
The Philosophical Quarterly

AN ESSAY BY THOMAS REID ON THE CONCEPTION OF POWER

Editorial preface

The following essay is by one of Scotland's greatest philosophers, Thomas Reid (1710–96). It has not previously been published, and it is presented now in this centennial year of the Scots Philosophical Club, some two hundred and nine years after the date of its writing. The Club is joint proprietor (with the University of St Andrews) of *The Philosophical Quarterly*, and with this issue, the first of the new millennium, the journal embarks on its second half-century. The Club and the *Quarterly* stand in a long line of Scottish academic, literary and scientific institutions. The Universities of Aberdeen and of Glasgow, in both of which Reid taught, and the University of St Andrews, from where the *Quarterly* is edited, all predate the Reformation. Reid was also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which was established in 1783 and continues today as a forum for philosophical and scientific debate, numbering members of the current *Quarterly* editorial board among its Fellowship. Such continuities add to the sense, encouraged by the range and manner of his philosophy, that Reid is a near companion in enquiry.

The subject of the present essay bears upon the understanding of the operations of nature, and to that extent it belongs to the philosophy of science – though it also bears significantly on general metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, and even, in its later stages, upon the the philosophy of religion. In it Reid revisits themes explored in his published *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788) (especially essay I, 'Of Active Power in General', and essay IV, 'Of the Liberty of Moral Agents'), and in his private correspondence with Lord Kames and Dr James Gregory. As in those writings, Reid's style and methods are fresh and remarkably modern; and the interest of what he has to say about the concepts of natural power and voluntary agency is undiminished by the passage of the years.

The following text is transcribed, with minimal editing, from the manuscript in the collection of the University of Aberdeen (MS 2131/2/II/2). This is in Reid's own hand and is dated March 13, 1792 – when he was eighty-one years old and retired from the Chair of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow. In his small but excellent study of Reid's life and work, A. Campbell Fraser quotes from this manuscript, and refers to it as '[Reid's] last expression of reflective thought', *Thomas Reid* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1898), p. 119. In 1795 Reid read a scientific paper on 'Muscular Motion' to the Glasgow Literary Society, and two years prior to that presented to the same society 'Observations on the Danger of Political Innovation'; but 'Of Power' does appear to have been Reid's last piece of philosophical writing. The paper 'Of Muscular Motion in the Human Body' has recently been published in Paul Wood (ed.), *Thomas Reid on the Animate Creation: Papers Relating to the Life Sciences* (Edinburgh UP, 1995), pp. 103–24. The present essay can be expected to appear again in some further volume of collected philosophical papers.

In editing the text for a philosophical readership I have judged it apt to convert Reid's frequent capitalization into lower case and to insert quotation marks where he refers to a word such as 'power' or 'cause'. I have also modernized spelling which might otherwise have proved distracting (e.g., in 'physick' and 'conjoynd'), though I have retained the original where it is still familiar (e.g., 'shewed' and 'connexion'). At several points Reid mentions figures whose work is not well known to present-day readers, or refers to still famous persons by what are now unfamiliar styles, e.g., 'L. Bacon' (i.e., Lord [Francis] Bacon). The latter issue has been dealt with by adopting current conventions, the former by footnotes to the text. No notes appear in Reid's manuscript. The punctuation, by contrast, is almost entirely Reid's own, the exceptions being instances where sense was at risk from evidently eccentric or erroneous breaks or continuations. There are one or two places where I have inserted words for the sake of sense or fluency. These additions are indicated by square brackets.

The essay is published by kind permission of the University of Aberdeen, which owns the manuscript. Thanks are due to the staff of Historic Collections there and to the Department of Philosophy's Reid Project, and to the Editorial Chairman of *The Philosophical Quarterly* for supporting the idea of this publication. The purpose is not one of piety (alone), for it is hoped that readers will engage this essay as they might the work of any contemporary philosopher. Happily, the clarity of Reid's prose is liable to assist with this.

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JOHN HALDANE

OF POWER

BY THOMAS REID

How men get the conception of power is a question of some difficulty. It is not an object either of sense or of consciousness. Locke rashly determined that we get this idea [in] both these ways. Hume shewed that it can be got in neither of them and thence rashly concluded that there is no such conception in the human mind.

