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Thomas Reid on Physical Causation

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In this paper, I examine Thomas Reid's view of physical causation. Reid's view is neither obvious, nor, as I shall argue, in line with what would seem to be a common sense understanding of the matter. The bulk of the paper aims to uncover both Reid's *conclusions* about the nature of causation and the *reasoning* that lead him there. To this end, I attempt to reconstruct the metaphysical alternatives available to Reid as well as the considerations by which he was evidently most compelled. I then make a close examination of the relevant texts to see how Reid negotiates these.

The following interesting results emerge: The metaphysical picture Reid settles on is a version of occasionalism—the view that regularities we observe in nature are not the result of the causal properties of the physical objects themselves, but the moment-by-moment divine ordering of events. Further, I suggest there are actually two separate lines of argument that lead Reid to this conclusion: An epistemological argument of Newtonian inspiration and a semantic argument of Humean origins. These considerations lead Reid to a form of skepticism about the notion of physical (non-agentic) causation; though the Newtonian line recommends a weaker conclusion than the Humean one.

Finally, I argue that Reid need not and, indeed, should not have been led to this occasionalist view: his broader philosophy provides both the motivations and resources to reject occasionalism in favour of the more appealing Lockean account.

Cause and Power

According to Reid, for an entity to be the *cause* of some change it must meet the following criteria: (a) It must act in such a way that it produces a change in some material object and (b) it must do so as a result of exercising its own power and

not merely by being acted upon by some outside power.¹

But what is required for a thing to 'exercise its own power?' Does a heart exercise its own power by pumping blood? Does a volcano exercise its own power by erupting and spewing lava? What exactly counts as a power? Reid confirms that we can have 'no notion' of cause and effect 'if we have none of power' (EAP, 515a). And so, if we are to attempt a reconstruction of Reid's notion of causation, we will have to focus our attention on what he has to say about 'power'.

Locke, Agent Power and Body Power:

One candidate theory of power Reid considers is offered by John Locke (EAP, 518b-520a). According to Locke, we have two notions of power corresponding to two types of powers in the world-the active powers of conscious agents and the powers of physical bodies.²

The notion of 'agent power' we get by means of our 'Faculty of Reflection' (*EHU*, XXI: iv, 111). That is, by consciousness of the 'operations of our minds,' we are made aware of our own powers to set our thoughts or bodies in motion towards various ends. Of this sort of power we have a 'clear and distinct' conception, according to Locke: It is an active power (a) by which we are able to 'command' the 'doing or not doing such and such a particular action'; (b) through *conceiving* some end and *willing* (that is, deliberately exerting ourselves) to achieve it (*EHU*, XXI:iv–v, 111–12).

Our idea of 'body power,' on Locke's view, is got by a collaboration of the faculties of Sensation and Reason. That is, we do not have any direct perception of these powers; yet, by means of the senses, we do observe changes occurring in objects. Moreover, convinced that 'like changes will for the future be made in the same thing, by like agents, and by like ways,' we place in one object the possibility of being changed, and in another the possibility of producing that change. And so, we come by our idea of 'body power' by inference. Thus we say that fire has a power to melt gold (*EHU*, XXI:i, 110). This power is attributed to the fire as a sort of dispositional property. So, we

¹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, edited by Dugald Stewart and Sir William Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1852; third edn), 511–711, 515a; hereafter cited in the text as *EAP*.

² John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Raymond Wilburn (London, 1948), ch. XXI:i-iv, 110–11. Hereafter cited in the text as as EHU.

do have a notion of power in bodies; yet, it is not as clear and distinct as our notion of 'agent power' since we have no direct experience of it, but arrive at it through inference (*EHU*, XXI:iv, 112).

Body Power and 'Occult Power'

We can get a clearer view of Lockean body power by contrasting it with what was pejoratively called 'occult power' by Locke's contemporaries. One sort of world-view that would certainly have answered to the charge of invoking occult powers is animism. It is characteristic of animist metaphysics that things we ordinarily think of as being lifeless or unthinking are imbued with will and intention. Hence, the sea might be thought to be angry and desirous of destroying a vessel when the water gets rough. From the point of view of early modern science, infusing physical objects with willful, self-moving powers would certainly count as introducing 'occult powers'. Animism, however, was not really a serious intellectual paradigm in modern Europe.

