Class 14 - March 4
Reid and Kripke on the Self

I. On Reduction

We can distinguish among more-complex and more-simple objects in the world
Among the simpler objects are atoms and molecules.
They are similar to each other, and the components of many more-complex objects.
We suppose that there are some fundamental particles (or otherwise constituent objects) that are roughly uniform, out of which the complex objects are made.
The complex objects can, in some sense, be reduced to their component parts.

Among the most complex objects are things that are not best considered to be objects at all.
Consider the mess in your room, consisting of dirty laundry, half-eaten food, and piles of books and papers.
In one sense, there is a mess in your room.
Grammatically, at least, the mess is an object.
But, we do not believe that there is an object called the mess beyond those things which compose the mess.
There is no mess beyond the laundry, food, and papers.
It is just a convenience of language to pretend to put these things together and call it a mess.
The mess is reducible to the laundry, food, and papers.

Complex objects are often reducible to simpler ones.
It is among the most important tasks of science and philosophy to determine the reductions of complex things.
Consider water.
That's a complex.
It was a significant scientific achievement to discover that it is H_2O.
We discovered that heat is molecular motion, and that lightning is electrical discharge, too.
All of these discoveries are scientific reductions.

Our mental states are among the most important complex objects awaiting scientific reduction.
It would be nice to know what my joy, or depression, or anxiety, or elation really are.
Are they neural states?
Are they functional organizations of some matter?
Are they states of a body-independent soul?
Or, are they irreducible to any further simples?
Perhaps mental states are simples in themselves.
We will return to these questions in our next unit.

For some phenomena or objects, there is an open question whether they admit of reduction.
Consider numbers.
Some people think that numbers are certain kinds of sets.
Other people believe that they are other kinds of sets, ones which contradict the beliefs of the first group.
Still others believe that numbers are objects *sui generis*, of their own kind.
The *sui generis* claim is that numbers are just numbers, simple and non-reducible to other objects.

We are currently trying to find some definition, or reduction, of personal identity.
We have looked at three theories.

1. Body Theory
2. Soul Theory
3. Consciousness Theory

Each of these accounts of personal identity has some significant flaws.
In our last class, we saw that Reid criticized both Locke's presentation of consciousness theory and its core idea.
In contrast, Reid presents an alternative, which we can call irreducibility theory.
On the irreducibility theory, there is no reduction of personal identity to some other property.
Our selves are just our selves.

II. The Irreducibility Theory of the Self

Reid starts with a strong claim for the existence of personal identity.

> The conviction which every man has of his identity, as far back as his memory reaches, needs no aid of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it, without first producing some degree of insanity (Reid 343a).

Further, we all know of our own identity.

> We may infer with certainty, that every man of common sense has a clear and distinct notion of identity (Reid 344a).

So, it may come as some surprise that Reid offers no definition, no reductive account, of the self.

> If you ask a definition of identity, I confess I can give none; it is too simple a notion to admit of logical definition; I can say it is a relation, but I cannot find words to express the specific difference between this and other relations, though I am in no danger of confounding it with any other (Reid 344a).

Look at the difficulties with the other accounts of self.
All of them are unsatisfactory.
The lesson we should learn is not that there is a further, reductive theory of self on which we have not yet stumbled.
We can not, says Reid, reduce the self at all.
It is simple, and un-analyzable.
All we can do is characterize it, differentiate the relation we have with our selves from other relations, and explain how we encounter the self.
Past that, attempts to define or reduce the self are quixotic.

III. On Definition and Reduction

Definitions are often difficult to devise.
A standard definition provides necessary and sufficient conditions.
If we want to define, say, 'chair', we look for what properties an object requires in order for it to be a chair, and what properties are sufficient for an object to be a chair.
If an object is a chair, it will have those properties; if an object has those properties, then it is a chair.

We might propose the following:

> Chair: An object is a chair if and only if it is a piece of furniture, used for sitting, with a back.

The philosopher will proceed to examine this definition for exceptions.
Are stools kinds of chairs?
How about a giant sculpture of a chair, one on which no person could really sit?
Or a doll-house chair; isn't that a chair?
The game of finding counter-examples to any purported definition is a popular one in philosophy.
Philosophers are trained to do this sort of thing.
So, it should come as no surprise that it is quite difficult to define anything.

There are some theoretical terms which admit of clear definitions, ones which refer to scientific concepts, say, with no ordinary uses.

> Monosaccharide: A carbohydrate that cannot be decomposed into simpler carbohydrates by hydrolysis.

'Bachelor' admits of a pretty good definition.
Other terms, like 'mind' and 'self' are more difficult to define.

There are two kinds of reactions that one could have to difficulties formulating necessary and sufficient conditions for ordinary terms, like 'self'.
We might start to believe that there is no such thing as a mind or the self..
If we can't define something, perhaps it doesn't really exist.

Consider the term 'caloric', which was supposed to refer to a substance which made objects hot.
It used to be thought that an object gained caloric when it heated and lost caloric when it cooled.
As scientists discovered that heat is just molecular motion, we gave up the term 'caloric'.
It turned out that it had no meaningful definition.

Another response to difficulties defining an object is to give up the idea that it is reducible to other objects or properties.
I mentioned the *sui generis* solution to the problem of defining numbers.
Two standard definitions of numbers in terms of sets derive from work of Zermelo and von Neumann in the early twentieth century.
Take $\varnothing$ to stand for the empty set.

Zermelo defines the numbers as follows:

$0 = \varnothing$
$1 = \{\varnothing\}$
$2 = \{\{\varnothing\}\}$
$3 = \{\{\{\varnothing\}\}\}$ ...

