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Thomas Reid

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Thomas Reid (1710-1796) is regarded as the founder of the Scottish school of 'Common Sense' philosophy. In 1737 he became a minister at the parish of New Marchar, leaving it in 1752, when he was appointed professor of philosophy at King's College, Aberdeen. He was professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow from 1764 until 1789, when he retired to devote himself to his philosophical writing.

Among his most significant published works are: *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764); the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785); and the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788). I shall focus on the last one, in which Reid develops his views on active power, agency, and moral liberty. (All Reid quotations are taken from the 1969 edition of that work which, confusingly, bears the title *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*).

Reid had much influence on his contemporaries both at home and abroad but he was increasingly neglected during the nineteenth century, until the second half of the twentieth century saw a revival of interest in his philosophy, particularly in his epistemology and his views on human agency and moral liberty. The latter are certainly worth exploring; they offer astute criticisms and subtle, albeit not unproblematic, alternatives to a number of arguments and positions that are still prevalent in philosophical debates. Besides, his style is clear and direct, his arguments are straightforward and his writing are full of insight and, well, common sense.

It will not be possible to do justice to the complexity of Reid's views here, but I shall try to provide an overview of the main features of his account of agency and liberty and then briefly discuss some difficulties affecting the former.

Active Powers

In the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* Reid defends the concept of 'active power' and develops his accounts of human agency and liberty around this concept. He says that 'power is a thing so much of its own kind, and so simple in its nature' (5) that it cannot be defined. And he agrees with Hume that we have no sense impression of power. Nonetheless, he argues, our idea of power *is* derived from experience, though admittedly, not *directly* so: 'our conception of power is relative to its exertions or effects' (10; see also p.36), which are the operations of the mind, and of which we are conscious. Our concept of power, then, is inferred from our consciousness of its operations.

Although Reid mounts a determined defence of the concept of power, he has a fairly restricted concept of 'active power'. First, he argues that the term 'active power' is to be contrasted with 'speculative' and not with 'passive power'. For, he says, the capacity to undergo change, as opposed to the capacity to produce it, is not a power; and, although Locke uses the term, passive power is a 'powerless power, and a contradiction in terms' (23). Second, he denies that matter has any causal powers: he accepted the Humean doctrine that we perceive only constant conjunction of events and not efficient causation, and the doctrine taught by 'eminent natural philosophers' that 'matter is a substance altogether inert, and merely passive'(41). Reid recognizes that this goes against common usage (we attribute causal powers to substances) and that those same scientists ascribed to matter 'the powers of corpuscular attraction, magnetism, electricity, gravitation, and others' (41). His response is that the words 'cause', 'agency', 'active power' etc. are ambiguous. The proper meaning of 'cause', he holds, is that of 'efficient cause', and that of 'power' is 'active power' (as characterized below). But, he says, there is another

‘lax’ sense of the words ‘cause’ and ‘power’, authorized by custom and used in Physics; in this sense we may say that inanimate things or laws of nature have powers or are causes. But talk about the powers of physical bodies in this sense merely describes the laws and regularities in accordance with which the real, i.e. efficient, causes of observable changes in nature, of which we are ignorant, produce these changes. (For a discussion of why this is an unsatisfactory response, see Madden, 1982, esp. 329ff.). Indeed, Reid says, if ‘all the phenomena that fall within the reach of our senses, were accounted for from the general laws of nature’ that would not reveal ‘the efficient cause of any one phenomenon in nature’ (46).

As well as denying that matter has causal powers, Reid holds that all active powers are so-called ‘two-way powers’: ‘power to produce any effect implies power not to produce it’ (35); otherwise it is not power but necessity. And this, he says, implies or strongly suggests (he fluctuates between the two) that only creatures endowed with understanding and will can have active powers. The reason for this is that ‘we can conceive of no way in which power may be determined to one of these rather than the other, in a being that has no will’ (35) and, he adds, will requires a degree of understanding, for it requires an object of which one must have some conception.