Every voluntary exertion to produce an event seems to imply a persuasion in the agent that he has power to produce the event. A deliberate exertion to produce an event implies a conception of the event, and some belief or hope that his exertion will be followed by it. This I think cannot be denied. The consequence is that a conception of power is antecedent to every deliberate exertion of will to produce an event. We have reason to think that voluntary exertions are as early as any other operation of the thinking being, and if they be all deliberate, that is, intended to produce an event which we believe to be in our power, we should be led to think a conception of power, and even a belief that such and such events are in our power, are innate, [or] at least antecedent to every act of volition. But I am rather inclined to think that our first exertions are instinctive, without any distinct conception of the event that is to follow, consequently without will to produce that event. And that finding by experience that such exertions are followed by such events, we learn to make the exertion voluntarily and deliberately, as often as we desire to produce the event. And when we know or believe that the event depends upon our exertion, we have the conception of power in ourselves to produce that event.

This account of the origin of our conception of power, makes it to be the fruit of experience and not innate; though it must be as early as any deliberate voluntary exertion to produce a certain event. This account likewise supposes that an exertion is something different from a deliberate will to produce the event by that exertion, and that there may be exertion without will. It must be acknowledged that these two are so conjoined, when we

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Every voluntary exertion to produce an Event seems to imply a persuasion in the Agent that he has power to produce the Event. A deliberate Exertion to produce an Event, implies a conception of the Event, and some belief or Hope that his Exertion will be followed by it. This I think cannot be denied. The consequence is that a conception of Power is antecedent to every deliberate Exertion of ~~the~~ Will to produce an Event. We have reason to think that voluntary Exertions are as early as any other operation of the thinking Beings and if they be all deliberate, that is intended to produce an Event which we believe to be in our Power, we should be led to think a Conception of Power, & even a belief that such and such Events are in our power, are innate, at least antecedent to every Act of Volition. But I am rather inclined to think that our first Exertions are instinctive, without any distinct conception of the Event that is to follow, consequently without will to produce that Event. And that finding by Experience that such exertions are followed by such Events, we learn to make the exertion voluntarily & deliberately, as often as we desire to produce the event; If this be true And when we know or believe that the Event depends upon our Exertion, we have the conception of power in our selves to produce that Event.

This Account of the origin of our conception of Power, makes it to be the fruit of Experience and not innate; though it must be as early as any deliberate voluntary exertion to produce a certain Event. This Account likewise supposes that this Exertion is something different from a deliberate will to produce the Event by that Exertion, & that there may be Exertion without Will. It must be acknowledged that these two are so conjoined, when we have got some knowledge of the extent of our Power, that we find it very difficult to distinguish them. In this distinction is supposed in the account we have given of the origin of our conception of Power, it may be proper to give some other instances which confirm it.

When I will to rise & walk immediately, the Exertion seems inseparably conjoined with the volition, & both appear as one & the same Act of Mind: But I resolve to rise and walk an hour hence. This is a deliberate act of Will, as well as the will to do it immediately; but no exertion follows for an hour. Here the Will is disjoined from the Exertion therefore they are different. Again I will to walk for half an hour. The Exertion immediately succeeds, During

Facsimile (1:4 scale) of the first page of Reid's manuscript, reproduced by kind permission of Aberdeen University Library.

have got some knowledge of the extent of our power, that we find it very difficult to distinguish them. As this distinction is supposed in the account we have given of the origin of our conception of power, it may be proper to give some other instances which confirm it.

When I will to rise and walk immediately, the exertion seems inseparably conjoined with the volition, and both appear as one and the same act of mind: but I resolve to rise and walk an hour hence. This is a deliberate act of will, as well as the will to do it immediately; but no exertion follows for an hour. Here the will is disjoined from the exertion therefore they are different.

Again I will to walk for half an hour. The exertion immediately succeeds. During my walk, my thought is wholly occupied, on some other subject than the walk, so that there is not a thought of it or will concerning it at present in my mind; yet the exertion of walking continues. In this instance there is exertion without will, as in the last there was will without exertion.

Volition, I think does not admit of degrees. It is complete in itself and incapable of more and less. Exertion on the other hand may be great or small or middling. Therefore volition and exertion are not the same. If so, there may be exertion without deliberate will; and experience of the consequence of such exertions may at the same time give us the conception of power and teach us that the events known to be consequent upon such exertions are in our power.

Supposing we were unable to give any account how we first got the conception of power, this would be no good reason for denying that we have it. One might as well prove that he had no eyes in his head for this reason[.] that neither he nor any other person could tell how they came there.

That certain events are produced when we will to produce them is a matter of every day and every hour's experience. This may give us a conception of power in ourselves, as early as we have occasion for it. And I see no other way we can possibly acquire it.