The primary intended target of the charge was the Aristotelian natural philosophy of the Scholastics. To see why the issue was considered important, consider modern scientific responses to two features of the Aristotelian system—the theory of substantial souls and the theory of gravitation. In the Aristotelian system, vegetative and animal souls are posited as substantial forms which are the cause of growth and mobility in living things. The difference between a living thing (say a plant) and an inanimate thing, is not just the complexity and organization of their material parts, but the fact that living things have substantial forms that enliven matter and dispose it to growth. Similarly, in Aristotelian physics, gravitation is explained by insisting that everything in the universe has its appointed station to which it strives to return. 'Stones fell toward the earth because they were aspiring to reach their proper place at the center of the universe'.³

The Aristotelian view of the natural world differs from the animist one in that it does not ascribe conscious willing or understanding to falling stones or growing trees. Nonetheless, it shares the belief that the non-human world is endowed with genuinely active powers (for growth and movement) which they exercise, not in simple reaction to some previous event, but as originators of the impetus to change. We might say the natural world, on this picture, is

³ Stephen F. Mason, A History of the Sciences (New York. 1962), 192.

endowed with non-conscious, non-willing 'unmoved movers' or 'first causes'. Their powers are exercised not by choice, but automatically; yet, they are not exercised by any sort of strict determination to do so by some previous cause – that is, they are genuinely active. To put it in admittedly modern terms, on the Aristotelian view, there is a plenitude of ghosts in the machine, a hierarchy of souls, each with its own active powers, organizing the causality of matter towards the exercise of their respective functions.

It is these sorts of powers that early modern philosophers were most concerned about in their repudiation of 'occult powers'. And the reason these needed to be repudiated was that they did not fit the emerging mechanical conception of the world. Consider, as a paradigm example, this passage from Descartes' *The World*, in which he invites his readers to think of the whole of nature on the model of a mechanism:

I should like you to consider that all these functions follow naturally in this machine simply from the arrangements of its organs, no more or less than the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from that of its counterweights and wheels, so that it is not at all necessary for their explanation to conceive in it any other soul, vegetative or sensitive, or any other principle of motion and life other than its blood and its spirits, set in motion by the heat of the fire that burns continually in its heart, and which is of a nature no different from all fires of inanimate bodies.⁴

On the conception of the world Descartes envisions, all change in the physical world is, in fact, motion—the movement of parts. Matter is an inert substance; no merely material thing is self-moving or can internally generate motion. Thus, any movement or change in a physical object is the result of either the continuation of existing motion or the transfer of motion from another object. Vegetative functions such as growth and animal functions such as bodily movement can also be explained as movement of material parts—that is, mechanically. A consequence of all this is that substantial forms and other such powers become ontologically unnecessary.

So how do Lockean 'body powers' compare with the 'occult powers' of the Aristotelians? The exercise of 'occult powers' is genuinely active; that is, though they are exercised without intention or understanding, they are not

⁴ René Descartes, "The World' (1632), in *René Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (New York, 2000), 30-43 at 43.

determined to do so by previous events. They involve a causality of their own that organizes the causality of mere inanimate matter towards the exercise of various functions. Lockean powers, by contrast, are not properly active at all. That is, not only are they exercised non-volitionally, they are also determined to do so by previous material events. Thus, Lockean body powers are consistent with the deterministic, mechanical conception of the world. Locke admits that we often speak of active and passive powers in bodies, but he insists that, actually, all body powers are passive:

Neither have we from body any idea of beginning of motion. A body at rest affords us no idea of any active power to move; and when it is set in motion itself, that motion is rather a passion than an action in it. For, when the ball obeys the motion of the billiard stick, it is not any action of the ball, but bare passion. Also, when by impulse it sets another ball in motion that lay in its way, it only communicates the motion it had received from another ... we observe it only to *transfer*, but not to *produce* any motion. The idea of the *beginning* of motion we have only from reflection on what passes in ourselves (*EHU*, XXI: iv, 112).

In this passage, we see Locke insisting that body power is not the same as the 'occult powers' of the Aristotelians; body powers are determined to be exercised by previous action. They are not originators of action (that is, first causes) as human agents are. In fact, they are tertiary qualities (EHU, VII:x, 46)-dispositions of a thing to determine changes in another thing when they themselves are acted upon in certain ways.

Reid on 'power'

We are now in a position to pose again the questions motivating this essay. We've noted that, according to Reid, for a thing to be a cause it must produce some change by 'the exertion of its power' (EAP, I:i, 515a). Reid also claims that bodies cannot be causes, properly so-called. The significance of this claim will depend on what he means by 'cause'; what he means by 'cause' will, in turn, depend on his view of 'power.' I see two possibilities:

(1) *The Conservative Interpretation*: Reid does not deny that bodies have Lockean passive powers, but only that they cannot have active powers-that is, 'occult powers.' Because they cannot have active powers, they cannot be

the originators of change (i.e. first causes) in the same way that agents can. Nonetheless, one physical event can determine another, so long as it is itself determined to do so by previous events. Reid's claim that bodies cannot be causes properly so-called is really only a benign joining of the modern chorus of repudiation of 'occult powers,' not a rejection of the deterministicmechanical character of the physical world.