Active Powers, Human Agency and Liberty

So what, in Reid’s view, is the relation between active powers and agency? He says:

The name of a *cause* and of an *agent*, is properly given to that being only, which, by its active power, produces some change in itself, or in some other being. The change, whether it be of thought, of will, or of motion, is the *effect*. Active power, therefore, is a quality in the cause, which enables it to produce the effect. And the exertion of that active power in producing the effect, is called *action*, *agency*, *efficiency* (268).

Thus, to act is to exert active power to produce a change. Active power is exerted at will, the change produced is the effect, and the agent, who has the power (a quality), is the cause.

Reid goes on to say that ‘human active power’ has two kinds of ‘immediate effects’: ‘We can give certain motions to our own bodies; and we can give a certain direction to our own thoughts’ (49). Any other effects we might bring about, which may be vary varied and significant, are ‘remote’ and brought about ‘by moving first our own body as an instrument’ (ibid.).

It is important to understand how Reid thinks that we ‘give motions’ to our bodies. First, Reid accepted the essentially dualist conception of agency widespread among seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers that the body is causally moved by the mind; a conception encouraged by the doctrine, mistakenly believed to be scientific, that matter is inert. Thus, for Reid, an agent who, for instance, freely raises his arm does so by first exerting his power to determine his will, thus causing a volition that his arm rise. Such a volition, characterized as ‘the determination of the mind to do, or not to do something which we conceive to be in our power’ (58), in turn causes the arm to rise. And the rising of the arm so caused is the action. However, Reid says that

we know not even how those immediate effects of our power are produced by our willing them. We perceive not any necessary connection between the volition and exertion on our part, and the motion of our body that follows them (50).

According to Reid, experience teaches us that there is an ‘established harmony’ between our willing certain motions of our bodies and the occurrence of these motions. The willing, Reid says, is ‘an act of the mind’, but

whether this act of the mind have any physical effect upon the nerves and muscles, or whether it be only an occasion of their being acted upon by some other efficient, according to the established laws of nature, is hid from us (50).

And he adds,

it is possible therefore, for any thing we know, that what we call the immediate effects of our power, may not be so in the strictest sense. Between the will to produce the effect and the production of it, there may be agents or instruments of which we are ignorant' (50).

The conclusion is obvious: this 'may leave some doubt, whether we be, in the strictest sense, the efficient cause of the voluntary motions of our own body' (51), or whether we are, as Malebranche held, only 'occasional causes' (ibid.). And, he adds, 'I see no good reason why the dispute about efficient and occasional causes, may not be applied to the power of directing our thoughts' (52).

This dispute, however, Reid takes to be both impossible to settle and of no significance, for he says that what matters for 'the moral estimation of our actions' (51) is whether we had the power to determine our wills to bring about an event, and not whether we were the efficient, or merely the occasional, cause of that event:

The man who knows that such an event depends upon his will, and who deliberately wills to produce it, is, in the strictest moral sense, the cause of the event; and it is justly imputed to him, whatever physical causes may have concurred in its production (51).

Thus having active power to cause a volition to cause a particular event is both necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility for that event.

But does an agent not cause all of his volitions? According to Reid, he does not. For the will can be determined by 'principles of action' such as appetites, passions and affections. When the will is so determined, the resulting action is voluntary because it depends on the agent's will, but it is free only if, and to the extent that, the agent could have determined his will otherwise:

By the *liberty* of a moral agent, I understand, a power over the determinations of his own will.

If, in any action, he had the power to will what he did, or not to will it, in that action he is free. But if, in every voluntary action, the determination of his will be the necessary consequence of something involuntary in the state of his mind, or of something in his external circumstances, he is not free: he has not what I call the liberty of a moral agent, but is subject to necessity (259).

Reid further explains that moral liberty requires that the agent have not only the power to will or not to will what he did, together with some conception of what he wills, but also ‘some degree of practical judgment or reason’, that is, ‘the judgment to discern one determination preferable to another’ (259) as otherwise active power ‘would be given in vain’ (260).

So Reid is an incompatibilist libertarian. He holds that moral responsibility requires what is sometimes called ‘liberty of indifference’: that the agent could have willed otherwise; and the fourth of the *Essays on the Active Powers* is devoted to explaining his notion of moral liberty and defending the claim that we have such liberty with an array of arguments, many of them of great power and ingenuity.