It is easy and natural to think that other men have such a power as we find in ourselves. We judge of things unknown by what we know, and as we first know by consciousness that we think and act and feel pain and pleasure, we are by analogy rather than by reasoning led to think the same of other men; and indeed not only of other men but of other things. It is a discovery made by degrees, and by observation and instruction, that many of the things about us, are so very unlike to us as to be perfectly inanimate and unthinking. It is a just observation of the Abbé Raynal¹ that savages, whenever they perceive motion which they cannot account for, there they

¹ Reid is here referring to Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (1713–96), author of *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770).

conceive a soul. And I think the structure of all languages, in the genders of nouns, and the voices of verbs affords a strong proof of this. ‘There is’ says Mr Hume (*Nat[ural] History of Religion* Sect. 3) ‘an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious’.

I apprehend that most (if not all) ambiguous words had at first one meaning, and in process of time have been used in other meanings, which were conceived to have some similitude, analogy, or some other relation to their first meaning. And it may happen that the original meaning from which the others were derived, may become less common than some of the others. Dr Johnston [*sic*] gives thirteen meanings of the word *power* and some of these he expresses by three or four different words which are not perfectly synonymous. And he certainly does not enumerate all the meanings in which it is used.

So far indeed is this word extended, that we ascribe power, not only to thinking beings who may produce some effect by will and exertion, but to beings believed to be perfectly inanimate and passive, and not only to beings or substances, but to qualities, relations and even to mere privations, such as darkness, ignorance, [and] want.

If the observations of Raynal and Hume, mentioned above, be just, we may the more easily account for the ascribing of power to things which are now believed to be inanimate, though perhaps in the first stages of society they were considered as animated beings.

Although it were granted that all the different meanings of the word ‘power’ have been derived from its original meaning before mentioned, (which indeed I take to be the case) it does not follow from this, that all those meanings are *species* of one and the same *genus*, and that there is one general nature in them all joined with some specific difference. It is perhaps impossible to give a reason why the word ‘power’ has been applied to what are called the powers of numbers, such as the square, cube, etc. Yet this singular meaning of ‘power’ is a *genus* of which there are innumerable *species* well known and distinctly conceived by mathematicians.

The origin I have above assigned to our first and most proper conception of power, is, I think, admitted by philosophers, if we except Mr Hume, who maintains that we have no notion of power at all, and that it is a word without any meaning.

The word ‘cause’ is not only as ambiguous as the word ‘power’ but has a very near relation to it. And perhaps, if we were to give a general definition of it, we might say that a cause is that which has power to produce the effect. If in this definition the word ‘power’ be taken in all its latitude, I

apprehend the definition may apply to every thing that is called a cause as well as the τὸ ἐξ ὀδῆ, or *the principle of change*.

I think however that there is an original and most proper conception of a cause from which all its other meanings have been deduced, and that this is very nearly allied to the original and proper conception of power.

When we attend to objects without us we see innumerable changes or events, some constantly conjoined with a certain effect which succeeds; but we perceive no real connexion between them. Antecedent to experience we should see no ground to think that heat will turn ice into water any more than that it will turn water into ice. Mr Hume's reasoning on this subject in [the] *Essay on Necessary Connexions*² would have convinced me if I had not been convinced before by Sir Isaac Newton. That author resolves the whole science of physics into two problems. The first, from the phenomena of nature to discover by induction the laws of nature. The second, from the laws of nature to explain or account for the phenomena of nature. Newton indeed is the first author in whom I have found this idea of the science of physics. Former authors ancient and modern not excepting Francis Bacon, have conceived it to be the province of physics to discover the causes of the phenomena of nature. Physics according to Bacon is either contemplative or operative. The first is *inquisitio causarum*, which he also divides into two parts, the first enquires into the efficient and material causes, the second into the formal and final. According to Newton, when physics shall be carried to the utmost perfection, there would not be found in the whole science such a conception as that of a cause; nothing but laws of nature, which are general facts grounded on experience, and phenomena which are particular facts, included in the more general, and consequent upon them. Some indeed call the laws of nature, 'causes'. But surely no man that thinks can believe that laws of nature can produce any phenomenon unless there be some agent that puts the law in execution.

Since therefore there is nothing external to us from which we can draw the conception of an efficient or productive cause, it must be deduced from something in our own mind.

We are conscious that we have power to produce certain events by our will and exertion. The conviction of this power is implied in the very voluntariness of exertion, for no man makes an exertion to do what he does not think to be in his power. In our own voluntary actions, therefore, we have a conviction and consequently a conception of efficient or productive power in ourselves. And this conception we had so early that it must be the work of nature.

² See Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, §7, 'Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion'.

