



**Thomas Reid. *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*. James A. Harris and Knud Haakonssen, Eds.**

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## *Book Reviews*

Thomas Reid. *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*. Edited by James A. Harris and Knud Haakonssen. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. Pp. xxv + 388. ISBN 978-0-271-03789-9, Cloth, \$139.95.

For anyone interested in Reid's moral psychology and ethics, the new edition of his *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* is a welcome addition to the Edinburgh Collection. This book, first announced as the sixth, finally arrives as the seventh of a ten volume collection, The Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, edited by Knud Haakonssen, which contains Reid's published and unpublished writings. During his lifetime, Reid published three volumes: *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788). With the most recent addition of Harris and Haakonssen's edition of the *Active Powers*, all three of these books are now available in a clear and well-documented critical edition. This new volume in the Edinburgh Edition has already become the standard critical edition of Reid's *Active Powers*.

The editors begin this volume with an instructive account of the historical background of Reid's ideas, the genesis of his work, a brief description of his method of argumentation, and comments about the reception of the *Active Powers*. The introduction is followed by the critical text of Reid's *Active Powers*, in which

Reid presents his account of human moral agency, and the volume ends with a bibliography and a useful index of names.

In the introduction, the editors argue that this collection of essays has its roots in Reid's earlier intellectual life, with themes that Reid first started to develop in the 1730s, when he was regent at King's College in Aberdeen. However, Harris and Haakonssen point out, the greatest number of notes and manuscripts on the subjects found in these essays date from the time when Reid held a professorship for moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow (which started in 1764). Haakonssen and Harris report that among the courses Reid taught in Glasgow, one stands out as lasting the longest and including the greatest number of lectures: pneumatology (philosophy of mind). Reid found this topic to be so important because he believed it was basic to ethics and politics. The lectures for this course, in which he develops his moral psychology, constitute a significant part of the *Active Powers*. During his years at the University of Glasgow, Reid also presented a series of discourses at the Glasgow Literary Society. Some of the arguments discussed in these papers became central to the important Essay III of the *Active Powers*.

According to Haakonssen and Harris, two factors seem to have had a major influence on the development of the arguments and views Reid presents in the *Active Powers*. The first is Reid's criticism of David Hume's moral theory, sentimentalism, together with a rebuttal of Joseph Priestly's necessitarianism, both viewed, according to the editors' understanding of Reid, as resurrections of the ancient Epicurean philosophy. Against this background, Reid develops his own views about the nature of non-rational and rational principles of action (or motives) and about the liberty of moral agents. The second factor is an essay competition for which Reid appears to have prepared several sets of manuscripts. Although these manuscripts bear the name of the competition, Haakonssen and Harris find no evidence that Reid actually submitted an essay to the contest. Even so, parts of Essay IV of the *Active Powers*—especially the three arguments in defence of moral liberty—reflect the content of these manuscripts. The introduction ends with instructive information about the first publication and reception of the *Active Powers*, which was among the dozen most frequently acquired works of Scottish Enlightenment Philosophy, and which appeared in twenty-one library subscriptions in the early nineteenth century.

In the critical text, which follows the introduction, Reid presents his account of the human mind as it is involved in free moral action. Reid had presented his views about the intellectual powers of the human mind (perception, belief, memory, consciousness, etc.) in his earlier *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*. His aim in the five essays of the *Active Powers* is to offer an account of moral agency. Man alone (by which Reid refers to human beings, as opposed to brute animals) is capable of self-government. For Reid active power, in general, is the ability to

choose and to govern oneself according to practical reasons. A being's active power is thus the capacity to be an agent. The particular active powers are the different parts of the human psychology that play a role in human agency, such as reason, the passions, conscience, and the will. The study of human active power and of human moral psychology deserve our attention, according to Reid, since "every man must acknowledge, that to act properly is much more valuable than to think justly or reason acutely" (EAP, 6).

Essay I is an examination of the nature of man's active power, man's capacity or power to act. Reid points out that it is impossible to offer a precise account of this active power since it is not a species of a more general kind. Still, Reid offers several observations about the nature of man's active power and our beliefs about this power. This essay also contains a discussion of Locke's and Hume's opinions concerning the idea of power, followed by a discussion about the nature of efficient causes, which, for Reid, are substances endowed with will and understanding.

In Essay II, Reid offers a series of observations concerning the will, which he regards as a power to determine how a man shall act. Reid also examines how different motives influence the will, ending with a discussion of voluntary acts of mind such as attention, deliberation, and fixed resolution.

