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THOMAS REID ON THE ETHICAL LIFE

Terence Cuneo

University of Vermont



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Thomas Reid on the Ethical Life

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Abstract: This Element presents the rudiments of Thomas Reid's agency-centered ethical theory. According to this theory, an ethical theory must address three primary issues. The first concerns what it is to be an agent, where this involves identifying the motives from which agents can act. The second concerns what ethical reality is like, and how we could know it. The third issue is to understand how agents can respond to ethical reality, commit themselves to being regulated by it, and act well in doing so. Reid's development of an agency-centered ethical theory is eclectic, borrowing from the rational intuitionist, sentimentalist, Aristotelian, and Protestant natural law traditions. This Element explores how Reid blends together these influences, while also identifying the resources that Reid has to respond to concerns raised by rival traditions, and what distinguishes his approach from those of other modern philosophers.

Keywords: Ethics, agency, action, Reid, modernity

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In memory of my friend and first philosophical companion,

E. George Lundstedt,

(1969–2018)

with whom I first read Reid.

Memory Eternal.

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