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Thomas Reid's Notion of Exertion

PAUL HOFFMAN*

THE NOTION OF POWER IS INEXTRICABLY bound to the notion of the exertion of that power. One notion cannot be grasped independently of the other. Indeed, Thomas Reid claims that we have only a relative notion of power (7), and that it is relative to its exertions or effects (9).¹ So in order to understand Reid's notion of power, it is necessary to pay careful attention to his understanding of exertion. It turns out that as he uses the term 'exertion' it has various referents that have not been clearly distinguished in the secondary literature. In the first place, there are two ambiguities in his use of the term 'exertion.' In the second place, in the sequence of events involved in a human action, there is a series of exertions linked to the various powers that Reid recognizes—active power, will, and liberty. The failure to distinguish Reid's various uses of the term 'exertion' has contributed to a misguided objection to his theory of the will. My aim in this paper is to provide a clear account of Reid's understanding of exertion with the goal of reaching a deeper understanding of his account of active power, will, and liberty, and then to apply this understanding in defending Reid both against the objection and proposed solutions to the objection.

Reid's use of the term 'exertion' is closely connected to his use of other terms such as 'action,' 'operation,' 'effort,' 'volition,' and 'effect.' He defines action as "the exertion of active power," and he goes on to assert that "as every action produces some change, so every change must be caused by some exertion, or by the cessation of some exertion" (11). He is, however, speaking carelessly when he speaks of the action or exertion as a cause, as his subsequent sentence makes clear; for he says, consistent with his restriction of causes to agents, "That which produces a change by the exertion of its power, we call the *cause* of that change; and the change produced, the *effect* of that cause."

In this passage Reid seems to be adopting an Aristotelian notion of action according to which action is linked to change. The action or exertion of active

¹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969). Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers of this edition.

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power somehow mediates between the cause/agent and the change/effect. That is, the exertion of active power is the means by which an agent produces a change. That this is Reid's view is nicely exemplified in the following passage in which he provides a summary of his account:

The name of a *cause* and of an *agent*, is properly given to that being only, which, by its active power, produces some change in itself, or in some other being. The change, whether it be of thought, of will, or of motion, is the *effect*. Active power, therefore, is a quality in the cause, which enables it to produce the effect. And the exertion of that active power in producing the effect, is called *action*, *agency*, *efficiency*. (268)

Underlying this intuitive picture is the first ambiguity in Reid's account of exertion and its relation to active power. The ambiguity is built right into the expression 'the exertion of active power.' Consider for example, the power of walking. What is the action associated with that power? One might naturally respond, as an Aristotelian would, that walking is the activity or action associated with the power of walking. And since Reid identifies the exertion of active power with the action, then it would follow that the exertion of the power of walking is walking. That is, Reid might be thinking of the exertion of power as the exercise of a capacity.

In contrast, however, one might respond instead that walking is the effect or change produced when the agent exerts the power of walking. On this view the exertion of the power of walking is the activating of the power of walking. It is, in other words, analogous to the throwing of a switch that turns on electrical power and is not analogous to the light's going on.

The first ambiguity, then, in Reid's account of exertion and its relation to active power is that he sometimes can be read as suggesting that active power mediates between the agent and his exertions (for example, walking), and other times he suggests that the exertion of power should be thought of as something mediating between an agent and his active power (as for example, if the exertion is understood to be the activating of the power of walking).

This ambiguity does not imply that Reid is somehow contradicting himself. On the contrary, let me use the term 'exertion_(A)' to refer to activating or turning on a power such as the power to walk, an exertion analogous to throwing a switch; let me use the term 'exertion_(E)' to refer to the action or activity that is analogous to the light's going on, what I will call the exercise of that active power, which in the case of the power to walk just is walking. It seems perfectly reasonable to say that an exertion_(A) mediates between an agent and his active power, and active power mediates between an exertion_(A) and an exertion_(E).

Even if there is no contradiction, there is great potential for confusion, because exertions_(E), of which walking is a prime example, would appear to be changes or effects according to Reid, and as such are contrasted with the actions by means of which they are produced. So even though he identifies exertions with actions and distinguishes actions from changes, some things he refers to as exertions count as changes.

In apparently committing himself to the view that every effect we bring about in ourselves is a change, Reid is breaking sharply from the Aristotelian tradition. Aristotelians distinguished between activities and changes. Activities are the mere exercise of a power and need not involve a change. So Aristotelians would deny

that I undergo a change when I exercise my capacity to see or to speak or to write. Similarly, they might deny that I undergo a change when I exercise my capacity to walk.²

An example that Aristotelians would consider to be a change is that of an agent lifting a vase. The agent's action, Aristotelians would say, is the action of lifting, and an agent cannot lift something without having the power of lifting. They would refer to the vase as the patient, and they would say that the change or passion is the vase's being lifted. They would make the further claim that the agent's action of lifting the vase is one and the same change as the vase's being lifted. They would deny, in other words, that the agent's lifting the vase is a distinct event from the vase's being lifted. In such cases, when an agent produces a change in itself or in something else, Reid, in contrast to the Aristotelians, gives no indication that he thinks the agent's action is the same change as the change undergone by the patient. But if the agent's lifting is the action bringing about the change in the vase, it would then be the exertion_(E), which would suggest that active power not only plays the role of mediating between the exertion_(A) and the exertion_(E), it also mediates between the exertion_(E) and the change, that is, the movement of the vase. That Reid would think active power plays this double role fits with his distinction between the immediate and remote effects of human power. He tells us that there are two types of immediate effects of human power. "We can give certain motions to our own bodies; and we can give a certain direction to our own thoughts" (49). The remote effects of human power include the effects we produce in other beings.

