

Mary Shepherd: A Proposed Reading

This is a reading of Shepherd's account of we come, through perception, to believe (ordinarily, pre-philosophically) in a material world of objects that exist when they are not being perceived, and exist mind-independently, and why she holds such materialism to be rationally justified. Basic similarities with Reid: Like Reid, Shepherd holds that our pre-philosophical materialism is rationally justified, and there is no need to abandon it for a more philosophical materialism—and like Reid, this is in large part because the pre-philosophical belief is not in its content as Berkeley and Hume characterize it. And like all three of her just-named predecessors, Shepherd agrees that *if* that belief were in its content as B&H characterize it, then it would be in trouble.

Process: As on Berkeley's account, through experience we come to learn how our sensations often occur in patterns, which knowledge allows us to group certain sensory ideas into physical objects (often of familiar types).

Content: But unlike on Berkeley's account (and Hume's), we don't take these groups of sensory ideas to *be* the objects. Rather, as Descartes holds (at least on the content of the ordinary belief), we take the relevant groups of sensory ideas to be *caused by* external objects: Recall Descartes's premise, "I have a great natural inclination to believe that some of my ideas are caused by external bodies" (step 3 in our rendering of Descartes's "Proof of the Existence of 'Corporeal Things'" on our handout of 2/10). Descartes's basic strategy is to bring God into the picture as a guarantor that (at least under the circumstances that obtain) this natural belief must be true.

Back to Process: But, having grouped sensory ideas into objects (or at least into groups we take to be associated with objects), how do we arrive at our pre-philosophical materialism according to Shepherd? Here she differs sharply, from Descartes and also her other predecessors. It is not just by the "great natural inclination" that Descartes posits. Indeed, although all three of (a) Descartes, (b) Berkeley/Hume, and (c) Reid have different accounts from one another on the content of the pre-philosophical materialist belief, they seem to agree on the process by which we come to hold the belief: To use Hume's terminology in his *Enquiry*, it's by "natural instinct": Humans come with a "great natural inclination" (to use Descartes's terminology, in translation) to be materialists.

For Shepherd, by contrast, while we are all quite naturally materialists, we arrive at the belief in external objects with continued (they exist when we are not perceiving them) and independent (they don't depend on minds perceiving them) existence by means of "*latent*" (see p. 7.5 of our Shepherd readings) *or "implicit"* (as Bolton characterizes it: "The perception of recurring patterns of sensations stimulates implicit reasoning expressed by ideas that represent their causes as having continued, external, and independent existence") *causal reasoning*.

The principles that this causal reasoning follows are explained and defended by Shepherd in her *Essay on the Relation of Cause and Effect*, which we are not reading. Bolton stresses what she labels Shepherd's "CP," or Causal Principle: "A thing that begins to exist has a cause" and "CPI," or Causal Principle of Induction: "Similar Causes have similar effects."

As we pick up the story in Shepherd's *Essay on the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy*, what's important for our purposes, beyond that Shepherd's principles be construed so that they underwrite the inference to materialism that she posits, is to note two things.

The key to this causal reasoning is how we reach the conclusion that bodies (the causes of our sensations) have continued existence (when not perceived). This reasoning is at pp. 7-9.2 of our readings. (And summarized by Bolton in sect. 3.1 of her article.) Note esp. the use of CP at p. 8.0.

First, on any plausible reading of Shepherd's posited causal principles, they are not logically or conceptually necessary. Her principle of Induction is much like Hume's "Uniformity of Nature" (to the point that I suppose the two can be read as saying pretty close to the same thing), and as with the latter, the opposite of the former implies no contradiction. Shepherd's principle seems not to be, in Hume's terminology, a "Relation of Ideas." As Bolton notes, Shepherd's "text makes no attempt to provide a reason to think the causal principles which found the system are metaphysically necessary truths." This causes Bolton to worry a great deal on Shepherd's behalf (and to construe Shepherd as herself greatly worrying about) a threatened circularity to Shepherd's whole system. But I see no problem here. (Perhaps in the end, Bolton reads Shepherd here as I do, but in that case, I don't understand why we have to go through all the worry first.) Shepherd does not use the conclusions she reaches by means of her causal principles (that God exists, that there is a material world) to in turn support her causal principles.

Rather, despite being logically contingent, Shepherd seems to hold that, **second**, we are *a priori* justified in accepting these causal principles (our justification for these principles need not derive from experience).

