**Thomas Reid on Powers and Abilities**

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**1. Introduction**

Early in his *Essays on Intellectual Powers*, Reid draws a distinction between mental power, mental operation, and mental capacity (*EIP* 21). To the untrained eye, these terms could probably be used interchangeably, and Reid believes this is correct, up to a point. He argues that, if we are interested in understanding exactly how the human mind works, we must use these terms with more precise meanings. This is part of his more general strategy of trying to always use the words with their common meanings, as much as possible, but also pointing out that certain philosophical distinctions are needed to carry out the project of laying out the foundations of the science of the mind.

This paper explains what the distinction between power, operation, and capacity is, according to Reid, with the goal of understanding why it is important to draw such a distinction, not only for the Reidian project, but for action theory, more generally. In doing so, I will analyze some of the more general consequences of this threefold distinction.

To give a preview, I will argue that the main purpose of this distinction, in Reid's system, is to support his view that the human mind is always active, while in a state of wakefulness. Once we understand why this is so, we must explain what kind of activity is involved, even in the more seemingly passive mental states, like sensation, perception, and introspective consciousness. In the course of giving this explanation, I will point out that we are faced with a deeper philosophical choice: ascribe (a weak) version of occasionalism to Reid or modify our understanding of mental activity to accommodate the larger picture that he proposes. This paper will argue that it is better to do the latter than the former.

**2. The Active Character of the Mind**

Locke famously thought that "the Mind is wholly Passive in the reception of all its simple *Ideas*." The main type of activity the mind is afforded is to exert "acts of its own, whereby out of its simple *Ideas*, as the Materials and Foundations of the rest, the other [complex ideas] are framed" (*Essay* 2.12.1). Hume is also often taken as stating that the mind is a passive recipient of all the impressions that it acquires from the external world. Right at the beginning of the *Treatise,* he statesthat the perceptions of the mind he calls "impressions" are "[t]hose perceptions, which enter with most force and violence; [...] under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul" (*T* 1.1.1). Metaphors related to forceful and violent entry do indeed suggest that the mind doesn't (and cannot) resist the appearance of these perceptions in it, even though some interpreters focus on the mental activity required for the association of ideas, when they argue against the view that Hume believes that the mind is passive in its initial acquisition of knowledge.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In opposition to Locke and Hume, Reid states that the mind is always active, and that it is part of its very nature to be like this. Only the body can be said to be fully passive. If we think about our mind, in its state of wakefulness, Reid believes that:

...the mind is from its very nature a living and active being. Every thing we know of it implies life and active energy; and the reason why all its modes of thinking are called its operations, is, that in all, or in most of them, it is not merely passive as body is, but is really and properly active. (*EIP* 21)

Maybe somewhat surprisingly, given the views of his predecessors, Reid includes seeing and hearing, alongside reasoning and willing, as active ways of thinking. We can raise a question regarding that types of activities hearing and seeing could be understood to be: are they voluntary or involuntary? Activity goes hand-in-hand with voluntariness. This means that, in what follows, I will use a convenient, albeit not entirely precise distinction, between *actions* that are deliberate, determined by their agent, and *processes*, which are involuntary and almost always unconscious. In this sense, for instance, digesting, which could be thought to be an activity, will be classed as a bodily process, involuntary and completely unconscious. Whereas, by contrast, solving a logic problem will be described as a voluntary action, an activity of the agent. This distinction is a useful heuristic device, although, as I soon explain, there are cases of mental operations, according to Reid, that display characteristics of processes (involuntary) as well as activities (voluntary). Understanding exactly how this happens is one of the goals of this essay, especially when it comes to describing (human) perception and its modalities. As it is often the case, Reid cites common language usage as a first type of evidence for the active character of the mind:

In all ages, and in all languages, ancient and modern, the various modes of thinking have been expressed by words of active signification, such as seeing, hearing, reasoning, willing, and the like. It seems therefore to be the natural judgment of mankind, that the mind is active in its various ways of thinking; and for this reason they are called its operations, and are expressed by active verbs. (*EIP* 21)