Some of Reid's statements are subject to more than one interpretation because of the ambiguity in his use of the notion of exertion. For example, when he asserts that "there can be no exertion without power" (9), does he mean that I cannot walk without the power of walking or that I cannot activate the power of walking without having that power? And when he says "there may be power that is not exerted. Thus a man may have power to speak when he is silent; he may have power to rise and walk when he sits still" (9–10), he is naturally read as supposing that speaking is the exertion of the power to speak and walking is the exertion of the power to walk. That is, the exertions are what we would normally think of as actions. But this remark is also consistent with the other understanding of exertion. He might, that is, be thinking that one can have the power to speak or to walk without activating that power.

An especially interesting manifestation of this ambiguity of whether an exertion is the activating of a power or the action that results when a power is activated is found in the first of two striking passages from the recently published "Of Power."³ In this first passage he uses the expression 'the exertion of walking' in a way that might suggest that walking counts as an exertion:

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

² Whether Aristotle would say that walking, as opposed to walking to a specific place, counts as an activity is a matter of dispute. For an excellent discussion of Aristotle's views, see Robert Heinaman, "Aristotle on Housebuilding," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985): 145–62.

³ Thomas Reid, "Of Power," *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2001): 3–12.

there is not a thought of it or will concerning it at present in my mind; yet the exertion of walking continues. ("Of Power," 5)

Perhaps even in this passage, however, the expression 'the exertion of walking' refers only to the activating of the power of walking, in which case Reid's point is that he continues to activate the power of walking without thinking about it. But it seems more natural to suppose that his point is that he continues to walk without thinking about it.

In the second passage he uses the expression 'makes an exertion to do' in such a way as to suggest that it is the attempt to put the power of walking into play that counts as the exertion:

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. ("Of Power," 7)⁴

This use of the expression 'makes an exertion to do' provides definitive evidence that Reid does not always use the term 'exertion' to refer to an action in the Aristotelian sense of the exercise of a capacity.⁵ The phrase 'makes an exertion to do' in this context seems to be synonymous with 'tries to do,' so Reid's point is that no one who believes he does not have the power to walk tries to walk.

Does Reid think that making an exertion to walk, that is, trying to walk, is the same as exerting_(A) the power of walking, that is, activating the power of walking? The answer is that he is committed to two other claims that prevent him from making this identification, and this generates the second ambiguity in his use of the term 'exertion.' First, Reid holds that it is contradictory to suppose that a power might be exerted without its effect being produced:

it is a contradiction to say, that the cause has power to produce the effect, and exerts that power, and yet the effect is not produced. (268)

He appears to hold this doctrine not only for powers, such as the power of walking, which are qualities by which an agent produces changes in himself, but also for those powers which are qualities by which an agent produces changes in other objects. In other words, Reid seems to hold that an exertion_(A) of the power of walking results, on pain of contradiction, with an exertion_(E) of the power of walking, and that the exertion_(E) of the power of lifting results, on pain of contradiction, in the target object's being lifted.

Second, Reid recognizes that we can try to activate a power and fail in that attempt:

A man in his sleep may be struck with a palsy, which deprives him of the power of speech; when he awakes he attempts to speak, not knowing that he has lost the power. But when he knows by experience that the power is gone, he ceases to make the effort. (62)

⁴ I am grateful to Mary Amschel for calling my attention to Reid's use of these two expressions.

⁵ Contrary to the claim of a referee for this journal.

The conjunction of this passage with the second passage from "Of Power" quoted above, where Reid says that "no man makes an exertion to do what he does not think to be in his power," reveals that he sometimes uses the terms 'exertion' and 'effort' interchangeably to refer to the attempt to activate a power. But since these exertions can fail if we lack the power, they must be distinct from exertions_(A) of that power, which Reid thinks, as we have just seen, must be successful on pain of contradiction. So we need to introduce another notion of exertion, exertion_(AA), the attempt to activate active power, which is distinct from exertion_(A), the activating of that power.

But how should we understand exertion_(AA)? How should we understand trying to exert a power? Reid asserts, as already noted, that "there can be no exertion without power." If trying to exert a power is itself an exertion, then it might seem to follow that to try to exert a power is already itself to exert a power. Gideon Yaffe has suggested that the power in question is the power to try.⁶ And since, as we have also seen, Reid thinks that we cannot exert a power without the effect being produced, Yaffe wants to say that Reid thinks we cannot exert the power of trying without the result being that we succeed in trying. In other words, Yaffe wants to claim that my introduction of exertions_(AA) in the attempt to understand trying to exert a power provides an incomplete picture of Reid's view. On his interpretation, trying to exert a power involves both an activating (an exertion_(A)) and an exercise (an exertion_(E)) of the power of trying. That is, when we try to do something, we activate the power of trying with the inevitable result that we try. That trying may or may not be successful. So my trying to walk will be successful if and only if I have the power of walking. But even if I lack the power of walking it will be true that I succeeded in trying to walk.

In support of attributing the power of trying to Reid, Yaffe cites the following passage:

The same man [the one struck with palsy], knowing that some persons have recovered the power of speech after they had lost it by a paralytical stroke, may now and then make an effort. In this effort, however, there is not properly a will to speak, but a will to try whether he can speak or not.

In like manner, a man may exert his strength to raise a weight, which is too heavy for him. But he always does this, either from the belief that he can raise the weight, or for a trial whether he can or not. (62–63)

I do not think this passage provides strong evidence for Yaffe's desired interpretive use of the power of trying. Reid says that the man who does not know he has palsy attempts to speak, but the man who knows he has palsy is aiming at something else. He is testing whether he has the ability to speak. This would suggest that even if Reid thinks there is a power of trying or testing, it comes into play only in special cases. But what I am trying to understand is what Reid is referring to by "attempt[ing] to speak" in the normal case when we believe we have the power of speaking. To which power should we attribute the exertion_(AA), the attempt to speak?⁷

⁶ In conversation, August 15, 2002.