Here, Shepherd *may* not be far in her thinking from Hume in how we might be justified in accepting these principles. "May": it depends on how we read Hume. Remember when we were discussing sect. 5 of Hume's *Enquiry* (see the first side of the handout of 4/5), I mentioned that readings of Hume differ according to whether they take Hume to be a skeptic or a "naturalist." (The handout itself lists some places in the text to which each of the two readings might point.) [We are using "naturalism" in roughly the sense in which it's used here:

<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199742844.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199742844-e-003>] On a skeptical reading, Hume is laying it down in his own voice that matters of fact cannot be known or in any good sense be justifiably believed *a priori*. On a naturalist reading, by contrast, Hume is not laying down the principles that lead to skepticism as his own, but is showing the folly of some philosophical pretensions. Hume is showing that we can't meet the nutty standards of some philosophers, but is himself ready to give the presumption of correctness to what we just naturally find ourselves believing, what we believe by "natural instinct." As Bolton sees, Shepherd takes her causal principles to be in the relevant sense "natural": "We assume the causal principles are true of whatever suddenly appears to exist; to do otherwise would be to contradict what we are naturally inclined to believe." On an epistemology on which our natural beliefs can be presumed to be correct, absent good reason for thinking them wrong, this can be enough to render us justified in accepting those beliefs, in any sense of "justified" in which we should seek to be justified.

Supposing we use “natural” causal reasoning to arrive at our pre-philosophical materialism, the difference between Shepherd and Hume, on the “naturalist” reading of Hume, will come down to whether the presumption of correctness for this materialism is overturned or defeated. And this, it seems, will come down to whether in its content our natural materialism in fact suffers from the problem that Shepherd and Hume (and others) agree would be trouble (see the very first paragraph of this sheet).

Here it is important to stress that, contrary to what Bolton writes, Shepherd does not, like Hume, hold that “most people believe that their *sensations* have continued existence.” I think here Bolton is just misreading the material on pp. 5-6 of our Shepherd readings.

How, then, does Shepherd compare with Reid? Reid is the exemplar of a “naturalist” in the (epistemological) sense we’ve been considering, it being the very heart of his epistemology that what we naturally believe is innocent-until-proven-guilty. But for Reid, what’s central to what we think of the material world as being like is that world’s primary qualities, as we perceive them through the sense of touch. In these central cases, according to Reid, we think of the world as not being at all like our sensations. There is no way that we could arrive at the conception of the material world we in fact arrive at by means of reasoning from our sensations. We need special “principles of our constitution” that can take us from the triggering sensations to the thoughts about the material world that these triggers naturally cause us to have. The presumption of innocence is then applied to those perceptual beliefs that we are triggered to form.

And that’s the feature of Reid’s account that draws Shepherd’s ire. As I read her, Shepherd is happy to, and does, accept principles of reasoning because we are naturally inclined to accept them. And she then accepts as justified the conclusions reached via those principles. But to rationally presume the truth of a belief that is triggered by a sensation just because it is so triggered makes no sense to her.

Well, then, what do we think of the material world as being like according to Shepherd? In a sense that would greatly disturb Berkeley, we seem to have no positive, non-relative conception of the material world on Shepherd’s view. Rather, we just think of it as having some properties or other in virtue of which it causes in us the sensations we have. We don’t think of the material world as being like our sensations, in a way that would cause trouble if we thought, with Berkeley, that nothing can be like a sensory idea except another (mind-dependent) sensory idea. But, again, we don’t seem to have a positive idea of what the world is like other than the relative one of being such as to produce certain sensory ideas. In this way, all our concepts of bodies seem to be as Reid construes just our concepts of secondary qualities: some unknown cause of a known sensational effect. By contrast, on Reid’s view, we do have some positive, non-relative notion of what the material world is like in terms of our concepts of the world’s primary qualities, which concepts our sensations cause us to form, but which concepts do not in their content involve those sensations. Whether this is an importantly good feature of Reid’s view is not obvious. I suspect Reid was Berkeleyan enough in his sensibilities that he would have thought it a great problem if he had to admit he had no positive, non-relative concept of what the material world was like.

We did all this without really getting into the details of the causal reasoning Shepherd posits. Time allowing, with Bolton’s help, we will consider how this reasoning goes. ([See the part above in blue.](#))