This is not the only type of evidence Reid considers, of course, and that is good, because, as far as evidence goes, this is not that strong. After all, processes that belong entirely to the body -- for instance, digestion -- can be thought of by using "active verbs". As such, one could say things like "I'm digesting the meal I have just finished eating". But maybe Reid is thinking that this is an improper way of speaking, given the fact that digestion is an entirely unconscious physiological process, not under the control of an agent. In this sense, it would be a stretch to think that digestion is an operation of the body, analogous to the way in which hearing is an operation of the mind. To better appreciate why this is so, we should take a closer look at the distinction that Reid draws between mental power, faculty, and capacity. Reid argues that these are all dependent on the existence of an agent with a particular mental make-up. He argues that to understand the idea of mental operation -- for instance, thinking -- we must postulate the existence of the mind's power to operate in a certain manner. These powers are not observable; however, by the use of our reflective introspection, we can observe our mental operations, which are the effects of the activation of the necessary mental powers when certain stimuli are met.

The words *power* and *faculty*, which are often used in speaking of the mind, need little explication. Every operation supposes a power in the being that operates; for to suppose any thing to operate, which has no power to operate, is manifestly absurd. But, on the other hand, there is no absurdity in supposing a being to have power to operate, when it does not operate. Thus I may have power to walk, when I sit; or to speak, when I am silent. Every operation therefore implies power; but the power does not imply the operation (*EIP* 21)

There are mental powers that are original and others that Reid calls “acquired.” Furthermore, the original powers are called ‘faculties’ and refer to those powers that are part of the initial make-up of the mind (*EIP* 21). Original perception is the paradigmatic case of a mental faculty. In addition, our minds, as they mature, are able to acquire more powers, which are usually called ‘habits’ and include acquired perception and attentive reflection, among others.[[2]](#endnote-2) With regard to perception, Reid is inspired to draw this distinction by Berkeley: the paradigm case of acquired perception is the perception by sight of three-dimensional figure, something that we originally perceive by touch only. (By vision, we originally perceive only two-dimensional figure). It is through experience and learning, Reid thinks, that we acquire the ability to perceive three-dimensional figure by sight. What I want to emphasize, here, is that, by no means, can we *decide* to acquire depth-perception by sight or not. Typically developing human beings will most probably acquire this habit very early in their lives, according to Reid.[[3]](#endnote-3) Many other cases of acquired perception are different, in this respect: it is by habituation that we acquire the ability to instantly distinguish, by sight, a Titian from a Raphael; but we can decide whether to dedicate effort, learning, and time to acquiring this skill. Art historians studying the Italian Renaissance will certainly benefit from this skill; others will not. In this sense, we have very little (if any) control over the acquisition of the habit of perceiving depth by sight, while we have a lot more control over the acquisition of the habit of distinguishing, by sight, between a painting by Titian and one by Raphael.

There are other cases of habit formation where Reid thinks that we are in a position to acquire a habit to a lesser or higher degree: attentive reflection is one such habit. It takes effort, practice, and dedication to become fully reflective, according to Reid.

Thus, Reid believes that we have the capacity to acquire habits in cases in which we have no apparent (or very little) control over what we acquire (depth-perception by sight), as well as in cases in which we have moderate control (attentive reflection), and full control (the case of the art historian specializing in Italian Renaissance).

There is an additional aspect we must take into account: the notion of capacity. As Reid says, “[t]here must be something in the constitution of the mind necessary to our being able to acquire habits, and this is commonly called *capacity*” (*EIP* 21). We must have a certain capacity for acquiring certain habits; without this capacity, no matter how much we try, we would not be able to acquire the respective habit. Human beings do not have the capacity for flight; no matter how hard a human being might try to acquire the ability of flying, unaided, like a bird, they will never succeed. There is nothing in the constitution of a human being that might allow us to acquire this as a habit. The idea of capacity is, thus, the most general one: it concerns the constitution of human beings, as such (as a particular natural species). Accordingly, an individual may not acquire certain abilities (new powers or habits, as Reid calls them) for three main reasons: (i) the individual is not placed in the right *milieu* (but they have the capacity for acquiring said ability); (ii) there may be specific factors that prevent an individual from acquiring an ability (e.g. a congenitally blind person will not be able to acquire the ability to perceive, by sight, three-dimensional figure; but, even that person will be said to have the capacity to do so: had their organs of sense worked properly, they would have been able to acquire said ability). Or (iii) individuals may lack the capacity altogether (as in the example of flight, mentioned above).