(2) The Radical Interpretation: Reid is claiming that bodies cannot have power at all (passive or active). On this interpretation, his claim that bodies cannot be causes amounts to the claim that one physical event cannot determine another-even 'passively'. In other words, Reid is not just joining the ranks of denouncers of 'occult powers', he is actually rejecting the deterministicmechanical picture of the natural world.

In the remainder of this essay, then, we will allow three questions to guide us: (i) What does Reid mean when he claims that bodies cannot be causes? (in other words, should he be understood in terms of conservative or the radical interpretations above?) (ii) What are his reasons for making such a claim? (iii) Should he have been convinced by these reasons?

Metaphysical Alternatives

What Reid's view of physical causation comes down to metaphysically is difficult to determine. It will help to lay out some of the available philosophical alternatives he would have had at his disposal. Two options already described—animism and Aristotelianism—were available to Reid, though, no doubt unpalatable. Here are several others that would have been, at very least, creditable and live options:

(1) Cartesian Naturalism: I take this to be both Descartes' own considered position⁵ and the dominant understanding of physical causation among early modern mechanical philosophers. On this view, the physical world is to be understood on the model of a machine, as we've already observed: All change is the result of the movement of underlying parts. And while physical objects cannot originate motion or change, they do transfer existing motion from one object to another via contact action. Thus, one body can causally determine change in another (though only as a result of itself being determined to do so); and it is in terms of such underlying mechanisms of

⁵ Kenneth Clatterbaugh, The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy, 1637-1739 (New York, 1999), 65.

motion transference via contact action that all phenomena in the physical world are to be explained.

The physical world, thus, has a degree of *causal autonomy* on the Cartesian picture. It is in this sense that the Cartesian understanding of physical causation is *naturalistic*. The interactions between physical bodies involve a form of physical determination. The nature of this causal relation is roughly this: Event A causes event B just in case A's happening directly *determines* or *makes it the case that* B happens. '*Directly* determines' here means that there is no intermediate event that determines B's happening which is not itself determined by A to happen. 'Determines' is supposed to indicate a form of necessitation that is neither the result of logic or direct willing.

Importantly, Cartesian naturalism does not eliminate the role of divine or human wills, and so is perhaps best called 'quasi-naturalism'. As immaterial substances, both God and human minds are able to interact with the physical order. God creates the world, infuses it with its original motion, and (at least, on some accounts) intervenes occasionally in the case of miracles. Likewise, human beings, in virtue of their immaterial minds, are able to causally alter the physical world on the basis of volitions that are not themselves determined by previous mechanical events. The metaphysics of Cartesian Naturalism, thus, includes both body-body causal interactions (where the mode of causation is physical determination via contact action) and mind-body causal interactions (where the mode of causation is mental determination via volition).

(2) Newtonian Naturalism: Newton's 1687 Philosophia Naturalis Principia Mathematica seemed to challenge, to a certain extent, the mechanistic assumptions of the Cartesian picture, by postulating causal forces (such as gravity and magnetism) that do not operate through contact action. It turns out that Newton's own view of the metaphysics of causation (as we shall see in the next section), is less decided than this. However, Newton's work made available a metaphysical view that shares all the basic features of Cartesian mechanical philosophy, except that body-body causal interactions can operate at a distance, rather than exclusively through contact action.⁶

(3) *Malebranchean Occasionalism*: According to Nicholas Malebranche, the sequence of events that we witness in the world is not causally ordered as the naturalistic pictures allege. That is, no physical event determines the occurrence of a subsequent physical event; instead, the actual order of events

⁶ This metaphysical interpretation of Newton, I take it, represents the views of figures such as Samuel Clarke (see Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy*, 1637–1739,177).

is determined moment-by-moment by the will of God.⁷ So, properly speaking, fire does not cause (determine) the melting of wax; instead, each time wax is placed by fire, God directly determines a wax melting event to follow. The event of the wax being near the fire is merely the *occasion* for God to exercise his efficacious will for a melting event, not the cause of the melting event. Fortunately, God acts in such a way that like events always (except in the case of miracles) follow like events—so there is regularity to the patterns of events in our world.

Importantly, Malebranche not only denies body-body causal interactions, but also mind-body causal interactions in human beings. Consequently, the (more or less accurate) correspondence between mental representations and the physical world is not the result of any causal process that links body to mind; instead, the presence of external objects is merely the *occasion* for God to cause a perception of such an object in our minds. Further, human volition does not cause action in the physical world, but serves as the *occasion* for God to alter the physical world accordingly.