⁷ We can safely identify the attempt to speak with the attempt to activate the power of speaking, since Reid is committed to the view that activating the power of speaking necessarily results in speaking.

To be sure, it is not clear that what Reid says about this example is ultimately coherent. How could the man with palsy test whether he has the ability to speak without trying to speak? So it would seem that the man with palsy who does not know he has it and the man who has palsy who does know he has it are trying to do the same thing. Both are trying to speak. Their ultimate ends in trying to speak are different—the first is aiming to speak either as end in itself or for some other end furthered by the content of what he says, but the second is aiming to speak with the end of determining whether he has the power of speaking. Nevertheless, since both are trying to speak, Reid's assertion that the second does not have a will to speak is false.⁸ But Reid's main point in the passage stands. He thinks we cannot try to do something if we believe we do not have the power to do it. We can try to do something only if we believe we have or might have the power to do it.

Still, since Reid seems to think he is talking about special cases when we are not willing to do something but only willing to try to do something, I do not think the passage provides strong evidence to support Yaffe's view that Reid thinks we need to invoke a power of trying to explain how trying, that is, how exertion_(AA), is possible in the standard cases when we are willing to do something and not willing merely to try to do it. But we might think we are still forced to attribute to Reid a power of trying that is involved in every action because of his assertion that "there can be no exertion without power." If I can try to walk even when it turns out, unbeknownst to me, that I lack the power to walk, then Reid's assertion that there can be no exertion without power does seem to entail that I have some other power in virtue of which I try to walk. I believe that the power in question is just the will. In other words, I believe that Yaffe's power of trying is nothing other than the will.⁹ This finds textual support in Reid's assertion that, "Human power, therefore, can only be exerted by will; and we are unable to conceive any active power to be exerted without will" (37).

On my interpretation, a human power such as walking is activated by means of the will. I walk when my power of walking is activated by an exertion of the will, that is, by my trying to walk. I would be further inclined to identify my trying to walk with my activating of my will, rather than with the exercise of my will once it has been activated. In other words, I am inclined to identify my exertion_(AA) of walking with an exertion_(A) of my will. In that case we might identify the exercise of my will (that is, the immediate effect produced when the will is activated—the exertion_(E) of my will), with its activating of my power of walking, that is, with my exertion_(A) of walking. On this view there would be three exertions involved in

⁸ One might try to defend Reid by arguing that he is committed to saying only that the man who doubts whether he has the power of speech differs in his volition from the man who believes he has the power to speak; he is not committed to saying that they differ in their efforts. So he can allow that the man who is testing whether he can speak tries to speak and yet does not will to speak. But, as Rishi Bhatt has pointed out to me, when Reid asserts that a "volition is accompanied with an effort to execute that which we willed" (63) he commits himself to the view that people who differ in their volitions must differ in their efforts.

⁹ If Yaffe is correct that Reid thinks the power of trying is a power distinct from the will, then that would generate the interesting possibility, not considered by Reid, that I might lose my power of trying just as I might lose my power of speech. That is, I might form the volition to speak, but then discover that I have lost the power to try to speak, that is, the power to make an effort to speak.

my walking. First is my trying to walk (an exertion_(A) of my will), next is an exercise of my will (an exertion_(E) of my will) which just is the activating of my power of walking (an exertion_(A) of walking), and finally, the exercise of my power of walking (an exertion_(E) of walking). For this interpretation to be consistent with Reid's view that I can try to walk and yet fail, it would have to be the case that not all exertions_(A) of my will result in exertions_(E) of my will. This might conflict with Reid's assertion that we cannot exert a power without the effect being produced, but I do not think there is conclusive textual evidence that he thinks that assertion applies to the will itself.

Since at this point I am going beyond any explicit remarks by Reid, I would not object strongly to the rival interpretation that my exercising of my will is an element in the causal sequence distinct from my activating my power of walking. In that case there would be four exertions in the sequence: the activating of my will, the exercise of my will, the activating of my power of walking, and the exercise of my power of walking.¹⁰ On this interpretation we could agree with Yaffe that Reid thinks it is true of all powers, including the will, that they cannot be activated with the effect being produced. That is, we could agree that an exertion_(A) of the will necessarily results in an exertion_(E) of the will.

Schematically the difference between these two interpretations is as follows. On the first interpretation:

(1) exertion_(A) of the will → (2a) exertion_(E) of the will = (2b) exertion_(A) of the power of walking → (3) exertion_(E) of the power walking

The possibility that (1) the exertion_(A) of the will can occur without (3) the exertion_(E) of the power walking arises because (1) can occur without (2a) the exertion_(E) of the will.

On the second interpretation:

(1) exertion_(A) of the will → (2) exertion_(E) of the will → (3) exertion_(A) of the power of walking

→ (4) exertion_(E) of the power walking

The possibility that (1) the exertion_(A) of the will can occur without (4) the exertion_(E) of the power of walking arises because (2) the exertion_(E) of the will can occur without (3) the exertion_(A) of the power of walking.¹¹

There is still a third interpretive possibility lurking here. Even if we have a good grasp of the distinction between exertions_(A) and exertions_(E) of powers such as the power of walking, it is much harder to get a grasp on the distinction between exertions_(A) and exertions_(E) of the will, especially if, as on the second interpretation above, exertions_(E) of the will are considered distinct from the exertions_(A) that follow them, exertions such as the exertion_(A) of the power of walking.¹² So

¹⁰ It is not clear that Reid's use of the term 'exercise' is the same as my use. For example, he asserts that "The actual exercise of that power [the will], by directing any particular action, or its forbearance, is that which we call *volition*, or *willing*" (35). He is probably using the term 'exercise' the same way I am, but he could be using it instead to refer to the activating of the power of will.