This analysis gives rise to an unexpected question: why does Reid, and we along with him, classify sight as an original power -- a faculty, in his terminology -- and not a capacity? The idea that a congenitally blind person is said to have the capacity for sight, without the possibility of ever actualizing it, should already give us pause. To appreciate this point, consider the case of Mary the Second, who, just like Jackson's Mary, is raised in a room devoid of color. Mary the Second's environment, in addition, does not allow for illumination. Everything works properly for her; Mary the Second is not a congenitally blind person. However, she does not see anything upon opening her eyes. She is perceiving darkness, without ever knowing it, because she has no means of distinguishing lightness from darkness. Should we say that Mary the Second has the faculty of sight? My intuition is to say no; she only has the capacity of sight, which would allow her to see, when placed in the right environment. This is the difference from Mary the Second and a congenitally blind person whose sight cannot be restored: the former will be able to see in the right environment, whereas the latter won't. This scenario shows that we have some degree of control over acquiring the habit of seeing three-dimensional figure, despite what Reid seems to have thought. It is true that we have less control than we have when we acquire the ability to distinguish a painting by Titian form one by Giorgione, by sight. However, the difference between these cases does not seem to be as clear-cut as Reid makes it to be. In the technical sense, it looks like sight is a habit: if certain things obtain around someone, they will acquire the ability to *see* two-dimensional figure, three-dimensional figure, or a Titian. This, in effect, is a good result for Reid, since his original proposal didn't offer an explanation as to why we have control over the acquisition of our habits, except over the acquisition of the habit of seeing three-dimensional figure, which seemed to be acquired automatically. With this emendation, we can regard all habits as equal, from the point of view of us being able to exercise some control over their acquisition.

**3. Powers of the Understanding vs. Powers of the Will**

We established that we have some control over the direction of our thoughts, as Reid thought, even in cases that seem *prima facie* automatic. Let us now consider this idea, by reference to the traditional distinction between intellectual powers and active powers of the mind. Reid himself takes this distinction seriously; he even names his two most important books accordingly: *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788). This is what he writes:

The powers of the mind are so many, so various, and so connected and complicated in most of its operations, that there never has been any division of them proposed which is not liable to considerable objections. We shall therefore take that general division, which is the most common, into the powers of *understanding* and those of *will*. Under the will we comprehend our active powers, and all that lead to action, or influence the mind to act; such as, appetites, passions, affections. The understanding comprehends our contemplative powers; by which we perceive objects; by which we conceive or remember them; by which we analyse or compound them; and by which we judge and reason concerning them (*EIP* 64)

Reid thinks, however, that the distinction itself is theoretical , something that the philosopher or, beter still, the scientist involved in understanding and describing how the human mind works is able to keep apart. This is because, in practice the two kinds are always conjoined, Reid thinks. Furthermore, he is interested in exploring in what ways the two kinds of powers interact, since he believes that we cannot have active powers without intellectual ones, and the other way around, even in some surprising cases, like, for example mathematical contemplation. The fact that an agent deliberately enters this activity, Reid thinks, is evidence for the idea that active power is required in this case. This is important, since it leads Reid to state that the mind is always active:

Although this general division may be of use in order to our proceeding more methodically in our subject, we are not to understand it as if, in those operations which are ascribed to the understanding, there were no exertion of will or activity, or as if the understanding were not employed in the operations ascribed to the will; for I conceive there is no operation of the understanding wherein the mind is not active in some degree. We have some command over our thoughts, and can attend to this or to that, of many objects which present themselves to our senses, to our memory, or to our imagination We can survey an object on this side or that, superficially or accurately, for a longer or a shorter time; so that our contemplative powers are under the guidance and direction of the active; and the former never pursue their object without being led and directed, urged or restrained by the latter: And because the understanding is always more or less directed by the will, mankind have ascribed some degree of activity to the mind in its intellectual operations, as well as in those which belong to the will, and have expressed them by active verbs, such as seeing, hearing, judging, reasoning, and the like. And as the mind exerts some degree of activity even in the operations of understanding, so it is certain that there can be no act of will which is not accompanied with some act of understanding. The will must have an object, and that object must be apprehended or conceived in the understanding. It is therefore to be remembered, that in most, if not all operations of the mind, both faculties concur; and we range the operation under that faculty which hath the largest share in it. (*EIP* 64-65)

Reid offers, for our consideration, a list of powers of the understanding that we might think that contains some surprising elements. Even if we think that the mind is active when it exercises its intellectual powers, we might have a hard time understanding what kind of activity is present in all these instances:

I shall not, therefore, attempt a complete enumeration of the powers of the human understanding. I shall only mention those which I propose to explain, and they are the following: *1st*, The powers we have by means of our external senses. *2dly*, Memory. *3dly*, Conception. *4thly*, The powers of, resolving and analysing complex objects, and compounding those that are more simple. *5thly*, Judging. *6thly*, Reasoning. *7thly*, Taste. *8thly*, Moral Perception; and, *last* of all, Consciousness.” (*EIP* 67-68)

It does not seem farfetched to make an argument in favor of classifying certain types of memory as active, but in what sense is perception active? Traditionally, philosophers have thought that our perceptual sense modalities are recording, passively, the information that the external world makes available to us. Reid thinks this is not so; why, exactly? To be able to answer this question, we must first understand in what sense Reid is thinking that the mind is active when exercising some of its intellectual powers that most philosophers would agree are active.

**4. The (Really) Active Powers of the Understanding: Attention and Reflection**

According to Reid, we cannot actually define “active power”; just like other terms he uses, this notion is a primitive and, as a primitive notion, it cannot be reduced to anything simpler. We can have a guiding principle in understanding what active power is, by considering that it involves an agent’s bringing about an effect by exerting it. In the *Essays on the Active Powers* (*EAP* henceforth),Reid reinforces the idea that active power is distinguished from the speculative powers, as we have already seen from the *EIP*:

The term active power is used, I conceive, to distinguish it from speculative powers. As all languages distinguish action from speculation, the same distinction is applied to the powers by which they are produced. The powers of seeing, hearing, remembering, distinguishing, judging, reasoning, are speculative powers; the power of executing any work of art or labour is active power. (*EAP* 12)

One way of understanding this passage is as Van Cleve does, as evidence that Reid thinks that “the opposite of ‘active power’ is not ‘passive power,’ a Lockean term that Reid regards as an oxymoron, but ‘speculative power,’ of which seeing and remembering would be instances of” (Van Cleve 2015: 367). I believe this to be a mistake: although Reid does, indeed, think that there is no such thing as “passive power” (*EAP* 21), he does not say that “speculative powers” are in any way opposed to active power. Van Cleve himself seems puzzled by this classification that he attributes to Reid, since he writes in a footnote: “So he tells us, but would he not regard perception as passive? If so, the speculative powers would include some passive powers.” (Van Cleve (2015: 367)). The speculative powers cannot include any passive powers – that would be oxymoronic – so, they must be active, in the way in which *EIP* posits, at least “in some degree” (Reid, *EIP* 64-65).