(4) *Berkelean Occasionalism*: Not all occasionalists went as far as Malebranche. George Berkeley, for instance, agreed in rejecting the efficient causality of physical bodies; however, he held that both divine *and human* wills could exercise causal power. Human volition, thus, is the only form of finite causality; all other regularities are simply the result of God's direct ordering.

(5) Humean Regularity Theory: The simplest way to describe the Humean view of causation is that it is 'Malebranche without God'. That is, for Hume, a cause is simply 'an object followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second'. Like Malebranche, Hume denies that there is any sort of necessary or determining relations between physical bodies. At most there are exceptionless regularities – 'constant conjunctions' – between similar events. It is simply a habit of mind that leads us to suppose that not only *will* event A follow event B, but that it *must* do so. It is a determination of the *mind* to move from the first to the second, not a determination in the *objects*.⁸ This picture is now commonly referred to as the regularity theory of causation. There is some reason to think Hume

⁷ This characterization oversimplifies Malebranche's position somewhat. It is more likely that Malebranche thinks God wills the total sequence of world events at creation (including both regularities and exceptions), without needing to act 'moment by moment' by a vast number of distinct acts of will (Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy, 1637–1739*, 112–27).

⁸ L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (Oxford, 1978; 1888), 156, hereafter cited in the text as THN.

might not have, in the end, accepted this view himself; however, *Reid* certainly understood him in his way.

A consideration of his general influences and an examination of the texts in which the topic of causality is discussed, I think, make these the most plausible metaphysical alternatives available to Reid. The first two–Cartesian and Newtonian naturalism–are both in line with the view expressed by the conservative interpretation that physical bodies have Lockean passive powers and, thus, that there is such a thing as physical causation. The latter three, however, all deny relations of causal determination among bodies, and so, would fall within the radical interpretation.

I now want to turn our attention, and indicate the primary considerations motivating Reid's discussion of physical causation. In each of the texts where he discusses physical causation, two figures loom large–Isaac Newton and David Hume. Ultimately, I think Reid's arguments against physical causation are drawn from these two sources.

Newton's Agnosticism

Reid writes that, according to Newton, 'when physics shall be carried to utmost perfection, there would not be found in the whole of science such a conception as that of cause; nothing but laws of nature ...'.⁹ To understand what is at the bottom of Newton's banishment of "causes" from completed physics, we should consider the sorts of views he was positioning himself against. On the one hand, Newton shares with most early modern philosophers the antagonisms already discussed towards the 'occult powers' of Aristotelian science (*Fundamental Principles of Natural Philosophy*, 17).¹⁰ On the other hand, Newton was also critical of many of the mechanical explanations of Cartesian science. In particular, the Cartesians–convinced that all action must involve contact action (as previously noted)–had offered various explanations of observed regularities in terms of unobserved mechanisms: Gravity was explained by postulating vortices in the cosmic ether, magnetism by 'magnetic effluvia.' In fact, when Newton offered his own theory of gravitation as a

⁹ Thomas Reid. 'Of Power' (1792), in John Haldane and Stephen Read (eds), From The Philosophy of Thomas Reid: A Collection of Essays (Oxford, 2003), 18; cited hereafter in the text as OP.

¹⁰ Isaac Mewton, *Fundamental Principles of Natural Philosophy* in H.S. Thayer (ed.), Newton's philosophy of nature: selections from his writings (New York, 1953),17; hereafter cited in the text as *FPNP*.

force acting at a distance, he was accused of reintroducing occult forces into natural philosophy.¹¹ Newton's response was twofold. On the defensive end, he clarified that by calling gravity a force he did not mean to suggest that he was attributing forces in the 'true and physical sense' to objects (*FPNP*, 17). And, more offensively, he insisted that to resort to postulating 'causes' of gravity such as unobserved mechanisms (i.e. vortices in the cosmic ether) was mere hypothesis, not true explanation.¹²

Newton's banishment of 'causes' from natural science, then, should be understood as follows: He was opposed to explanations of the observable in terms of the unobservable-that is, of 'phenomena' in terms of hidden, underlying 'causes.' For this reason he thinks that a completed science will be a set of laws describing the observable relations and properties of natural phenomena, but will not include any 'causes' in the sense of further explanations of the observed in terms of unobserved forces or mechanisms. However, it was never Newton's intention to transform this methodological agnosticism into a metaphysical principle. He remained convinced that the observable regularities in the phenomena he was describing had some cause. It was just that, *qua* natural philosopher, he thought it fruitless to speculate on the nature of these.