To this account of the origin of our conception of productive power or efficiency Mr Hume objects, that though we find a constant conjunction between our volitions and certain events, we discover this only by experience, and see no necessary connexion between our will and the motion of our body which follows it, any more than we see between heat and the melting of ice, and therefore as the last gives us no conception of productive power, but solely of constant conjunction, so neither can the first.

To this I answer that if a man believed that in heat there was a will to melt ice, he would undoubtedly believe that there is in heat a real efficient power to produce that effect, though he were ignorant how or by what latent process the effect is produced. So we, knowing that certain effects depend on our will, impute to ourselves the power of producing them, though there may be some latent process between the volition and the production which we do not know. So a child may know that a bell is rung by pulling a certain peg, though he does not yet know how that operation is connected with the ringing of the bell, and when he can move that peg he has a perfect conviction that he has power to ring the bell.

I apprehend, that our belief, that things which have always been found to be conjoined in time past, will continue to be conjoined in time to come, is not grounded on reasoning, but may rather be called instinctive, like our belief in testimony. We believe in both these cases before we have the power of reasoning. And I can perceive no premises from which the conclusion believed can be logically inferred when reason is ripe. Our instinctive belief of what is to happen would often and does often lead us into mistakes, though highly necessary before we have the use of reason, and when we learn to reason we regulate this belief by just rules of induction. But the rules of induction, or of reasoning from experience, do not produce the belief of what is to come, they serve only to regulate and restrain it. In like manner our reasoning about testimony serves only to restrain and regulate the unlimited belief which we have in it by nature.

Thus I think it appears that, from our own active exertions, we very early get the conception of active power, and of an efficient cause. But it is a very different question how we come to be persuaded that every event and every thing that has a beginning must have an efficient cause. This belief cannot be got from experience, because we perceive no efficient cause in one tenth part of the events that fall under our view. Besides no necessary truth can derive its evidence from experience. This has been received as a necessary truth by all men learned and unlearned from the beginning of the world, till Mr Hume called it in question, because he could not perceive a necessary agreement of the ideas of the proposition. I have said what occurred to me to prove it to be a first principle (*Essays* Vol. 1. Chap[ter] on the first

Principles of Necessary Truth).³ But let it be observed that by a cause I mean only an efficient cause which by its active power produces the effect. It is still another question whether active or productive power can, or cannot be in an inanimate subject.

With regard to this question there have been different opinions among philosophers. It is not easy to determine what kind of being it was which the Peripatetics called 'Nature', to whose operation they ascribed all that we call the *phenomena of nature*. It is certain that Cudworth, a very acute metaphysician, thought that the Deity in the government of the material world, employed certain immaterial beings which he called 'plastic natures', who are endowed with active power but without wisdom or intelligence who are the proper efficient causes of generation and other natural phenomena.⁴ The famous J. Le Clerc defended this notion of Cudworth and Bayle attacked it.⁵ And after many replies and duplies⁶ neither was able to convince the other. To me Bayle seems to have much the advantage in the argument. I conceive it to be a first principle, that a complex work which in all its parts is admirably adapted to a certain purpose, must have been contrived by an intelligent being who had that purpose in view and knew how [to] adapt the means to the end. Nor do I see how a regular well contrived work, may not be produced by a dance of atoms as well [as] by a being who has active power without intelligence. And it seems to me very strange that philosophers who thought the system of Epicurus too ridiculous to deserve refutation, should yet ascribe the phenomena of nature to unintelligent causes.

I believe, not the Peripatetics only but the vulgar in all ages have been prone to attribute real efficiency or productive power to unintelligent and even to inanimate things, and that when they say that heat melts ice, and that cold freezes water, they conceive the heat and the cold as really efficient causes, though inanimate. This belief of the vulgar seems to be as general, as that the earth is at rest and that all the heavenly bodies go round it in twenty-four hours.

³ See Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, essay vi, ch. 6, 'First Principles of Necessary Truth'.

⁴ Reid is here alluding to the spiritualist interpretation of nature advanced by Ralph Cudworth in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). Given what Reid says earlier, it is interesting to find Cudworth writing that 'we are certain of the existence of our own souls, partly from an inward consciousness of our own cogitations, and partly from that principle of reason that nothing cannot act. And the existence of other souls is manifest to us, from their effects upon their respective bodies, their motions, actions, and discourse' (tr. and ed. J. Harrison, London: 1845, Vol. II, p. 515).

⁵ Jean Le Clerc (1657–1737) publicized Cudworth's ideas in a series of journals he established, including *Bibliothèque universelle* and *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne*.

⁶ Obsolete term in Scots law meaning a reply to a reply (answered in turn by a 'triply').