There are two speculative powers that everyone – Reid and his commentators – are happy to call ‘active:’ attention and reflection. There is no doubt that they are active, since they are thought to be voluntary. Reid thinks that, while both reflection and consciousness are ways of thinking about the operations of our minds; reflection is the more rational way, which builds on the information consciousness provides. To be able to reflect on what goes on in our minds, at any given moment of time, we must employ our attention, to focus on a particular operation of our mind that we are already aware of by means of consciousness. Simplifying a bit, we could say that reflection obtains when consciousness and attention combine. Thus, the difference between consciousness and reflection is:

like ...the difference between a superficial view of an object which presents itself to the eye, while we are engaged about something else, and that attentive examination which we give to an object when we are wholly employed in surveying it. Attention is a voluntary act; it requires an active exertion to begin and to continue it; and it may be continued as long as we will; but consciousness is involuntary and of no continuance, changing with every thought. (*EIP* 58)

As stated previously, reflection is an acquired power; a habit, in Reid’s terms. It may be acquired when we reach a certain developmental stage, or it may never be acquired, even in the case of neurotypical subjects. For the purposes of everyday life, we rarely need to employ this power and actually think, reflectively, about the operations of our minds. Reid believes that it is useful to acquire and use reflection, but he recognizes that it is difficult to do so. It seems to take skill and practice to acquire this ability that we do not possess as children. We might need to exercise more control than when we acquire the habit of perceiving three-dimensional figure by sight.

The power of reflection upon the operations of their own minds does not appear at all in children. Men must be come to some ripeness of understanding before they are capable of it…Like all our other powers, it is greatly improved by exercise; and until a man has got the habit of attending to the operations of his own mind, he can never have clear and distinct notions of them, nor form any steady judgment concerning them…To acquire this habit, is a work of time and labour…” ( *EIP* 58)

The main thing to note about reflection is that it involves attention; if we do not attend to the operations of our minds, we are not said to reflect upon them. Of course, we may have attention in the absence of reflection, as it happens when we focus our attention on an external object, like a lake or a tree. Whenever we think about internal objects -- the opreations of our mind -- unless we attend to them, we cannot be said to reflect upon them. We might be conscious of such operations, in the sense that we are aware that we are perceiving, or remembering, or imagining something. Attention is a fully active operation of our mind, on this Reidian picture; maybe it is attention that endows reflection with a high degree of activity. Maybe we can use the same picture to understand why Reid thinks that there is some degree of activity in all our speculative powers. This, then, is my proposal: all the speculative powers that we can say are active use attention, in one form or another. In this sense, attention is necessary: the speculative powers draw their active character from the concurrent deployment of attention, alongside them. Let us see how this applies to perception, on the Reidian picture of the mind.

**5. The Active Character of Perception**

Reid does not state explicitly that attention is key to understanding how our minds manage to be always active, to "some degree"; he doesn't offer any other explanation, either. In this section, I will elaborate on the idea that (most) speculative powers derive their active character from an interaction with attention. What I offer here is a rational reconstruction of some of Reid's views, paying close attention to not come into conflict with anything he says explicitly.

In the case of perception, interestingly enough, Reid seems to say that attention is necessary for visually perceiving objects; without attention, some objects do not count as seen (or heard or touched), although they are in the perceiver’s field of vision:

When we look at an object, the circumjacent objects may be seen at the same time, although more obscurely and indistinctly: for the eye hath a considerable field of vision, which it takes in at once. But we attend only to the object we look at. The other objects which fall within the field of vision, are not attended to; and therefore are as if they were not seen. There are many phaenomena of a similar nature, which shew, that the mind may not attend to, and thereby, in some sort, not perceive objects that strike the senses. . . . I have been assured, by persons of the best skill in music, that in hearing a tune upon the harpsichord, when they give attention to the treble, they do not hear the bass; and when they attend to the bass, they do not perceive the air of the treble. (*IHM* 134-135)

A passage like this suggests that unless we voluntarily direct our attention to the objects present in our visual field, something will be lacking from our visual perception of those objects. The most straightforward way of understanding this is to think that visually perceiving an object requires us to be attentively focused on that object, just as reflecting on our mental operation of perception requires us to be attentively focused on that particular mental process, while it is occurring. Seeing an object does not seem to require us to be focused on it, in the same way. This is how I interpret the phrase “they are *as if* they were not seen”. Reid does not seem committed here to say that these objects are not seen, *tout court*; they only seem to be that way.