Hume's Semantic Reductionism

Hume's skepticism about physical causation is not rooted in particular controversies in natural philosophy, but in more strictly metaphysical considerations. I have already described the view Hume ends up with; I now want to run through the reasoning that led him there.

As a devotee of what Reid calls the 'Ideal theory', Hume is committed to the principle that all our ideas are derived from sensory experience. That is, all our ideas are either copies of impressions or some combination of these impressions. Consequently, the question of the nature of physical causation admits of a straightforward skeptical answer: when we examine the sequence of events we call a 'cause' and an 'effect', what impressions do we have? Certainly, Hume writes, we perceive 'that they are *contiguous* in time and place, and that the object we call cause *precedes* the other we call effect' (*THU*, I:xvi, 155). However, in 'no one instance can I go any farther, nor is it possible for me to discover any third relation betwixt these objects'. That is, when we

¹¹ Mason, A History of the Sciences (New York, 1962), 203-4.

¹² Ibid., 204

examine our idea of physical causation, we find an impression of one object being contiguous to and preceding another; however there is no impression of a necessary connection between them—of a determining relation.

Hume also considers the notion of 'power'. His analysis of efficacious power in objects parallels his analysis of cause. When we examine our idea of an object we call a cause, we 'never have any impression, that contains any power or efficacy' *(THU*, I:xvi, 161). All we have is a repeated impression of one object contiguous to and preceded by another object; we have no impression of a power or a disposition to bring about an effect.

It is important to note that Hume's skeptical conclusion regarding physical causation and power is not just epistemic—it is also semantic. Hume is not simply claiming that we cannot know if a physical object can be a (determining) cause or if a physical object can have power, he is claiming that we have no such idea as 'physical determination' or 'power'.

Several theses stated

Building on the historical preliminaries above, I hope to establish the following theses in what remains:

(1) Reid's argument against physical causation has three components: (a) He offers an epistemological argument recommending agnosticism about the true location and nature of the causes of change in the physical realm; (b) he offers a semantic argument to the effect that the idea of non-intelligent cause is literally incomprehensible; (c) he offers a developmental explanation of our ordinary causal discourse to justify his uncharacteristic divergence from common sense in this matter.

(2) Reid's epistemic argument is motivated by his commitment to Newtonian scientific methodology and recommends the Newtonian conclusion that we should be agnostic about the nature and location of physical causes for the purposes of natural philosophy. On the other hand Reid's second, semantic argument is distinctly Humean–and urges the correspondingly stronger rejection of physical causation.

(3) The metaphysical view that these arguments lead Reid to accept-and which he implicitly recommends-is occasionalist.

(4) This picture is, however, problematic by Reid's own lights; by adopting it, he is unable to respond to an objection he takes to be decisive against Hume. (5) Reid ought to have endorsed a naturalistic view of causation: in the first place because he would then have been able to avoid the objection just mentioned; in the second place, because Reid's philosophy is uniquely capable of defusing the semantic argument; in the third place, because it would have better suited his commitment to the *prima facie* justification of our common sense beliefs.

Textual Evidence for Thesis 1

The thesis that Reid's case against physical causation has three distinct components should be advanced with some qualification. It is not clear that Reid always distinguished the first two components as starkly as this thesis might suggest. In fact, in 'Of Power', they are not clearly delineated at all. Instead, Reid seems to suggest that Newton and Hume offer essentially the same 'reasoning' against physical causes, and all his focus is on the semantic argument (OP, 18). Nonetheless, I think the epistemic and semantic arguments are *logically distinct* stages in Reid's overall strategy. Moreover, in the other key passages I am drawing on -EAP I:v and Reid's letter to Kames (December, 16, 1780)–there is an evident *textual division* of the arguments.

Consider, first, 'Chapter Five' of 'Essay One' in the *Active Powers*. The first seven paragraphs are obviously concerned with epistemology: he opens by noting that it is not 'evident' that bodies can be possessed of active power; this is because we 'perceive changes innumerable in things without us ... but we *perceive* neither the agent nor the power' (*EAP*, I:v, 522b). For the purposes of ordinary life, this is no cause for worry, since to 'know the event and the circumstances that attended it, and to know in what circumstances like events may be expected' is sufficient' (*EAP*, I:v, 522b). But if we insist on speculating about the cause of these regularities, 'we find various conjectures and theories, but no solid ground on which we can rest.'

The conjectures available for the causes of the observed regularities in nature include: God directly causes the order of events (as suggested by Malebranche); some subordinate intelligent agents do (animism); or various theories claiming that non-intelligent instruments do (as, for instance, in theories of 'occult power', but also in Lockean powers, *EAP*, I:v, 522b). However, which, if any, of these conjectures is right, Reid concludes, 'is a *mystery* placed beyond the limits of human *knowledge*'; the wisest people are those 'who are sensible that they *know* nothing of the matter' (*EAP*, I:v. 522b).