Particularly interesting in this context is Reid’s treatment of motives. He says that every motive is addressed either ‘to the animal or to the rational part of our nature’ (288). The first kind, ‘animal motives’, are appetites and passions which we share with animals, and whose ‘influence is immediately upon the will’ (289). The second kind, ‘rational motives’, influence our judgement, by presenting an action as our duty, or as conducive to our good, directly or instrumentally.

Against his opponents, Reid denies that motives are the causal determinants of actions. In general, Reid says, the influence of motives is like that of advice or exhortation, ‘which leaves a man still at liberty’ (283): they may be compared to ‘advocates pleading the opposite sides of a cause at the bar’ (288), where ‘the sentence is in the power of the judge, not of the

advocate' (ibid.). Reid challenges the necessitarian claim that every action is caused by the strongest motive, pointing out that its truth cannot be determined 'unless some measure of the strength of motives can be found distinct from their prevalence' (288).

He offers his own account of the strength of motives. Concerning animal motives, he suggests that their strength is judged 'by the conscious effort that is necessary to resist them' (289); while the strongest rational motive 'is that which it is most our duty and our real happiness to follow' (291). He adds, in 'the grand and the important competition of contrary motives' (291), which is between the animal and the rational, we may ask which is the strongest motive. If we use the test for animal motives, he says, then the animal motive tends to be stronger (for it requires more effort to resist). But if we use the rational test, then 'it is evident, that the rational motive is always the strongest' (291). And, he concludes, whichever test we use, it seems false that the strongest motive always prevails:

In every wise and virtuous action, the motive that prevails is the strongest, according to the rational test, but commonly the weakest according to the animal. In every foolish, and in every vicious action, the motive that prevails is commonly the strongest according to the animal test, but always the weakest according to the rational (291).

To be sure, Reid's explanations and arguments will fail to convince many; nonetheless, anyone interested in these topics will certainly profit from paying careful attention to them.

For now, though, I shall leave Reid's defence of moral liberty behind and turn to his account of agent causation, which strikes me as at once very attractive and deeply problematic. I shall argue that, although the difficulties are serious, they are rooted in Reid's allegiance to doctrines that are independent of, and in fact inimical to, the concept of agent causation that he sought to defend.

Agent causation and volitionism

Reid's account of human agency has several unwelcome consequences. First, it engenders scepticism about physical agency. For, as we saw, Reid thinks that although we certainly cause volitions that our bodies move, when the willed motions occur, it is not certain that they are indeed caused by our volitions, since all we perceive is constant conjunction between the latter and the motions. This means that we cannot be sure that it is we who move our bodies.

Reid recognizes that his account has this sceptical implication. As we saw, he tries to deflect the issue by asserting that what matters is that we are the efficient causes of our volitions, and hence morally accountable for our actions. But while this may or may not be a satisfactory response to scepticism about free-will and moral responsibility, it is certainly not a satisfactory response to 'physical' agency scepticism. For, in the first place, as Reid himself might have put it, it is more certain that we can causally affect the physical world through our agency than it is that any particular theory of action is true. And secondly, if we set out to give an account of the nature of human agency as involving the power to cause changes 'in bodies', it is self-defeating to conclude that there may be no such power.

A second difficulty concerns the much-disputed issue of whether Reid's notion of agent causation involves an infinite regress.

The charge that volitionist theories generate a vicious regress is a familiar one. Briefly, and in its most basic form, if what makes an event voluntary is that it is caused by a volition, and if volitions themselves are voluntary events, then every volition needs to be caused by a prior volition, *ad infinitum*. (And if volitions are not voluntary, in what sense are the resulting actions voluntary?) Reid himself acknowledges and dismisses the objection (263), and in general his advocates have endeavoured to show that Reid's volitionism escapes the objection. But does it?

I am not convinced that it does – not for anti-libertarian reasons, but because I think Reid’s conception of volitions and their roles is untenable. Reid holds (i) that volitions, that is, determinations of the will, are caused by agents; (ii) that we cause volitions through an exertion of our active power; (iii) that every exertion of active power requires a determination of the will (remember that the latter was his main ground for holding that only creatures with a will can have active power). And this seems to suggest that the causing of every volition by an agent requires a prior determination of the will, i.e., a prior volition. In short, the combination of the doctrines that agents cause events by causing volitions and that volitions are themselves events which agents cause does seem to generate a regress (see Alvarez, 2000).

