudenberg (2004)) concerned with episodic memory, which involves events. *The fragrance of the tuberose* cannot be understood to be an event, in its own right; whereas *smelling the fragrance of the tuberose* can be so understood. Here's the issue, then: to remember the fragrance of the tuberose (i.e. the external object of memory), we must use our memory of the *the act* of smelling (i.e. the internal, and correct, object of episodic memory). We cannot reach an external object, on this scenario, without the mediation of an internal object.³² This is bad news for Reid, because on this scenario, we lose the relevant immediate access to the past external world that memory is supposed to give us, according to him.

There is a way out of this predicament, I believe, if we adopt the following position. We understand the objects of memory as events constituted by the original internal object (e. g. having the sensation of smelling) and the original external object (e. g. the fragrance of the tuberose). Thus, we have a well-formed (episodic) memorial experience whenever we have an event constituted by an internal act and an external object (i.e. a physical quality of a body, or the body itself), or an internal act and an external event (i.e. the movement of a physical body from one position to the next).³³ There is no reason to believe that the internal act in question – e.g. sensation, perception, etc. – is playing the role of a mental intermediary; it is, rather, a constitutive part of an event. Whenever one says things like “I remember the tuberose you showed me yesterday”, one should

³²I might be giving Reid a harder time than necessary: after all, the act of smelling that I must be remembering for the proper functioning of memory, in this case, can hardly be described as an *idea*, in the sense that Reid criticizes the theory thereof. I think, however, that these worries are justified, on the assumption that memory can give us immediate knowledge of the past.

³³This should work, on the assumption that the objects involved in a particular event are essential for how we understand where the borders of the events are. For more on the relationship between events and the objects involved in them, see Lombard (1986) and Parsons (1991).

be understood as meaning something like “I remember seeing / smelling the tuberose you showed me yesterday”.

This way of construing the object of episodic memory as a composite works for more complicated cases. For instance, consider the event of a car crashing into a wall, witnessed by an observer who is later asked to give his testimony about that particular event in a court of law. While giving his testimony, the witness relates his memories of seeing the car moving from a certain position to another, of seeing it move at high speed, etc. To the best of his knowledge, all that he can recount is his having had certain operations occurring, which, in their turn, have recorded certain external objects or events as co-existing with the relevant mental operations. The only way to preserve the immediate access that memory gives us to things that existed in the past – as Reid claims – is to hold that we remember events, constituted by internal acts of the mind and external objects / events.

Memory is special, from this point of view. The operations of our minds that occur in the present – i.e. perception and consciousness – range over events that do not have this complicated structure. On the scenario above, where an observer is witnessing a car crashing into a wall, there are two simple events simultaneously grasped by the observer’s mind: (i) by consciousness, he is aware of the event of his *perceiving*; (ii) by perception, he is seeing the event of *the car crashing into a wall*. But when he remembers what happened, the two simple events combine into one: our witness remembers *his seeing the car crashing into a wall*. My conjecture is that this is the only way to satisfy the immediacy requirement for memory.³⁴

One issue that may be unsettling, on this view, concerns the previous awareness condition on episodic memory. Given that the two events that constitute the compound remembered event are objects of two independent faculties – namely, perception and consciousness – it is not, strictly speaking, accurate to say that we cannot remember (episodically) anything that we have not perceived. The previous awareness condition on episodic memory requires that what we remember is

³⁴I am unsure whether this division into types of events, where we have simple ones, either internal or external, and hybrid ones, constituted by internal and external components, is sound, from a metaphysical point of view. However, as I point out in the main text, this is what is needed, in order to uphold certain independent desiderata.

something we previously perceived (the external object) *and* something we were previously conscious of (the internal object). This does not seem to me to be a disconcerting result: the two events are associated in the mind of the observer, and remembered as one. It is a result, however, that Reid's theory is not obviously ready to take on.³⁵ A theory that follows, as closely as possible, Reid's anti-skeptical commitments with regard to memory, must incorporate both: (i) the specious present; and (ii) a view of events, as objects of memory, that construes them as compounds of internal and external events. We need the first requirement in order to satisfy the previous awareness condition on episodic memory. We need the second requirement in order to hold that memory provides *immediate* knowledge of past events.

5 Conclusion

Here are the main findings of the present discussion. Reid dedicates an entire essay to the faculty of memory and he argues that it functions in much the same way as perception and consciousness, with an important caveat. Whereas perception and consciousness give us immediate access to presently existing things, memory gives us immediate access to things existing in the past. As I pointed out, I agree with other Reid scholars that episodic memory is his main (or even sole) focus. By contrast to other authors, however, I argue that there are some deep-rooted tensions in his views on memory, which are not amenable to simple corrections.

One consequence of having to deal with the main inconsistency discussed in this paper is the need to adopt a restrictive view of the events that memory can range over. These events must be constituted in such a way as to allow for the faculties of the mind that subjects are conscious of at the moment of witnessing the external event to be part of the event remembered. It remains to be seen if such a metaphysics of events is viable, but that is the topic of a different project.³⁶ The

³⁵To be sure, I am not attributing this view to Reid. First, it is controversial that he would adopt the specious present view. Furthermore, the act of association would need a separate explanation, which Reid, so far as I can tell, does not provide. A view like this, however, is open to someone of Reidean persuasion.

³⁶A good starting point for such an investigation might be Reid's views on the metaphysics of powers and their interactions (between creatures, between the Creator and creatures, etc.) I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting that that is a good place to start such an exploration.

conclusion of the present investigation is that, given certain constraints that someone subscribing to a broad Reidean anti-skepticism will adopt, the objects of episodic memory must be events with the type of hybrid structure presented in §4. Only then can we say that episodic memory is indeed *episodic*.

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