¹¹ I am indebted to a referee for this Journal for suggesting this schema to illustrate the differences between the two interpretations.

¹² I am indebted to Casey Hall for pressing this objection.

one might argue that in the case of the will, a distinction between exertion_(A) and exertion_(E) should be denied. We might instead say that there is only one exertion of the will, that of trying to activate some other power, and if it is successful then there results an exertion_(A) of that other power.

Each of these interpretive possibilities has a serious, although not conclusively defeating, drawback. The problem with the first is that it requires Reid to make an exception in the case of the will to his assertion that we cannot exert a power without the effect being produced. The problem with the second is that it is hard to understand what an exertion_(E) of the will is if it is distinct both from the exertion_(A) of the will and the exertion_(A) that follows it, an exertion such as the exertion_(A) of the power of walking. The problem with the third is that it would be true of some active powers, but not all, that they include both an exertion_(A) and an exertion_(E).

Reid believes it is important not to confuse volition with effort or 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. ("Of Power," 5)

He makes the same point in the *Essays*:

The *next* observation is, That when we will to do a thing immediately, the volition is accompanied with an effort to execute that which we willed.

If a man wills to raise a great weight from the ground by the strength of his arm, he makes an effort for that purpose proportioned to the weight he determines to raise. A great weight requires a great effort; a small weight a less effort. We say, indeed, that to raise a very small body requires no effort at all. But this, I apprehend, must be understood either as a figurative way of speaking, by which things very small are accounted as nothing, or it is owing to our giving no attention to very small efforts, and therefore having no name for them . . .

This effort [the small effort] we are conscious of, if we will but give attention to it; and there is nothing in which we are in a more strict sense active. (63)

Reid's distinction between volition and effort or exertion, where for now it does not matter whether we take the exertion in question to be an exertion_(A) or an exertion_(E) of the will, seems to correspond closely to Aquinas's distinction between choice and use.¹³ Choice is an act of will in which we decide to do something; use is another act of will by which we activate another power, typically our motive power. Aquinas, however, does not emphasize that use comes in degrees. But it is crucial to Reid's understanding of effort. I take it that Reid's point is, in effect, twofold. First, we can try more or less hard to activate a given power. Second, a power, such as strength, can be activated to a greater or lesser degree. We need to keep this in mind in interpreting his assertion already mentioned that "it is a contradiction to say, that the cause has power to produce the effect, and exerts that power, and yet the effect is not produced" (268). I may have the lifting power or strength to lift a weight of 150 pounds, exert my lifting power, and yet still fail to lift the weight because I did not engage enough of my lifting power.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IaIIae Q16 a1.

So far I have been trying to suggest that Reid thinks of volitions and exertions^(AA) as two distinct determinations of the will in roughly the same way that Aquinas thinks of choice and use as two distinct acts of will.¹⁴ However, it is not entirely clear that this is Reid's view. In the sentence from "Of Power" immediately following the sentence quoted above where he says that volition and exertion are not the same, he concludes, "If so, there may be exertion without deliberate will."

It is not clear why Reid wants to draw this conclusion. He seems to want to argue that there can be exertions of active power that are independent of the will because they are instinctual:

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 . . . But I am rather inclined to think 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. ("Of Power," 3)

If Reid really were admitting that there can be exertions of active power that are independent of the will because they are instinctual, it would be a startling about face. To do so would be to return to common sense and to repudiate the extreme view of the *Essays on the Active Powers* that "active power cannot be exerted without will and intelligence" (40). If an exertion^(AA)—trying to do something—can result from instinct, then active powers in the proper sense need not depend on will and intelligence and we could attribute active powers to animals, without supposing, as Reid does, that they have wills (67, 118, 200, 298).¹⁵ Moreover, if it is conceded that instinct can be the source of exertion, it would be difficult to draw the line between instinct and other kinds of striving that the Aristotelians and Spinoza attributed to plants and even to inanimate objects. This is not to say that Reid himself thinks he has repudiated his previous views. On the contrary, he continues to assert that "will is necessarily implied in the notion of power" and that in "the only proper sense of the word, it is evident that a being which has no will can have no power."¹⁶

It is thus mysterious why Reid would make such an interesting and careful argument to establish that some exertions are instinctual and thus independent of the will if, in the end, he rejects that view. So even though he does say in "Of

¹⁴ Most of the time when Reid speaks of determinations of the will, he is referring to volitions. But in the following passage he does seem to suggest that some determinations of the will are efforts or exertions: "In such efforts, men often exert a degree of muscular strength beyond what they are able to exert by a calm determination of the will" (168). I am grateful to Casey Hall for calling my attention to this passage.

¹⁵ Although Reid often suggests that active power depends on the will in the sense that having a will is a sufficient condition for having active power, he also asserts that "power to produce any effect implies power not to produce it" (35), which cuts the other way. I think that Reid's real view is that the power not to produce an effect appears only with the power of self-government or liberty, so that ascribing wills to animals does not make them truly active, because animal volitions are always in accordance with the strongest animal motive (260). What corresponds most closely in Reid to the Kantian notion of will is not his own notion of will, but instead his notion of liberty.

¹⁶ Reid, "Of Power," 10.