Paragraph seven makes it clear that Reid is dropping the epistemic question and moving on to something new.

That something new is, evidently, a consideration of the same question from a semantic angle. He begins by citing Locke approvingly to the effect that 'the only clear *notion* or *idea* we have of active power, is taken from the power that we find in ourselves ...' (*EAP*, I:v, 523a). Since this power in ourselves is necessarily tied up with volition and understanding, it follows 'that the active power, of which only we can have any distinct *conception*, can be only in beings that have understanding and will' (*EAP*, I:v, 523a). He concludes: 'Power to produce any effect, *implies* power not to produce it. We can *conceive* no way in which power may be determined to one of these rather than the other, in a being that has no will' (*EAP*, I:v, 523a).

The same textual division between the epistemic and the semantic argument is evident in Reid's letter to Kames (Dec., 16, 1780).¹³ The first seventeen paragraphs deal with a variety of questions about explanation and physical causation. However, it is clear Reid's concerns here are epistemological. In the first place, Newton's agnosticism about discovering causes in natural philosophy is obviously guiding Reid. Again he lists the various alternative theories of the causes of the observed changes in nature–direct ordering by God, ordering by subordinate intelligent beings, ordering by non-intelligent instruments. And again he insists that 'our *reason* is not able to *discover*' which theory is true–'we can do little else than *conjecture'* (*Ka*, para. 14, 58).

However, by paragraph nineteen, his approach shifts towards the semantic. He notes that he is 'unable to find any distinct *conception* of active power but such as I find in myself' (*Ka*, para. 19, 59). This conception is tied up with will and understanding, so, 'if there be anything in an unthinking inanimate being that can be called active power, I *know not what it is* and cannot reason about it' (*Ka*, para. 19, 59).

The Epistemic Argument

Thus far, I have argued that Reid's case against physical causation contains both an epistemic and a semantic argument, and I have sketched the basic moves of the argument as it is presented in the relevant texts. I now want to give more focus to the logic of the arguments by giving them a more precise

¹³ Sir William Hamiton (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 56–60; hereafter cited in the text as *Ka*.

form, and reflecting on their significance. The epistemic argument can be stated thus:

We know change occurs in the natural world because we 'perceive changes innumerable in the things without us.'

Further, we know that all changes must have some cause. Reid believes it is a necessary truth that 'whatever begins to exist, must have a cause which produced it' (*EIP*, 455a).

But, in order for something to be a cause, it must act on its own power. Yet, we observe no powers producing this change-neither inherent in the bodies themselves, nor in some external being.

Therefore, we cannot know what the causes of changes in nature are or whether bodies can be causes of such change.

Two comments should help clarify the significance of this argument. First, it is certainly Newtonian in character. It concludes from the fact that physical power is unobserved that we cannot know the true causes of changes in nature. Moreover, it recommends agnosticism only. This explains the heavy referencing of Newton in the relevant passages.

Second, the conclusion here should, I think, be read in the spirit of the radical interpretation. That is, the epistemic argument does not simply conclude that we cannot know the originating impetus of changes in the natural world (that is, first causes). It claims that, '[we] see an established order in the succession of natural events, but we see not the bond that connects them together' (*EAP*, I:v, 522b). It is determining relations as such (including passive determining relations) that are not observed. Now this argument does not yet assert that bodies do not have (passive) powers and, consequently, cannot (even passively) produce changes in nature. But it does conclude that we cannot *know* if they have such power and produce change.

The Semantic Argument

Reid's semantic argument urges a much stronger conclusion. It runs as follows:

For a thing to be a 'cause', it must possess its own power by which it produces some change.

To have its own 'power', a thing must be able to both produce and

to not produce a change in a given set of circumstances.

To be able both to produce and to not produce a change, a thing must be endowed with will and understanding.

Bodies are not endowed with will and understanding.

Therefore, bodies are not able both to produce and not to produce a change.

Therefore, bodies do not possess their own powers.

Therefore, bodies cannot be causes, properly so-called.

I call this argument 'semantic' because it turns on the meaning of the words 'cause' and 'power'. The second and third premises contain the crucial moves of the argument. Reid justifies these premises with the following reasoning: We do not arrive at any conception of power from our observations of the changes in bodies; instead, we get our conception of power from consciousness of our own exertions of power. But the conception we get here is of a power to act and to not act. This conception is tied up with the ability to *conceive* of an end and *will* either to produce it or to not produce it. So our only conception of power is of agent-power, of power involving will and understanding. The notion of a non-intelligent/non-willing power is literally inconceivable for us; we cannot understand what someone might mean by these words. Reid writes:

'If any man, therefore, affirms, that a being may be the efficient cause of an action, and have power to produce it, which that being can neither conceive nor will, he speaks a language which I do not understand' (EAP, I:v, 525a).

