

## Introduction

My project in this short book is to present the rudiments of (what I call) Thomas Reid's agency-centered ethical theory. In doing so, my aim is not to offer a comprehensive overview of Reid's position, break new conceptual ground, or present a strikingly novel interpretation of Reid's views. It is rather to identify Reid's leading questions and why he answers them as he does.

There would be little reason to write a similar book on Hume's ethical theory or Kant's. Their views have already been the subject of both extensive critical commentary and exegetical controversy. The work in these areas of scholarship primarily consists in fine-tuning, correcting, and weighing the relative merits of the different available interpretations. In contrast, there is excellent reason to write a book whose primary aim is to identify Reid's leading questions and how he answers them. For despite having exercised considerable influence, Reid's views in ethics are unfamiliar to most philosophers today. (Throughout this discussion, I use the term "ethics" broadly to concern how we should live; it needn't pertain to morality more narrowly understood.) And to the extent Reid's views are familiar, many seem to think of Reid as a rational intuitionist in the mold of Samuel Clarke and Richard Price.<sup>1</sup> While Reid's rationalist tendencies run deep, I will be developing an interpretation according to which Reid's leading questions are rather different from those of the rational intuitionists.

The interpretation is one that emphasizes the synthetic character of Reid's approach, which fuses insights from the rational intuitionist, sentimentalist, Protestant natural law, and Stoic traditions. (I will have more to say about the representatives of and the views defended in these traditions later.) Speaking autobiographically, if I have experienced any shift in my own take on Reid's views over the last twenty years, it is that when placed against the backdrop of the history of modernity, they look more distinctive than they once did. Reid's questions, the answers he offers to them, and the theoretical framework he employs seem not to enjoy close parallels among his interlocutors. I am tempted to say that this is largely because the general position Reid develops is highly eclectic. Reid seemed comfortable borrowing and blending together whatever views seemed best to him, regardless of their pedigree. In my judgment, it is this approach to ethical theorizing—and the views that emerge from Reid's implementation of it—that make Reid a particularly interesting figure with whom to engage.

Reid embraces what I have called an agency-centered approach to ethical theorizing. By an *agency-centered* approach, I mean one according to which agency intersects with the subject matter of ethics in a sufficiently wide range of

<sup>1</sup> See MacIntyre (1966, 177) and Rawls (2000, 9).

important ways that we cannot satisfactorily engage in ethical theorizing without committing ourselves to, and ultimately developing, particular understandings of agency. Under an agency-centered account, the way to approach ethical theorizing is not to begin as the rational intuitionists did by defending the “eternal and immutable” character of moral obligation. Nor is it to begin, as the sentimentalists did by identifying what in fact moves our approbation or disapprobation. Nor is it to begin as G. E. Moore did by examining the character of moral concepts or language, say, by asking what the term “good” means. Instead, the way to theorize is to start by asking what ethical reality must be like if we can respond to it, commit ourselves to being regulated by it, and act well in doing so. And it is to begin by asking what agency must be like if we are to make sense of ascriptions of moral accountability and the character of the reactive attitudes, such as resentment and gratitude, which themselves often track ethical reality. This book explores different dimensions of Reid’s agency-centered approach.

I can offer here a taste of what renders Reid’s agency-centered approach distinctive. Reid devotes not quite half of the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788) to offering a detailed taxonomy of the contributors to action, or what he calls “motives.” According to Reid’s taxonomy, there are three types of motives. There are, first, the *mechanical motives*, which incorporate both “blind impulses” (such as the instinct to sleep) and “habits” (such as those operative in pronouncing sounds in certain ways when we speak) (EAP III.i). There are, second, the *animal motives*, which include what Reid calls the benevolent and malevolent affections, passions, dispositions, and opinions (EAP III.ii). These include attitudes such as gratitude, pity, and compassion. Finally, there are what he calls the two *rational principles of action*, our good on the whole and duty.

I will have much more to say about motives, especially the two rational principles of action. For present purposes, suffice it to say that one finds in the rational intuitionists and the Protestant natural law (or deontological) tradition little interest in motives or moral psychology. Given the rational intuitionists’ nearly exclusive interest in defending the robust objectivity of the fundamental moral principles, this is understandable. And given the Protestant natural law (or deontological) tradition’s efforts to distance itself from Aristotelian virtue-centered approaches, which emphasize the role of motives, it is unsurprising that members of this tradition barely discuss related issues.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Reid’s interest in moral psychology runs deep.