Power” that there can be exertion without deliberate will, I do not think he would, if pressed, endorse the view that exertions_(AA) are not determinations of the will.

Reid acknowledges that our bringing about of exertions of the will might not be the real cause of the exertions_(A) and exertions_(E) of our active powers such as walking. He says, “what we call the effects of our own power, may not be so in the strictest sense” (50). The reason for this, in part, is that “we perceive not any necessary connection between the volition and exertion on our part, and the motion of the body that follows them” (50). The exertion he has in mind here must be the exertion_(AA), since we have already seen him argue that it is a contradiction to suppose that an exertion_(A) of an active power not be followed by an exertion_(E) of that power or that an exertion_(E) not be followed by the effect in another subject.

This explanatory gap arises in part from the difficulty of understanding causal interaction between mind and body. Reid’s discussion of this point is quite nice, although after mentioning the volition and exertion in the same breath, when he introduces the issue, in the remainder of the discussion he refers only to the volition, when it would have been more appropriate to refer to the exertion, because the gap is really between the exertion_(AA), that is, the effort to engage an active power, and the subsequent bodily movements.

Reid notes that when we move our body voluntarily, we will only the external effect, without thinking of the nerves or muscles by whose operation the motion is produced. We know by experience, he tells us, that “there is an established harmony between our willing certain motions of our bodies” and the required operations of the nerves and muscles (50). Yet we cannot know more than this:

But whether this act of the mind have any physical effect upon the nerves and muscles, or whether it be only an occasion of their being acted upon by some other efficient, according to the established laws of nature, is hid from us. So dark is our conception of our own power when we trace it to its origin. (50)

Reid’s point here is that there is a harmony or correlation between our exertions_(AA) and the appropriate movements of the nerves and muscles, but we cannot know whether we are really agents or whether some other agent is doing the work of moving our nerves and muscles. He makes the same point regarding our ability to cause our thoughts:

I see no good reason why the dispute about efficient and occasional causes, may not be applied to the power of directing our thoughts, as well as to the power of moving our bodies . . . [W]hen I attempt to comprehend the manner in which an efficient cause operates, either upon body or upon mind, there is a darkness which my faculties are not able to penetrate. (52)

This is a deep confession on Reid’s part. Earlier in the *Essays* he had cited Locke, apparently with approval, as having argued that “the only clear notion or idea we have of active power, is taken from the power which we find in ourselves to give certain motions to our bodies, or a certain direction to our thoughts; and this power in ourselves can be brought into action only by willing or volition” (35). And speaking in his own voice he had said that “the notion of efficacy will be reduced to this, that it is a relation between the cause and the effect, similar to that which is between us and our voluntary actions” (40). Now in this moment of candor he admits that we do not understand that sort of causation either (“so dark is our conception of our power”). Indeed, he admits we cannot even be sure that

we are not, as Malebranche argues, merely the occasional causes of the voluntary motions of our bodies (51). In light of this confession, his apparent rejection of Hume's weak reinterpretation of causation as mere constant conjunction and his apparent rejection of Malebranche's strong reinterpretation of causation as requiring knowledge on the part of the agent of how the effect is produced both look much less appealing philosophically.¹⁷ Reid cannot legitimately claim that our only notion of causation is partly derived from the common sense notion we get from being aware of our power to move our bodies or to direct our thoughts.

Reid does have a fall back position. He could say that our notion of power is the one we derive from our understanding that we as agents cause our volitions and exertions_(AA).¹⁸ This may in the end be the correct account of causation, but Reid cannot claim that it is our ordinary, common sense notion. Our ordinary, common sense notion of causation is that of our causing the motions of our bodies.

The initial exertion in a sequence of action is not always an exertion of the will. Sometimes a prior exertion, which I will call exertion_(R), is required for us to form the volition to do something. For example, suppose our appetites or passions are drawing us in one way, but duty, decency, or interest draws us in another way (126). To resist this appetite or passion and to will the right thing can require an exertion on our part. We are capable of this sort of exertion in virtue of the power of liberty or self-government (126–27). The liberty of a moral agent, as Reid defines it, is “a power over the determinations of his own will” (259).¹⁹ By ‘determinations’ I take him to be referring at least to volitions, and I have also suggested that he thinks exertions_(AA) are another kind of determination of the will. The role of exertion_(R) in action is made especially clear by Reid in his discussion of cases in which it does not come into play:

In some cases, a stronger impulse of appetite or passion may oppose a weaker. Here also there may be determination and action without judgment.

Suppose a soldier ordered to mount a breach, and certain of present death if he retreats, this man needs not courage to go on, fear is sufficient. The certainty of present death if he retreats, is an overbalance to the probability of being killed if he goes on. The man is pushed by contrary forces, and it requires neither judgment nor exertion to yield to the strongest.

A hungry dog acts by the same principle, if meat is set before him, with a threatening to beat him if he touch it. Hunger pushes him forward, fear pushes him back with more force, and the strongest force prevails.

Thus we see, that, in many, even of our voluntary actions, we may act from the impulse of appetite, affection, or passion, without any exercise of judgment, and much in the same manner as brute animals seem to act. (67)

When Reid says it requires neither judgment nor exertion to yield to the strongest force, he certainly is not referring to an exertion_(AA) to mount the breach,

¹⁷ Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), Bk. VI, Part II, Ch. 3, 449–50.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Bryan Lee for this defense of Reid.

