

We have considered smell as signifying a sensation, feeling, or impression upon the mind, and in this sense, it can only be in a mind, or sentient being; but it is evident, that mankind give the name of *smell* much more frequently to something which they conceive to be external, and to be a quality of body; they understand something by it which does not at all infer a mind, and have  
5 not the least difficulty in conceiving the air perfumed with aromatic odours in the deserts of Arabia, or in some uninhabited island where the human foot never trod. Every sensible day-labourer hath as clear a notion of this, and as full a conviction of the possibility of it, as he hath of his own existence; and can no more doubt of the one than of the other.

Suppose that such a man meets with a modern philosopher, and wants to be informed, what  
10 smell in plants is. The philosopher tells him, that there is no smell in plants, nor in any thing but in the mind: that it is impossible there can be smell but in a mind; and that all this hath been demonstrated by modern philosophy. The plain man will, no doubt, be apt to think him merry: but if he finds that he is serious, his next conclusion will be, that he is mad; or that philosophy, like magic, puts men into a new world, and gives them different faculties from common men.  
15 And thus philosophy and common sense are set at variance. But who is to blame for it? In my opinion the philosopher is to blame. For if he means by smell what the rest of mankind most commonly mean, he is certainly mad. But if he puts a different meaning upon the word, without observing it himself, or giving warning to others, he abuses language, and disgraces philosophy, without doing any service to truth: as if a man should exchange the meaning of the words  
20 *daughter* and *cow*, and then endeavour to prove to his plain neighbour, that his cow is his daughter, and his daughter his cow.

I believe there is not much more wisdom in many of those paradoxes of the ideal philosophy, which to plain sensible men appear to be palpable absurdities, but with the adepts pass for profound discoveries. I resolve, for my own part, always to pay a great regard to the dictates of  
25 common sense, and not to depart from them without absolute necessity; and therefore I am apt to think, that there is really something in the rose or lily, which is by the vulgar called smell, and which continues to exist when it is not smelled: and shall proceed to inquire what this is; how we come by the notion of it; and what relation this quality or virtue of smell hath to the sensation, which we have been obliged to call by the same name, for want of another. (...)

From what hath been said, we may learn, that the smell of a rose signifies two things. First, A sensation, which can have no existence but when it is perceived, and can only be in a sentient being or mind. Secondly, It signifies some power, quality or virtue, in the rose, or in effluvia proceeding from it, which hath a permanent existence, independent of the mind, and which by

5 the constitution of nature, produces the sensation in us. By the original constitution of our  
nature, we are both led to believe, that there is a permanent cause of the sensation, and  
prompted to seek after it; and experience determines us to place it in the rose. The names of all  
smells, tastes, sounds, as well as heat and cold, have a like ambiguity in all languages; but it  
deserves our attention, that these names are but rarely, in common language, used to signify the  
10 sensations; for the most part, they signify the external qualities which are indicated by the  
sensations. The cause of which phenomenon I take to be this: our sensations have very  
different degrees of strength. Some of them are so quick and lively, as to give us a great deal  
either of pleasure or of uneasiness. When this is the case, we are compelled to attend to the  
sensation itself, and to make it an object of thought and discourse; we give it a name, which  
15 signifies nothing but the sensation; and in this case we readily acknowledge, that the thing  
meant by that name is in the mind only, and not in any thing external. Such are the various  
kinds of pain, sickness, and the sensations of hunger and other appetites. But where the  
sensation is not so interesting as to require to be made an object of thought, our constitution  
leads us to consider it as a sign of something external, which hath a constant conjunction with  
20 it; and having found what it indicates, we give a name to that: the sensation, having no proper  
name, falls in as an accessory to the thing signified by it, and is confounded under the same  
name. So that the name may indeed be applied to the sensation, but most properly and  
commonly is applied to the thing indicated by that sensation. The sensations of smell, taste,  
sound, and colour, are of infinitely more importance as signs or indications, than they are upon  
25 their own account; like the words of a language, wherein we do not attend to the sound, but to  
the sense.

Thomas REID, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), II (“Of Smelling”), 8 (“There is a quality or virtue in bodies, which we call their smell. How this is connected in the imagination with the sensation”) & 9 (“That there is a principle in human nature, from which the notion of this, as well as all other natural virtues or causes, is derived.”)