I am emphasizing this distinction here, not just because of how careful Reid was with using his words, but also because this concern with the role of attention in visual perception is foreshadowing discussions in contemporary psychology, surrounding the phenomenon of blindsight. The original phenomenon of blindsight was first observed in patients with traumatic brain injury, caused by damage to the primary visual cortex V, who, despite reporting that they do not see certain objects in their environment, were able to localize and even discriminate them, when asked to do so (Cowey 2009). The psychologists noticing this for the first time conjectured that these patients were actually seeing the objects they were reaching for, albeit in an unconscious manner, due to their having the respective injuries (Weiskrantz *et al* 1974: 709- 728). Thus, the name “blindsight” was introduced to refer to this phenomenon, in which someone is said to actually “see” a lot more in a scene, than they were initially conscious of. It is not clear that these results generalize to typical subjects, who have not suffered any kind of traumatic brain injuries. Some psychologists believe that a parallel to "blindsight" can be induced in anyone (Kolb & Braun 1995). The experiments in question involve typical subjects being presented with a scene, projected on a screen, for instance. They are then asked whether they have seen a particular feature of the scene (usually they answer negatively). They are then shown the same scene again, projected on the screen in front of them, after being primed where to look for the particular feature (e.g. near the horizon line).

Even though it is controversial whether this phenomenon applies to typical subjects,[[4]](#endnote-4) it can still be taken to show something important about how our vision works: namely, that we have a way of engaging in "subliminal perception” (Schlicht 2012: 310), also known as "unconscious perception" (Block 2015).[[5]](#endnote-5) This might mean that a view like Reid's is inaccurate, since we have some evidence indicating that we *do* perceive things in the absence of conscious attention. To this possible objection, I want to re-direct the reader to the last passage cited above, in which Reid says the objects in our visual field that we are not focused on “are *as if* they were not seen” (*IHM* 134-135). So, the view might go along with the idea that these objects might be seen, in a different, weaker way. The Reidian view, however, would not endorse, correctly, I think, the idea that this shows that we are perceiving these objects unconsciously.

Could the phenomenon of blindsight and its parallels in seeing subjects be an endorsement, rather than an objection to Reid's view on perception? I think so, since it could be taken to mean that to actually be aware that we have seen the feature in question (if indeed the experiments show that that feature is seen), we must be primed to direct our attention to a certain region of the visual field. In this sense, we are said to visually perceive the feature in question when we are consciously attentive to it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Given these considerations, whenever we want to talk, with Reid, about the activity of the mind in cases that we would otherwise think to display pure passivity, we should think about attention as bridging that gap. One may raise an objection regarding the alleged voluntary character of attention. If someone starts paying attention to an event in their environment, they may be distracted by other events that enter their perceptual field. For instance, on my train commute, I may read an article, written in English, about Reid's philosophy of memory. Even though I'm focused and paying attention to my reading, I get distracted by a group of Romanians talking excitedly, in Romanian, about one of their friends' wedding. Despite my best intentions, I start paying attention to what the Romanians are saying, given that this is my native language, and thus it is more difficult to block it. In this way, my attention gets pulled by this other event in my vicinity, without my active, voluntary involvement. There is no question that this can and does happen. This, however, does not show that attention isn't voluntary; on the contrary. To start paying attention, I need to focus on something. Additionally, to continue to pay attention, I must voluntarily continue to focus on that thing. If a scenario like this shifts my attention, it does not count, because the interruption itself is involuntary. The interruption has nothing to do with my exertion; it has, thus, nothing to do with my will. The interruption itself is not my voluntary action.[[7]](#endnote-7) WE can think of a situation like this involving two stages: an involuntary interruption, followed by a voluntary shift of attention. This applies to perception, one of the faculties that has been thought to be entirely passive, tasked with just recording information from the external world. The activity of the mind, in such cases, would be derived from the activity intrinsic in the operation of attention. This is sufficient to make the theory work, as Reid envisioned it.