¹⁹ Reid also characterizes self-government as power over the determinations of one's own will (262), which strongly suggests that he thinks liberty and self-government are the same power. Thus, I will treat them as identical. However, I do acknowledge that he says animals and children before the use of reason lack self-government, but is not sure whether they possess some kind of liberty (260), which suggests that he thinks self-government and liberty might be distinct powers.

nor to an exertion_(A) or an exertion_(E) of his power to move his body. There has to be a volition on the part of the soldier to mount the breach rather than retreat, there has to be an attempt to mount that breach, that is, an exertion_(AA), and there has to be an exertion_(A) and an exertion_(E) of the bodily power that would enable him to mount the breach. Rather, what is not needed is an exertion on his part to form the volition to mount the breach. Without an exertion_(R) he will simply will whatever the strongest force pushes him to will. When an exertion_(R) does come into play, it resists the force of some mechanical or animal principle, thereby enabling us, when it is successful, to act in accordance with some other animal principle or with the rational principles of action.²⁰

Exertions_(R), then, are exertions of liberty, that is, exertions of the power over the determinations of our will. This fourth notion of exertion is subject to the same ambiguities we have seen arise in connection with exertions_(AA). We might wonder whether Reid is referring to the activating of the power of liberty or the exercise of the power of liberty or whether he thinks it makes sense to distinguish between exertions_(A) and exertions_(E) of liberty. There probably is not a determinate answer as to what Reid has in mind. But I think it would be safe to say that Reid thinks exertions_(R) (or at least exertions_(A) of liberty if he does distinguish between exertions_(A) and exertions_(E) of liberty) are caused directly by the agent.

Reid seems to treat liberty or self-government as a resisting force. I am inclined to believe that he thinks an exertion of liberty is not required in cases when there is no appetite, affection, or passion opposing a rational principle of action. We simply determine the will. But perhaps if the question were raised to him, Reid would say that whenever we are free in a given action, the determination of the will is preceded by an exertion of liberty. Since such an exertion would not be an exertion of resistance, it would be misleading to label it exertion_(R). Instead it would be an exertion of liberty by means of which an agent is capable of activating his power of will.

We have seen that Reid's account of power and exertion is incomplete and ambiguous in various respects. But we are now in a position to present his account (with variations) of what happens when we are free in a given action opposed by an appetite, affection, or passion. First we bring about an exertion_(R), an exertion of self-government or liberty to resist the appetite, affection, or passion. This may or may not involve our bringing about exertion_(A) of the power of liberty that in turn results in an exertion_(E) of the power of liberty. When successful, that exertion_(R) blocks the appetite, affection, or passion and thereby insures that our will is not determined by something other than us. Then there are two possibilities, either there is another exertion of the power of liberty by means of which a volition is produced or instead we directly produce the volition. This volition is typically accompanied simultaneously with an exertion_(AA), an effort to put an active power into play. I am inclined to believe that Reid thinks that we produce exertions_(AA) directly,

²⁰ Reid asserts: "The pursuits of power, of fame, and of knowledge require self-command no less than virtue does" (132). He considers power, fame, and knowledge to be animal as opposed to rational principles of action, so his point must be that self-command or self-government comes into play whenever an agent resists the strongest animal motive, even if the prevailing motive is also an animal motive (290). I would like to thank Gideon Yaffe for help on this point.

but I cannot rule out that he would say that they always require a prior exertion of the power of liberty. A successful exertion_(AA) generates an exertion_(A) of the active power, which, by necessity according to Reid, results in the exertion_(E), the immediate physical or mental effect, that is, either a motion in our body or a direction to our thought (49). If we are acting on some other object, then the exertion_(E) results, by means of active power, in a passion or change in that object.

Suppose, for example, that my rational principles lead me to judge that I should continue to work on this paper instead of giving in to my desire to play still another game of FreeCell. By an exertion_(R) of liberty or self-government I try to resist that desire. If successful, I am able to form the volition to direct my attention to the paper. By an exertion_(AA) I try to direct my attention to the paper. If that exertion_(AA) is successful, there results an exertion_(A) of my active power of directing my attention to the paper, which of necessity results in my attention's being directed in that way, that is, it results in the exertion_(E) of my power of directing my attention.

In commenting on Reid's account of the will, William Rowe has argued that his account of exertion generates an infinite regress:

On Reid's theory, when an agent wills some action, the act of will is itself an event and, as such, requires a cause. If the act of will is free, its cause is not some event, it is the agent whose act of will it is. Being the cause of the act of will, the agent must satisfy Reid's three conditions of agent-causation. Thus the agent must have had the power to bring about the act of will as well as the power to refrain from bringing about the act of will, and she must have *exerted* her power to bring about the act of will. It is the last of these conditions that generates an infinite regress of events that an agent must cause if she is to cause her act of will. For what it tells us is that to produce the act of will the agent must *exert* her power to bring about the act of will. Now an exertion of power is itself an event. As such, it too must have a cause. On Reid's view the cause must again be the agent herself. But to have caused this exertion the agent must have had the power to bring it about and must have *exerted* that power. Each exertion of power is itself an event which the agent can cause only by having the power to cause it and by *exerting* that power. As Reid reminds us, "In order to the production of any effect, there must be in the cause, not only power, but the exertion of that power: for power that is not exerted produces no effect." The result of this principle, however, is that in order to produce any act of will whatever, the agent must cause an infinite number of exertions.²¹

Whether Reid is really guilty of an infinite regress depends on whether he thinks that his causal principle—that "in order to the production of any effect, there must be in the cause not only the power, but the exertion of that power"—applies to every exertion. To answer this question we need to look at the context in which the principle is stated. In the immediately preceding paragraph (quoted on page 2) Reid has just distinguished between, on the one hand, actions or exertions of power and, on the other hand, effects; moreover, he has made it clear that he is using the term 'effect' to refer to changes insofar as they are distinguished from actions or exertions of active power. So there are grounds to argue that Reid's causal principle is not broad in the way both that Rowe takes it and that is necessary to