Reid and his defenders argue that this objection rests on a misunderstanding, for, they hold, Reid did not think that in order to cause a volition an agent needs to determine his will to do so, i.e. cause a prior volition (see Rowe, 1991 and O’Connor, 1994, pp.613ff. O’Connor says that the regress of volitions arises only if one mistakenly thinks that an exertion of active power *is* itself a type of volition. But in fact the regress arises from the view, held by Reid, that an exertion of active power *requires* a volition.) It’s clear that Reid did not *explicitly* hold that every volition requires a prior volition, for he says he doesn’t and in fact it requires very little reflection to see that this view generates a regress. However, the question is whether his other views commit him to it. And the views outlined in (i)-(iii) above seem to. Besides, if we accept Reid’s explicit rejection of the view, then the question arises: if an agent can cause a volition without the need for a prior volition to do so, why cannot he cause other events without the need for a prior volition to do so? The answer cannot be that, without a prior volition, the causing of those events would not be an exertion of active power, because *pari passu* we should conclude that, without a prior volition, the causing of the volition would not be an exertion of active power. So, either volitions are required for all exertions of active power, or they are required

for none. And if they *are* required, then, either we abandon the view that volitions are caused by agents through an exertion of active power, or we end up with an infinite regress.

Thus, it seems that Reid's account of agency does face some serious problems. I shall conclude by exploring whether this means that Reid's concept of agent causation is irremediably doomed.

Conclusion: agent causation

I have argued that the problems identified in Reid's account arise from his endorsing two dubious doctrines: that matter is inert and must be moved by mind; and that we cause changes in matter (and mind) by causing volitions. If we abandon those doctrines, however, it is possible to develop a broadly Reidian agent-causal account of human agency that avoids those problems. For, arguably, what is essential to an agent-causal account of human agency is the idea that agents can and do cause events at will - and that the causal relation between agents and those events is not reducible to event causation (see Alvarez & Hyman, 1998).

First, we can accept that agents do things at will, and indeed will to do things, without accepting that these 'willings' or 'volitions' are events caused by agents and events that cause other events. And if we remove such volitions from the picture, we are left with the idea that agency involves a direct causal relation between agents and the mental or physical changes they bring about at will. On this view, an action is the causing of an event or change, but is not itself an event (for the causing of an event is not itself an event), and *a fortiori*, an action is not an event caused by the agent. So, agent causation involves a causal relation not between an agent and his actions but between the agent and the *results* of his actions – which include the motions of his body that he causes when he moves it.

The resulting conception of agent causation involves the capacity to move one's body at will directly, not by means of volitions. This may prompt the question: if not by means of volitions, how do we move our bodies? But it is possible that this question is motivated by the conception of matter mentioned above and endorsed by Reid. For, if matter is 'a substance altogether inert, and merely passive', then it seems that our bodies cannot move themselves and need to be moved by something else. But if we reject that conception of matter the question of how we move our bodies takes on a different complexion. If we think of the human body as animated or, what is the same, of ourselves as essentially embodied agents, our active power to move our bodies can be seen for what it is: the power of embodied creatures to move at will. As Reid argued, human beings have the power to move their bodies at will. This power need not and should not be understood as involving a sort of causal transaction between a mental event (a volition) and a physical entity (one's body). Our active power to move our bodies is the power we have to move them *directly* and *at will*, and thereby cause changes in the world, including our bodies, at will.

I have tried to diagnose the roots of some problems in Reid's account of agency and to suggest ways of overcoming them. I hope in this way to have shown that Reid's writings are not, at their core, obsolete or superseded, but rather that they repay the attention that they are increasingly beginning to receive -- indeed, that they establish him as one of the eighteenth century's richest and most rewarding philosophers of action.

See also: VOLITION AND THE WILL (13), AGENT CAUSATION (29), FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM (39), HUME (59).

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Further Reading

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