Essay III is by far the longest and perhaps most important essay, as the editors suggest. This essay stands at the core of Reid's moral psychology and contains a description of the different motives or incitements that, according to Reid, influence agents to act. The last category of motives consists of the rational principles of action, which are practical reasons *per se*. These normative requirements are demands of prudence and of morals. Reid argues that perceiving the demands of morals presupposes a moral faculty and that moral worth consists in acting in accordance with moral demands.

In Essay IV, Reid turns to the topic of the liberty of moral agents to act according to the different motives that influence their wills. After elucidating the concepts of moral liberty, necessity, and cause, Reid offers three arguments in which he tries to show that man has power over his actions and volitions. In the final chapters of this essay, Reid offers objections to the arguments for necessity. Reid ends the essay with a discussion of the problem of evil (whether the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of an all-powerful and benevolent God).

In Essay V, Reid draws a list of the different moral principles. These are necessary principles of common sense, according to Reid, that men take for granted in everyday life and that form the basis for all moral reasoning and argumentation. Reid sets out to defend his explicitly non-Humean views in the last four chapters of this essay. The ideas that Reid defends here are that morally worthy actions are performed with moral intention, that justice is a natural rather than an artificial virtue, that Hume misunderstood the nature of obligations and contracts, and

that moral judgments imply real judgments (since they are propositional attitudes which can be true or false) about matters of fact.

Reid scholars have awaited the publication of this volume with anticipation and expectation. Indeed, until its appearance, inquiry into Reid's moral philosophy and philosophy of action required either working through Sir William Hamilton's seventh edition of *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.* (2 vols. Edinburgh: McLahlan & Stewart, 1872), with its fine print and numerous comments, or finding a copy of the out-of print Baruch A. Brody edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), which consists of a copy of an 1813 edition together with an introduction by Brody. Brody's edition has the advantage of offering a clear and uncluttered presentation of the text but with the disadvantage of lacking an index and references. A contemporary, clear, well-documented, and indexed edition like the Haakonssen and Harris edition was, therefore, more than necessary.

The editors' introduction is of use for the Reid scholar as well as for the person who is not well acquainted with Reid's view, and anyone coming to Reid for the first time will find the description of Reid's historical and philosophical context useful for situating Reid among his contemporaries. Of particular interest to Reid scholars and those working on Hume, however, is an original claim Haakonssen and Harris defend in the introduction concerning the background to the last four chapters of the last Essay. They argue that the formation of those last chapters is more complicated than might be assumed. Reid writes that the substance of these chapters "was wrote long ago, and read in a literary society, with a view to justify some points of morals from metaphysical objections urged against them in the writings of DAVID HUME, Esq." (EAP, 289). The society Reid is here referring to is the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, of which he was an active participant between 1751 and 1764. However, the editors point out, these chapters make extensive use of Reid's later Glasgow lectures on jurisprudence. Moreover, contrarily to the first four Essays there is no preserved final manuscript for Essay V. There is also no preserved revised set of Society papers for the last four chapters, like those found for Essays III and IV. These factors, together with the existence of several of Reid's letters to James Gregory about Reid's plans to rework portions of the *Active Powers*, prompt the editors to speculate that Reid significantly reworked these last chapters right before finalizing the published copy. In light of these facts, the claim that the last four chapters were under revision right before the first publication of the *Active Powers* is a plausible and interesting conclusion. If the editors are correct on this point, Reid continued to grapple with Hume's moral philosophy until the very end, and he continued to view his own account as a critical response to Hume's. This point should be of interest to anyone curious about Reid's account as well as to anyone curious about the reception of Hume's thought.

Throughout the text, the editors' notes are helpful and often necessary without being too numerous. Reid does not always cite the authors or passages to which he refers, but, as the editors point out, he included such details in his manuscripts. Scholars will be pleased to find this information in the notes and references of the critical edition. The reader is also often helpfully directed to Reid's sources and manuscripts, all of which are now available online. Finally, the index of names will make it easy for anyone working in the history of modern philosophy to look up Reid's discussions of other philosophers.

One slight problem with this edition, other than the relatively high price, is that a reader who is not familiar with Reid is left to work his or her own way through the *Essays* without a philosophical overview or summary. A general outline of the ideas developed in the *Active Powers* and a summary of Reid's account of moral agency might have been helpful for a more general audience. This slight drawback could have positive consequences, however, since the lack of a summary might encourage the novice reader to plunge right into Reid's own text.

The Haakonssen and Harris edition is the first new edition of the *Active Powers* since 1846 (when Hamilton published his first edition of *The Works of Thomas Reid*) and is, in its presentation and content, of great importance and use to anyone interested in meta-ethics in general, in Reid's moral philosophy, or in Reid's responses to Hume and Priestley. It was well worth the wait.

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