Again, some comments are in order. First, the conclusion of the semantic argument is stronger than that of the epistemic argument. Not only can we not know whether bodies can be causes, we cannot even conceive of them being causes. Second, this argument resembles Hume's. It concludes from the fact that we cannot perceive any power or causal determining relation in bodies, that we can form no conception of such a power or relation. Reid, thus, mirrors Hume's own reductive analysis of the common notion of physical 'cause':

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 that goes before it (*OP*, 22).

Finally, the semantic argument confirms the radical interpretation. Reid is not just claiming that bodies cannot have active power (leaving open the possibility that they may have Lockean passive power); he is claiming that the only conception of power we have is of the active powers of intelligent agents. We have no conception of passive power. Thus, bodies not only can't originate change, they can't even be intelligibly said to determine change passively.

Common sense

The third component of Reid's case against physical causation is to explain the divergence of his analysis of causation from our ordinary causal discourse. We might think that this stage of Reid's argumentative strategy is tangential to his skeptical conclusion—and in another philosopher it would be. However, for Reid, a break with the presuppositions embedded in the practice and discourse of ordinary life requires some justification—that is, a special sort of story explaining how the folk get it wrong.

Reid offers a developmental-historical account of the origin of our practice of ascribing causal properties to inanimate objects. He suggests that our original conception of power is got from consciousness of 'our ordinary active exertions' (*OP*, 19). Yet, noticing innumerable changes in the natural world and being convinced that all change must have some cause, we project our own power into the objects undergoing change. At first, this results in an animistic understanding—we imbue lifeless and unthinking things with will and intention. However, this practice of projecting active powers onto the physical world doesn't end with the passing of animistic metaphysics. Both the 'Peripatetics' and 'the vulgar' continue to 'attribute real efficiency or productive power to unintelligent and even to inanimate things' (*OP*, 20). When they 'say that heat melts ice, and that cold freezes water, they conceive the heat and cold as really efficient causes' (*OP*, 20). This habit of speaking of bodies as causes has become entrenched in our language and folk explanatory practices.

There is a telling ambivalence in Reid's account of the 'popular' sense of cause. On the one hand, he wants to insist that we have no coherent conception of non-intelligent power/causation. And, yet, he does not always seem fully convinced of this, and seems to admit we do have some notion of physical

causation. This ambivalence is most evident in the concluding paragraph of 'Of Power'. He suggests that there are two types of power–agent power and body power–which are 'essentially different' from each other. And he adds that 'their definition is as different as their nature' (*OP*, 22). In fact, he seems to offer a definition of physical power: it is a power that is exercised without volition or understanding; it is a power that is exercised 'with necessity'–that is, 'must, without miracle, be exerted to [its] utmost whenever the circumstances concur which by the laws of nature are necessary to [its] exertion'. This seems very much like the Lockean conception of 'body power'; moreover, it seems perfectly comprehensible.

However, Reid backs off almost immediately and insists that by 'power' here we really '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 that goes before it' (*OP*, 22). The 'determination' element drops out again, and all we are left to 'mean' by it is exceptionless contiguity and temporal order.

Reid as Occasionalist

Ambivalence aside, I think Reid did ultimately settle on an Occasionalist view of metaphysics of causation. At first glance, this claim might seem to conflict with Reid's repeated declarations of agnosticism about the true causes of changes in nature. However, if the general picture I am offering here is right, then these declarations only represent provisional conclusions based on the first stage of Reid's arguments. That is, from the point of view of natural philosophy we are unjustified in settling on one of the available metaphysical pictures. However, Reid thinks there are considerations outside of natural philosophy that enable us to reject some pictures. He says as much in his letter to Kames:

Of all these systems... there is not one that, in my opinion, can be either refuted or proved from the principles of natural philosophy. They belong to metaphysics, and effect not natural philosophy, whether they be true or false. Some of them, I think, may be refuted on metaphysical principles ... (*Ka*, para. 16, 59).

If there are considerations from the point of view of metaphysics that enable us to rule out some 'systems', what are they and where do they point us? In the first place, Reid believes it is a necessary truth that 'whatever begins to exist, must have a cause which produced it' (*EIP*, 455a). So, any system in which there are changes that are not caused at all can be ruled out. This eliminates the Humean picture, which recognizes only regularities or constant conjunctions (*EIP*, VI:vi, 456).