**6. Reid’s Occasionalism: An Alternative Explanation of Our Mind's Activity**

The explication of Reid's view of the active character of the mind that I offered so far is not the only possible one. Jaffro 2014 offers an alternative interpretation of what it means, for Reid, to say that the speculative powers of our minds always involve some degree of activity. He argues that when we use these powers, traditionally thought to be passive, we should think of them as actions "in the full sense, although they are not -- or not entirely -- our actions; if so, then, they must be the actions of someone else, or depend on the actions of someone else (Jaffro 2014: 209). Whose actions can they be, if not ours? Our maker's, according to Jaffro's interpretation of Reid. He cites some representative passages from the *EAP* that could be taken to say that our "inexplicable" actions (or not actions at all) depend on our maker, just like animals' do, more generally:

Numberless instances might be given of things done by animals without any previous conception of what they are to do; without the intention of doing it. They act by some inward blind impulse, of which the efficient cause is hid from us; and though there is an end evidently intended by the action, this intention is not in the animal, but in its Maker. Other things are done by habit, which cannot properly be called voluntary. We shut our eyes several times every minute while we are awake; no man is conscious of willing this every time he does it. (*EAP,* 48)

In a different place, Reid writes:

I see no reason to think, that we shall ever be able to assign the physical cause, either of instinct, or of the power of habit. Both seem to be parts of our original constitution. Their end and use is evident; but we can assign no cause to them, but the will of him who made us. (*EAP,* 90)

On the interpretation that Jaffro develops, all operations of our minds (the powers of the understanding, as well as the powers of the will) turn out to be actions: “some of them, which consist in the exertions of the agent’s active power, are the agent’s actions, [while] most of them, namely all the exertions which are in the agent without being exertions of the agent’s powers, are the actions of God or actions planned by God” (Jaffro 2014: 209).

This interpretation attributes a moderate kind of occasionalism to Reid: our powers *depend* on God’s general plan of action expressed through the laws of nature. God does not intervene every time we are blinking to will our blinking; it's enough that God prescribed a particular law of nature according to which human beings must be blinking as often as we are. One could, however, object that, since the laws of nature must be kept in existence and actually applied to things in the world (otherwise we just have inert laws), God's intervention is quite direct. Every time we blink, the objector holds, God is really involved, by being the active cause, and applying a certain law of nature to our eyes. Several scholars do attribute a strong version of occasionalism to Reid, based on several passages from Reid (Tuggy 2000 and Yaffe 2004). Others, however, think that the laws can be activated but once and that is enough to ensure a general kind of contribution by God, but nothing more is required (Van Cleve 2015, in addition to Jaffro 2014).

Here are some representative passages that scholars have cited to argue that Reid thought some type of occasionalism is true:

But whether he [God] acts immediately in the production of [events], or by subordinate intelligent agents, or by instruments that are unintelligent . . . I apprehend to be mysteries placed beyond the limits of human knowledge. (*EAP* 28)

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. (*EAP* 40)

It might not be directly obvious that Reid endorses occasionalism here, but, given that we can have no knowledge of the intermediary steps in some of our actions, Jaffro believes that an explanation that says that God is the author of that action, with the effect that certain things are happening to us, is the most plausible way of understanding what Reid is saying. Part of the explanation, however, is that the notion of "power" turns out to be ambiguous, as Jaffro (2014): 205) explains. According to Jaffro, on the one hand, "power" must stand for a capacity for voluntary operations (active power). This is the regular notion of power. However, we also must understand "power", to refer to a capacity for involuntary human operations, but voluntary divine operations. In this sense, when I see a tree, I have the power for involuntary processes to be activated in me, while God has the power to activate such processes in me. Beside there not being any textual indication that Reid believed that “power” is ambiguous in this way, I do not think that perception turns out to be active in any relevant way, even if we attribute this interpretation to Reid. My perception may turn out to be active for God; it's God's activity, after all. But, my perception of a tree is quite passive, from my point of view, and in the dispute regarding the activity or passivity of the intellectual operations of human minds, this is what matters. On such an interpretation, it turns out that my perception of a tree is as passive as the existence of the tree itself, even though both the tree's existence and my perception of the tree are effects of God's activity.