<sup>2</sup> Heydt (2018, 24) marks a dramatic shift in interest in the passions, comparing scholastic textbooks in moral philosophy with those written by Protestant natural law (deontological) theorists such as Carmichael. The scholastics devoted extensive attention to the passions in

There appear to be two primary explanations why. The first more or less falls out of Reid's commitment to an agency-centered approach to ethical theorizing. This approach is predicated on the conviction that any satisfactory approach to ethical theorizing must be located within an account of what it is to be an agent. It places questions such as the following at the heart of ethical theorizing: What would it take for us to be capable of exercising effective agency, especially the sort that can support ascriptions of responsibility? Reid's answer is (in part) that we must act from motives. For without motives, what Reid calls active power (our executive practical capacity) would be "given us in vain. Having no motive to direct our active exertions, the mind would, in all cases, be in a state of perfect indifference, to do this or that, or nothing at all" (EAP III.i.i: 74).

Add now that while motives are a necessary condition of exercising agency, they can push (or pull) us in a variety of incompatible directions, fracturing and undercutting agency. To avoid such conflicts, we need to manage our motives. Reid often gives the impression that such management consists in keeping the various mechanical and animal motives in check (EAP III.iii.ii). But his considered view is that such self-management involves much more than this. It also involves cultivating certain dispositions. When discussing the benevolent affections, which are a species of the animal principles of action, Reid writes that we are "social creatures, whose happiness or misery is very much connected with that of our fellow men" (EAP III.iii.iii: 164). Because of this, "a regard to our own good ought to lead us to cultivate and exercise" the benevolent affections, "as every benevolent affection makes the good of others to be our own" (EAP III.iii.iii: 164). A second explanation, then, for why Reid pays so much attention to motives is that doing so enables him to illustrate how agents can engage in effective rational agency, which is a topic of central importance to agency-centered approaches.

As I say, the foregoing offers just a taste of what is distinctive about Reid's agency-centered approach. One finds the fuller offering in the subsequent discussion. I have divided this discussion into four segments. The first section, "Normative Governance," introduces Reid's agency-centered understanding of ethics. As its title indicates, the section explores the topic of how, according to Reid, we are to govern our tendencies and behavior. One could think of this section as treating that dimension of agency-centered approaches that concerns so-called normative ethics. The second section, "Action, Motives, Power," explores some ambiguities in and puzzling features of Reid's understanding of these components of agency, advancing several interpretations of what Reid

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their textbooks. In contrast, Heydt notes that in "Carmichael's commentary on Pufendorf's compendium, discussion of the passions takes up *three pages*. . . . In Pufendorf's works on natural law, the passions are barely mentioned." *Cp.* Radcliffe (2018, appendix).

is saying. This section concerns that dimension of agency-centered approaches that intersects with action theory. The third section, “Two Challenges,” brings Reid’s view into conversation with both the Aristotelian-Thomistic and sentimentalist traditions by identifying resources available to Reid in order to answer their central worries about his project. This section explores that dimension of agency-centered approaches that concerns metaethics. The brief concluding section, “The Sidgwickian Characterization,” introduces Sidgwick’s claim that a deep divide marks the ancients’ approach to ethical theorizing from that of the moderns. I ask whether Reid clearly falls on the moderns’ side of Sidgwick’s divide, claiming that he does not. Reid’s place in the history of modernity is distinctive.

Because my primary aim is to articulate the main lines of Reid’s answers to his leading questions in the *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, there are a variety of topics that Reid addresses that I do not. And among the issues I do treat, all of them deserve to be explored in greater detail. Moreover, there are historical influences on and parallels to Reid’s views of which I do not take note.<sup>3</sup> Finally, I have not attempted to explore the various ways in which Reid’s positions anticipate well-known contemporary views such as W. D. Ross’s deontological pluralism and Derek Parfit’s “non-metaphysical cognitivism.”<sup>4</sup> Still, if this book achieves its purpose, it will have articulated an interpretation of Reid that takes us to the core of his project. That core consists in a set of claims that lie at the intersection of ethics and the philosophy of action. Having these claims clearly articulated should position others not only to familiarize themselves with Reid’s position but also to correct and fine-tune the interpretation offered here.

Let me close by saying a word about those for whom I have written this book. It is written for two primary audiences: those who may have had some exposure to Reid’s thought but know little about his ethical theory, and those who know something about ethical theory and its history but know little about Reid’s contribution to it. My hope regarding the first group of philosophers is that they will find this discussion enriches their understanding of Reid, opening up further avenues of investigation. My hope regarding the second group of philosophers is that they will find in Reid’s ethical theorizing a set of commitments that connects in unusual and illuminating ways with the work of the ancients and contemporary philosophers. I realize that there are many with an interest or background in philosophy who fall into neither of these two groups.

<sup>3</sup> Those interested in the figures and sources that influenced Reid’s ethical theorizing should consult Haakonssen (2007, Introduction) and Heydt (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Ross (1930/2007) and Parfit (2011, ch. 31).

While they are not my primary audience, I hope that they, too, will benefit from engaging with this interpretation of Reid's ethical theory.

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