Leibniz taught that the whole creation, bodies as well as minds, consist of monads, or individual substances, each of which was so made at first by the creator that, like a watch wound up, it has within itself the cause of all the changes it shall ever undergo. And though no one substance or monad acts upon another yet all keep time to one another, by a pre-established harmony, so as to produce the phenomena of the universe. In this system no cause whatsoever (excepting the Deity the first cause of all) produces any effect, but upon itself. Even the Deity has no occasion to interpose in the government of the world after he once made it except in the case of miracles. He made it at first so perfect as to go on of itself without needing his helping hand. No one part of it does in reality receive either benefit or harm from any other part. Every man from the time of his creation to eternity would have done and suffered all that he really does and suffers, although there had not been another being in the Universe. He would have enjoyed the vicissitude of day and night though there had been no sun nor moon. But the sun and moon rise and set, by a pre-established harmony, in perfect correspondence with that day and night which succeed each other in his mind, from its own internal frame, without being influenced in the least by anything external to him.

In this system, there may be causes in the sense of David Hume. But proper and efficient causes there are none in the universe but one, I mean the Deity. Nor was there ever any power exerted but in the act of creation, or in miracles.

The modern system of necessity advanced by some of the disciples of Dr Priestley, which makes every action of the Deity to be necessary, although I take it to be a very natural consequence of denying all liberty in human actions, excludes all power out of the universe. For power and necessity are contradictory. And according to this system power is an attribute which cannot possibly exist in any subject.

To return to the question whether active or productive power can be in an inanimate subject.

If the account before given of the origins of our notion of power be just, it seems to follow that will is necessarily implied in the notion of power. Volition and what follows upon our volitions is all that we conceive to be in our power. What a man never willed cannot be imputed to him as his action. A man's power is measured by what he can do if he will. This is the measure of power when we speak of power in any intelligent or animated being. In this sense, which I take to be the only proper sense of the word, it is evident that a being which has no will can have no power. And when we impute power to dead matter it must be understood in some popular or analogical, and not in the proper sense. Power in the proper sense is under

the command of him who has the power, and we cannot infer the act from the power because there is no necessary connection between them. It is otherwise with regard to the powers we ascribe to inanimate beings. Even when our volitions are compelled by an irresistible motive, such as the fear of immediate death, or the violence of torture, the action is not imputed to the man or considered as an exertion of his power, but as a necessary consequence of fear or torture, necessity and power being incompatible.

The powers therefore which in a vague and popular sense we ascribe to inanimate things differ from power taken in the proper sense in two things [respects]; the last implies volition and cannot exist without it, but the first is not accompanied with any volition but is in beings which have neither understanding nor will. Another difference between the power that is properly so called and that which is not, is that the first implies no necessary connection with the act. Because a man has the power of walking it does not follow that he walks at this moment; on the contrary a power to walk implies a power not to walk. If a man has the distemper called 'St Vitus Dance' we don't say that he has the power of moving, but that he moves necessarily, or that he has not the power to be at rest. For power properly so called is inconsistent with necessity. On the contrary the powers which we ascribe to inanimate things are always conjoined with necessity, and must, without a miracle, be exerted to their utmost whenever the circumstances concur which by the laws of nature are necessary to their exertion.

Hence it appears that power when ascribed to an intelligent being is a thing essentially different from the powers ascribed to inanimated beings. And their definition is as different as their nature. When an event depends upon the will of an intelligent being, we say it is in his power. And though he have no will nor inclination to produce the event, [and] though it should never be produced, it is not the less in his power upon that account. His power is exerted only according to his will, and when he does not will to exert it, it is dormant and produces no effect.

When we ascribe power to inanimate things, we mean nothing more than a constant conjunction by the laws of nature which experience discovers between the event which we call the effect and something which goes before it. Thus we say the sun has power to retain the planets in their orbits, heat has power to melt lead, and cold to freeze water. If the ignorant be led by the ambiguity of the word, to conceive any efficient power in the sun, the heat, or the cold to produce the effects ascribed to them, this is a vulgar error which philosophy corrects. By what agent those effects are really produced we know not, but we have good reason to believe that they cannot be produced by inanimate matter.

This distinction of the proper, and the vague or popular meaning of the word 'power' is important in the intricate question about liberty and necessity. The defenders of necessity must maintain either that there is no such distinction, and that 'power' can have no meaning but that of a constant conjunction of that which we call the cause with the effect, which is David Hume's opinion; or if they admit that we can conceive a power which is really efficient, they must say that there neither is, nor can be any such power in the universe.