The above passages, that Jaffro, Yaffe and the others take to support God's occasionalism, are puzzling. There are two ways of resolving them, on my interpretation. We could think that Reid is simply stating that we have no actual knowledge of the necessary connection between cause and effect. As such, we simply recognize that these are mysteries of the creation (or of evolution, etc.) On the other hand, we could think that Reid is saying more here and attempts to defend some kind of concurrence theory. This would mean that God is the first cause that acts, somewhere behind the scenes and unbeknown to us, while the human mind is the second cause that becomes active in the very act of paying attention. For any kind of activity, both causes are required. In this way, we still don't have an explanation of the necessary connection between cause and effect, but we are in a position to identify, in theory, all causal steps. In the end, this allows Reid to say that the human mind is active, not passive, in the relevant sense.

**7. Conclusion**

We should have a better understanding of the difference between mental operation, power, acquired power (or habit), and capacity in Reid. Whether we believe that weak occasionalism can explain the distinction between our active and speculative powers, in the way envisaged by Jaffro, or not, we should still be able to appreciate the importance of this discussion for moral responsibility. We are agents endowed with voluntary active power and our worth as moral agents depends on our having freely willed our actions, which, in turn, depends on our experiencing of the exertion of active powers. Since Reid argues that the powers of the understanding are active “in some degree”, we are faced with explaining how exactly this can be reconciled with the apparent lack of voluntary operation in perception, sensation, or consciousness. One way of dealing with this issue is to claim that attention is part of the active powers of the understanding, and it makes them active, as I have done. Another possibility is to attribute a non-radical version of occasionalism to Reid. The problem, in this case, is that we must expose an alleged ambiguity in Reid's usage of the word "power": it sometimes stands for voluntary human actions, while other times it stands for involuntary human actions (but voluntary Godly actions). This attribution of ambiguity seems ad-hoc and not as useful in drawing the distinction between what is active and what is passive -- if anything -- in our minds. On this interpretation, it turns out that, strictly speaking, our minds are passive when the speculative operations are employed; whatever "activity" we can attribute to them here is derived from God's mind's activity. In other words, not much activity at all. Thus, I believe that the explanation I offered works better at uncovering what Reid might have thought when he was saying that our minds are always active.[[8]](#endnote-8)

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1. See, for instance, the arguments developed by Miller 1984: 22 and by Demeter 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Reid scholarship has dealt extensively with the distinction between original perception and acquired perception, so I will not dwell on this issue here. I want to draw attention to certain issues that are relevant for our more general understanding of *habits*, in the Reidian paradigm. For more details on original vs. acquired perception, see Copenhaver 2010 and Van Cleve 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Reid might not have had all details correctly, but it is nowadays believed that infants start having depth perception around 5 months of age (Soska & Johnson 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Morgan, *et al* 1997: 401- 402 argue that they could not replicate the results of the experiments alleging the existence of blindsight in seeing subjects. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The existence of unconscious perception is also debated in the psychological and philosophical literature on consciousness studies. For more, see, for instance, Block & Phillips 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In Folescu 2021, I explain in detail how exactly attention helps us visually perceive objects; what kind of attention is required; and how Reid's view is foreshadowing psychological research on the feature integration theory of attention, performed initially by Treisman 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. I thank several audience members at talks given on this material, for pressing me to explain this issue, in particular Andrew Melnyk and Stephan Schmidt. I thank Alex Radulescu for helping me deal with this potential objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I would like to thank the editors of this volume, Domink Perler and Sebastian Bender, for inviting me to contribute a chapter on Reid's understanding of powers and abilities. I would also like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, for providing me with time to think about these issues, via their fellowship for advanced researchers program. Material included here was presented as several conferences and I would like to thank the audience members for their helpful suggestions. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)