Von Neumann defines them differently:

$0 = \varnothing$
$1 = \{\varnothing\}$
$2 = \{\varnothing, \{\varnothing\}\}$
$3 = \{\varnothing, \{\varnothing\}, \{\varnothing, \{\varnothing\}\}\}$ ...

Von Neumann's definitions are less elegant than Zermelo's, but more efficient.
They have become standard.
Still, it is not clear that 1 is just $\{\varnothing\}$.
Many mathematicians and philosophers would deny that identity, even if they use the von Neumann sets as ordinal numbers in standard set-theoretic presentations of arithmetic.
The problem arises from the observation that either set of definitions will suffice.
There seems to be nothing to determine which reduction of numbers to sets is the right one.
Some philosophers respond by arguing that numbers are just not reducible to sets.

Similarly, Reid responds to the problem of defining the self by arguing that the self is irreducible to body, or soul, or consciousness.

> I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers (Reid 344b).

The self is simple and irreducible, like a Leibnizian monad.
Leibniz thought that the world was composed of individual, independent substances, called monads, each of which reflected the entire history of the universe from past to future.
Monads are like living, thinking atoms.
Reid alleges that the self is like a monad, a perfect, complete whole.
The identity of the self is the only pure, or perfect, kind of identity that there is.
Other identities are merely approximate.

> The identities...which we ascribe to bodies, whether natural or artificial, is not perfect identity; it is rather something which, for the conveniency of speech, we call identity. It admits of a great change of the subject, providing the change be gradual; sometimes , even off a total change... But identity, when applied to persons, has no ambiguity, and admits not of degrees, or of more and less. It is the foundation of all rights and obligations, and of all accountableness; and the notion of it is fixed and precise (Reid 346).

IV. Characterizing the Self

Reid's strategy allows him to invoke all the characteristics of the self used by earlier attempts to define the self without depending on those properties to be necessary and sufficient conditions.
The purposes of limning the properties of the self, for Reid, is to characterize rather than define what we take to be the self.
For example, Reid argues that self is continuous.

> Identity supposes an uninterrupted continuance of existence. That which has ceased to exist cannot be the same with that which afterwards begins to exist; for this would be to suppose a being to exist after it ceased to exist, and to have had existence before it was produced, which are manifest contradictions. Continued, uninterrupted existence is therefore necessarily implied in identity (Reid 344a).

Reid invokes the continuity of the self to block attempts to reduce the self to any particular mental state, since all mental states are fleeting.
Similarly, Reid invokes the unary nature of the self; it is indivisible.

> A part of a person is a manifest absurdity. When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person, and has lost nothing of his personality. If he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person he was before... A person is something indivisible (Reid 344a-b).

Reid would thus argue that Gregor Samsa continues to be the same Gregor, despite his metamorphosis.
Memory is useful for picking out ourselves, since one can not truly remember something that one did not do.
We should not be misled into thinking that memory is essential to ourselves.

> It is not my remembering any action of mine that makes me to be the same person who did it. This remembrance makes me to know assuredly that I did it; but I might have done it, though I did not remember it (Reid 345a).

We can forget what we did, as in Reid's case of the old general/brave soldier.

V. Kripke's Cases

Kripke, like Reid, believes that there is something perfect or essential to the self.
Also like Reid, he does not specify a reduction, though Kripke does not appear to be opposed to such a reduction.
The main point of the Kripke excerpt is to find some further properties of our selves, to highlight certain idiosyncratic or unrecognized characteristics of our selves.

We need not have most of our properties.
We need not have come to Hamilton College.
We need not have any of the clothes that we do, or the friends that we do, or have the desires that we do, or the beliefs that we do, or our haircuts.
Are there properties of our selves that could not be different?

Kripke considers whether the Queen of England could have been the daughter of the Trumans.
He denies the possibility.
In order to deny it, he distinguishes the case from related cases.

We can easily imagine that the Trumans had a daughter who grew up to be the Queen of England.
England could start electing their queens.
Or, the Truman's daughter could be switched with the Queen's parents.
Such possibilities are conceivable.
But, they are not relevant to the case at hand.

> Perhaps in some possible world, Mr. And Mrs. Truman even had a child who actually became the Queen of England and was even passed off as the child of other parents. This still would not be a situation in which *this very woman* whom we call Elizabeth the Second was the child of Mr. and Mrs. Truman, or so it seems to me (Kripke 223a).

Kripke's intuitions say that a particular person could not have different parents than s/he does.
If the Queen of England had the Trumans as parents, she would not be the same person as the current Queen of England.
She would be a different person with the same position.

If Kripke's intuitions are correct, then it seems as if we have found one particular property of our selves that is essential to who we are.
It seems that we must have the ancestry that we do.

Kripke believes that we can translate his discovery to objects other than ourselves.
Even an artifact, like a table, seems to have some essential constitutive properties.
We can imagine a table like this wooden one, but made of ice instead of pine.
Such a table, Kripke argues, would not be this table.
It would be a different one like it.

> It seems to me that anything coming from a different origin would not be this object (Kripke 223b).

Are there other properties of our selves which are essential?
Must we be of a particular gender?
Must we have any of our core sets of beliefs?

The big question is whether Kripke's considerations undermine Reid's claim that the self is irreducible.
If we really have found an essential characteristic of the self, that we must have the parents that we do, are we then able to say that who we are is reducible to our ancestry, perhaps in conjunction with other essential factors?