²¹ William Rowe, "Two Concepts of Freedom" ["Two Concepts"], *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 61 (1987): 53–54.

generate the infinite regress. It implies only that in order to produce a change in another object, an exertion_(E) is required and that to produce a change in oneself, that is, an exertion_(E), an exertion_(A) is required. The regress only gets started if we follow Rowe in assuming that Reid is using the term 'effect' in a broad way to include every exertion so that it would imply that "in order to the production of any action, there must be in the cause not only the power to produce that action, but the exertion of that power." But Reid could justly respond to Rowe that he was providing an account of the production of effects as distinguished from actions, not an account of the production of actions, and that he was not committing himself to the view that the production of an action, that is, an exertion in the sense of the activating of a power, also requires the exertion of a power.

Now in defense of Rowe, one might argue that Reid does not believe that actions are uncaused, since he also maintains that "neither existence, nor any mode of existence, can begin without an efficient cause" (267). If actions are caused, then they too must be effects, and thus subject to Reid's causal principle that "in order to the production of any effect, there must be in the cause not only the power, but the exertion of that power." But again it could be claimed on Reid's behalf that he has only committed himself to the view that effects *that are distinct from actions* require a prior action for their production, he has not committed himself to the view that actions themselves require a prior action for their production.

In response Rowe would point to another passage where he thinks the difficulty leaps from the page because Reid applies the causal principle to actions themselves, specifically to determinations of the will.²²

[The principle of sufficient reason] can have no connection with the dispute about liberty, except when it is applied to the determinations of the will. Let us therefore suppose a voluntary action of a man; and that the question is put, Whether was there a sufficient reason for this action or not? . . .

If the meaning of the question be, was there a cause of the action? Undoubtedly there was: of every event there must be a cause, that had power sufficient to produce it, and that exerted that power for the purpose. (329)

This application of the causal principle seems to undercut my argument that Reid intends it to apply only to effects which are not themselves actions. He applies it to actions because the principle applies to all events and actions are events.²³

There is, however, one governing passage that demonstrates that Reid is not guilty of an infinite regress:

In many propositions that we express universally, there is an exception necessarily implied, and therefore always understood. Thus when we say that all things depend upon God, God himself is necessarily excepted. I[n] like manner, when we say, that all that is in our power depends upon the will, the will itself is necessarily excepted; for if the will be not, nothing else can be in our power. Every effect must be in the power of its cause. The determination of the will is an effect, and therefore must be in the power of its cause, whether that cause be the agent himself, or some other being. (266)

²² Rowe, "Two Concepts," 54.

²³ James Van Cleve also raised this objection in conversation.

It seems to me that in order to be charitable in our interpretation of Reid we need to apply this claim about built-in exceptions to universal principles to his own causal principle. And the most charitable way to construe the exception is that the causal principle does not apply to every exertion that is the activating of a power. This is not to say these activations of power are uncaused, but just that they do not require a prior activating of a power. Thus it is open to Reid to maintain that the agent is the cause of exertions_(A) of liberty or self-government and exertions_(A) of the will and that the agent can produce them without any other exertions_(A).

Rowe proposes two solutions to the alleged infinite regress. He thinks the first requires a significant modification in Reid's theory, namely, to allow that there can be events, perhaps acts of will, that an agent causes without bringing about any other event as a means to producing them.²⁴ Now I think this is the correct solution, but, contrary to Rowe, I think it implies no significant modification of Reid's actual theory. It just is the theory Reid held.

Rowe's second proposed solution, which he thinks does not require a major modification of Reid's theory, is to deny that the exercise of an agent's power to produce a volition is an event. Rowe argues for the plausibility of such an interpretation by noting first, that for Reid every event is a change in a substance and second, that on an Aristotelian view of self-movers, a self-mover does not change in the unmoved part insofar as it exercises its capacity to move its movable part.²⁵ This is an unholy alliance of views. Aristotle's account of change is intimately connected to his doctrine of the identity of action and passion, according to which an agent's action is one and the same change as the passion undergone by the patient, and moreover, that change is located in the patient. So Aristotle says that the teacher's teaching is one and the same change as the student's learning, and that change, that acquisition of knowledge, is located in the student, not in the teacher.²⁶ Thus, the fact that Aristotle would say that the self-mover does not change in its unmoved part does not license the inference that its exercise of its capacity to move its movable part is not a change. On the contrary, Aristotle would say that the action of the unmoved part of a self-mover is a change located in the moved part. Furthermore, Aristotle's understanding of change depends crucially on his contrast between changes and activities. As already noted, Aristotle regards the exercise of certain capacities, such as the capacity of seeing, or knowledge of grammar, as activities that do not count as changes.²⁷ Thus, contrary to the view Rowe is trying to attribute to Reid by invoking Aristotle, Aristotle himself would deny that every event is a change. So Aristotle would never assent to the view that the exercise of power is not an event, and it would be highly uncharitable to attribute such a view to Reid, especially since, the alleged infinite regress being illusory, there is no need to.

²⁴ Rowe, "Two Concepts," 55. In his subsequent book on Reid, *Thomas Reid on Freedom and Morality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 151–53, Rowe abandons this solution, arguing that there can be no efficient cause of an agent's exertion of active power. I cannot make sense of the newer argument.

²⁵ Rowe, "Two Concepts," 63–64, n. 19.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Physics*, Bk. III, ch. 3, 202a13–202b22.

²⁷ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Bk. II, ch. 5, 417a21–417b28.