In the second place, the semantic argument eliminates any system that postulates non-intelligent powers/causes. If I am right that we should accept the radical interpretation of Reid, then this eliminates not just the Aristotelian picture with its 'occult powers', but also any view that attributes Lockean passive powers to physical bodies (in other words, both Cartesian and Newtonian naturalism).

Further, it would be an error of hypostatization to think that the 'laws of nature' could serve as a metaphysical basis for the physical determination. A 'law of nature' is a 'rule according to which the effects are produced'; however, as Reid explains, 'there must be a cause which operates according to these rules'. Laws are descriptions of regularities; descriptions do not move objects any more than 'rules of navigation' navigate ships (*OAP*, I:vii, para 47).

These considerations seem to leave Reid to choose among some systems which postulate_either God or some other subordinate intelligent agents as the causes of the changes in nature. Reid clearly does not take animism seriously (*OAP*, IV:iii, para 283). Moreover, given that he thinks we have independent reasons for believing that God exists, the postulation that other supernatural entities have been delegated causal responsibilities seems ontologically superfluous.

By a process of elimination, then, the only option left for Reid appears to be some version of occasionalism. There is textual support for this conclusion. In the letter to Kames, Reid writes that he 'can conceive only two ways' in which the activity of matter can be guided by the exertions of an 'intelligent Being' (*Ka*, para. 21, 59). The first he attributes to Leibniz and gives reasons to think it is highly implausible. The second way is precisely the one he attributes to Malebranche several paragraphs earlier (*Ka*, para 15, 58). That is, the 'intelligent Being' guides matter 'by continual influence exerted according to its situation and the situation of other particles' (*Ka*, para.21, 59).¹⁴

¹⁴ If this conclusion is right, then it accords with a conclusion recently drawn by Nicholas Wolterstorff concerning Reid's theory of perception–namely, that he sees sensations as 'signs' that occasion perceptions rather than as causes of those perceptions (Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemlogy*, 55). What I am suggesting here is that the occasionalism Wolterstorff sees in Reid's theory of perception and concept-formation is part of a more general occasionalist tendency

The version of occasionalism most plausibly attributed to Reid, however, is not the total version articulated by Malebranche. As we have seen, Reid thinks we do have an idea of active power in our own agency. In fact, he thinks we must presuppose such a power in our activities as practical agents (*OAP*, IV:vi). And so, *contra* Malebranche, his metaphysics retains a belief in the efficacious power of human beings as they exercise their will. This is precisely the view we attributed to Berkeley earlier–an unsurprising result, given Berkeley's general influence on Reid's thought.

What Reid Should Have Said

Occasionalist metaphysics is hardly a live option for contemporary philosophers. So saddling Reid with this position will lead most of us to think that he took a wrong turn on the matter of physical causation. However, I think Reid took a wrong turn *even by his own lights*. In his discussion of Humean regularity theory, Reid criticizes Hume's position as having no way to distinguish causally-related constant conjunctions from merely accidentally-related constant conjunctions. He writes:

It is sufficient here to observe, that we may learn from [Hume's view of cause as constant conjunction] that night is the cause of day, and day the cause of night; for no two things have more constantly followed each other since the beginning of the world (*EIP*, VI:vi, 457b).

That is, we believe that there are some things that are constantly conjoined, but not causally related; so constant conjunction cannot serve as a sufficient account of cause. Yet, it is not clear that Reid, in the end, is left with any way to distinguish accidental constant conjunctions from causal ones. There are no powers or determining relations left in the things themselves on the basis of which to draw the distinction. And, presumably, God wills that day follows night every bit as much as that 'melting wax events' follow 'wax near fire events'. Reid's view, then, seems vulnerable to the same objection he took to be decisive against Hume.

But not only does occasionalist metaphysics create problems for Reid, he had the philosophical *resources* and *motivation* to endorse the more plausible

naturalistic picture: Reid's theory of concept-formation is not tied to the Ideal Theory-that is, on the Reidian account, our concepts are not constructions from sensations and, so, are not semantically reducible to these. Reid could have said that, in seeing two events constantly conjoined, we are_led to form a *concept of* and *belief in* a power inherent in the one by which it determines the other. There would be no reason to require some 'impression' of necessity/ determination or of power in order to be able to form such a conception-and so the semantic argument could be diffused. Moreover, it could have been a relative conception of power along the Lockean lines: a disposition of an object which is exercised necessarily whenever it is determined to do so by some precipitating set of circumstances. No 'occult powers' here. If I am right, this is precisely the conception that Reid was tempted to admit we do, in fact, have in his essay 'Of Power.'

Perhaps most significantly, if Reid had taken this approach, he would not have had to break with the common sense beliefs embedded in our ordinary practice and discourse concerning causality.

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