Timothy O'Connor also proposes that Reid be interpreted as denying that the exertion of active power is an event. O'Connor argues that the exertion of active power "is the instantiation of a causal relation between agent and volition, and Reid does not consider this to be an event."²⁸ His argument for this is that Reid treats the term 'efficiency' as synonymous with 'exertion of active power' and that Reid asserts that efficiency (or perhaps the notion of efficiency) "is a relation between the cause and the effect, similar to that which is between us and our voluntary actions." It is far from clear, however, that Reid thinks that the instantiation of a causal relation between cause and effect is not an event. Certainly the mere fact that he says that efficiency is a relation because cause and effect does not show that he thinks the instantiation of the relation between cause and effect is not an event. And the other passage that O'Connor claims confirms his reading is extremely problematic. In a letter to James Gregory, Reid states the following:

You speak of our having a consciousness of independent activity. I think this cannot be said with strict propriety. It is only the operations of our own mind that we are conscious of. Activity is not an operation of mind; it is a power to act. We are conscious of our volitions, but not of the cause of them.²⁹

O'Connor claims that this passage provides evidence that Reid thinks exertions of active power prior to and productive of volitions are not events, because if they were we would be conscious of them. However, this passage cannot support such an interpretation, because in the passage he identifies activity not with an exertion of active power, but with active power itself. Although Reid typically does identify activity with the exertion of active power, it is completely illegitimate to use an assertion about activity in a passage in which Reid explicitly identifies activity with power as providing evidence for his views about exertions of active power. Thus O'Connor fails to provide any plausible textual evidence that Reid thinks the exertion of active power is not an event. He then accuses Reid of failing to address squarely "the further question of why the obtaining of a causal relation between agent and volition (an exertion of active power) doesn't qualify as a kind of event."³⁰ It may appear, therefore, that O'Connor is being grossly unfair to Reid. He has followed Rowe in posing an illusory problem of an infinite regress, proposed a solution whose key element—that the exertion of active power is not an event—has no foundation in the text, and finally criticized Reid for maintaining such a view.

Nevertheless, I think there is a legitimate concern underlying O'Connor's criticism. On the view I have so far attributed to Reid, he can maintain that every event has a cause and still avoid an infinite causal regress by maintaining that there are some exertions—namely, those that are activations of the power of self-government or of the will—that an agent can cause without any prior exertion. The objection O'Connor seems to be pointing to is that the agent's causing that exertion is itself an event. In other words, the instantiation of the causal relation

²⁸ Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* [*Persons and Causes*] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47.

²⁹ Thomas Reid, *Philosophical Works*, vol. I, with notes and supplementary dissertations by Sir William Hamilton, introduction by Harry M. Bracken (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), 82–83. Quoted in *Persons and Causes*, 47.

³⁰ O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, 48.

between an agent and the activating of power would seem to be an event, and, if every event has a cause, one wonders what is the cause of that further event? Rowe also is concerned about this objection.³¹

As O'Connor notes, this objection applies equally well to event causal theories as to agent causal theories.³² If event x causes event y , then isn't event x 's causing y itself a further event needing a cause? There appear to be two possible solutions to the objection, either to deny that the instantiation of a causal relation is an event, or to deny that the instantiation of a causal relation is the sort of event that requires a cause. O'Connor's preferred solution is to concede that the instantiation of the causal relation is an event and to argue that it does not require a cause. His complaint against Reid is that Reid makes the mistake of denying that it is an event. But I would argue that Reid's attention is not focused on the instantiation of the causal relation, so there is no determinate answer to be extracted to the question of which solution he would adopt. Thus I am not entitled to assert with confidence that he is committed to the view that every event has a cause. Rather I think the strongest claim that can be made is that he thinks every exertion of power has a cause, and he avoids one potential regress by denying that every exertion of power requires a prior exertion of power.

In closing, I would like to mention one potential puzzle for Reid's account that remains on my interpretation. If we indeed have the power of liberty or self-government, then Reid seems to be committed to the view that every exertion_(E) of that power is successful, that is, if we exert our power of liberty or self-government then we always overcome the force of the opposing appetite, affection, or passion. If so, then how can Reid account for weakness of will? One possible explanation, which generates the puzzle, would be if he were to assert that there can be attempts to activate the power of liberty or self-government, that is, exertions_(AA) of the power of liberty or self-government, that fail. The problem is that there is no candidate power to which these exertions_(AA) can be attributed. It sounds less than promising to say that these exertions belong to the will. Reid would have to say, for example, that when I give in to my desire to play another game of FreeCell, what happens is that I bring about an exertion_(AA) of my will to activate my power of liberty so that it will overcome my desire to play FreeCell in order that I can then bring about an exertion_(A) of my will to continue to work on this paper, but that that exertion_(AA) fails to activate my power of liberty. This looks too cumbersome. Instead, I think Reid should not countenance the notion of attempts to activate the power of liberty or self-government. He could simply say that in cases of weakness of will I fail either because I do not activate my power of liberty or self-government at all, or because I do activate it but not to a sufficient degree to overcome the opposing passion, affection, or appetite—analogous to the way in which I might fail to lift a weight because I do not activate my power of lifting to the required degree.³³

³¹ Rowe, *Thomas Reid on Freedom and Morality*, 163–64.

³² O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, 53, 57–58, 61.

³³ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the UC Riverside agency workshop, May, 2002; at the Hawaii International Humanities Conference, January, 2003; at the Reid Society Meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, March, 2003; and at the Quadrennial Congress of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at UCLA, August, 2003. In addition to those people mentioned in the notes, I would like to thank Gary Watson, John Fischer, Hugh Marlowe, Dan Speak, Chris Yeomans, and Rebecca Copenhaver.