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Jennifer McKitrick
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jmckitrick2@unl.edu

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BOOK REVIEW

Gideon Yaffee, *Manifest Activity: Thomas Reid's Theory of Action.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 158 pp., $52.00 hardcover

Gideon Yaffee's *Manifest Activity* is an important contribution to both the studies of Thomas Reid's views and action theory. Reid is known as an early advocate of an agent-causal view of free will; more recent advocates include Roderick Chisholm. *Manifest Activity* is a well-appreciated effort at bringing Reid's particular version of agent-causalism and his arguments for it into the contemporary discussion. *Manifest Activity* should be of interest to Reid scholars, action theorists, and anyone who wants to explore a focused, critical analysis of a fascinating thinker.

Yaffee's writing is clear and readable, yet rigorous and detailed. Yaffee's aim in each chapter is clearly laid out, and the structure of each is clear. Some chapters start out with a reconstruction of one of Reid's argument, and then Yaffee assesses each of the premises in turn. Other chapters begin with an interpretive puzzle, which Yaffee solves with resources from the Reid corpus. At times, the dialectic gets complex, but concise summaries that tie the arguments together are a welcome end of each chapter. Skipping the footnotes is not recommended, as they often contain significant reflections, extensions, or qualifications of points in the main text, if not important references to historical and contemporary texts.

In his introduction, Yaffee writes that Reid takes himself to be following the methods of Newton, according to which ''the primary aim of scientific inquiry is the identification of first principles'' such as the law of universal gravitation (p. 3). Mathematical, empirical, and philosophical inquiries all have the same structure and the same goal, and first principles are all similar in certain respects. Quoting Reid, Yaffee states that the only support for first principles is ''that, by the constitution of our nature, we are under a necessity of assenting to them. Such principles are parts of our constitution'' (p. 4). However, so-called first principles seem like a very mixed lot, and it does not seem like our constitution puts us under a necessity of assenting to basic laws of nature. Yaffee seems aware of this,

mentioning in a footnote ''it might seem strange to claim that for him the basic laws of nature are first principles. After all, basic laws are not always dictated by common sense'' (p. 3). Yaffee's only reply to this strangeness is that basic laws of nature like the law of universal gravitation are Reid's favorite examples of the first principles of contingent truths. While Yaffee gives textual support for his interpretation of Reid, he never questions the plausibility of the view itself. Yet it is not clear that basic laws of nature from which particular facts follow are principles that we are compelled to believe, rather than elusive a posteriori truths about the world.

The terminology that Yaffee introduces in his introduction is crucial to understanding his discussion of Reid's views. A ''cause in the physical sense'' is something which, by the laws of nature, the effect always follows, ''laws of nature'' being rules according to which the effects are produced (p. 6). An ''efficient cause'' is an entity endowed with active power to produce an effect, or the originator of a sequence of events. A ''power'' is a quality possessed by the entity from which change flows (p. 7). With such terms in mind, Reid's thesis can be put: Actions of an agent are events of which the agent is the efficient cause.

In chapter 1, Yaffee considers Reid's argument from the power to exert for the claim that will and understanding are necessary for active power. According to Reid, the only real causes are not mere instances of regularities, but efficient causes, which all have minds. Following Reid, Yaffee asserts that this claim follows from three natural beliefs, and that the contrary position according to which mindless objects have active power ''is shown, by Reid's argument, to be unstable'' (p. 37). Yaffee seems to be endorsing Reid's argument and conclusion, which he interprets as follows: an agent has a power only if she has the power to exert it; an agent has the power to exert only if she has a will; an agent has a will only if she has an understanding; therefore, an agent has power only if she has a will and an understanding. Yaffee tries to motivate support for the first premise by looking at Reid's criticisms of Thomas Hobbes's conception of power, according to which an agent has a power to act if and only if, if she chooses to act, then she acts. Reid's criticism of Hobbes's conception of power is a variant of a standard criticism of compatibilism: that an action cannot be in the agent's power if the choice to perform that action is not also within his power. This criticism suggests that an agent has the power to perform an action only if the agent in question has the power to choose to perform the action, which may be some reason for believing the first premise of the argument.

Perhaps Yaffee shows that Reid's criticism of Hobbes supports the first premise of the argument from the power to exert or that Reid's particular

variant is an improvement on the standard criticism. However, whether Hobbes's conception of power or his critic's conception of power is correct, both of them suppose that the entity with power is an agent, capable of making choices. Yaffee's aim is to show that Reid shows that there is no power without a mind. But the defense of the first premise of the argument from the power to exert considered by Yaffee presupposes that the power in question is that of an agent. Showing that one conception of what it is for an agent to have power is superior to another conception of what it is for an agent to have power does not go towards showing that only agents can have power. Furthermore, Reid uses the term ''exertion'' to refer to the feeling of effort. Consequently, the first premise of the argument from the power to exert is based on the assumption that a thing with power experiences a feeling, which is question begging in the context of an argument against the claim that mindless entities can have power.

The argument for the second premise of the argument from the power to exert, which we can call the conceivability argument, raises similar concerns. Yaffee's construction of the conceivability argument proceeds as follows: our only conception of exertion derives from the consciousness of our own exertions; all of our own exertions are volitions; we are unable to conceive of intellectual powers different in kind from the powers we possess; an active power would be different in kind from those we possess if the exertion of it did not consist in volition; there are no active powers different in kind from those which we are able to conceive; therefore, all exertions of active power are volitions.

Let us consider the third premise of the conceivability argument, that we are unable to conceive of intellectual powers different in kind from those we possess. Again, the contrast is between our intellectual powers and a different kind of intellectual power. If ''intellectual'' is used in a sense that does not presuppose a mind, that sense is not mentioned. What is inconceivable, according to the premise, is a different kind of intellectual power, not a non-intellectual power. The possibility of something without a mind having power is not directly considered, let alone refuted.

Yaffee writes that the first, fourth, and fifth premises of the conceivability argument are relatively unproblematic and gives them little discussion. He says that the first premise of the conceivability argument is an upshot of David Hume's lesson about causation, that we never perceive power, only constant conjunctions between types of events. What Yaffee fails to note is that Hume explicitly rejects the view that we can derive a conception of power from our own exertions. There too, we observe only constant conjunctions, in this case of feelings of exertion and bodily move-

ments. Yaffee says nothing of Hume's direct challenge to Reid's view of manifest activity.

Yaffee finds support for the fifth premise of the conceivability argument, that there are no active powers different in kind from those we are able to conceive, in Reid's view that inconceivability implies impossibility. According to Reid, things which people are, by nature, incapable of conceiving are impossible. However, regardless of Reid's endorsement, the fifth premise of the conceivability argument and the principle supporting it are not unproblematic. As Thomas Nagel argues, perhaps we cannot conceive of what it is like to navigate through the world with echolocation. However, it would be wrong to conclude that it is impossible for a creature to navigate through the world with echolocation. Our inability to conceive of space as having other than three dimensions does not show that string theory could not possibly be true. Yet possibly, such phenomena are things, which our nature as human beings excludes us from being able to conceive.

Yaffee suggests that there is some evidence that Reid's argument for second premise of the argument from the power to exert is rooted in thoughts about the inherently subjective nature of mental experience. Arguably, we cannot know what the subjective experiences of others are like. We only know the nature of experiences we have had, and know nothing of the nature of unfamiliar experiences. If unfamiliar experiences are inconceivable, and the inconceivable is impossible, then unfamiliar experiences are impossible. By parity of reasoning, we cannot know what it is like not to have experience at all. We cannot experience non-experience. Perhaps Reid's argument is that since we know what it is like to efficiently cause something, and we cannot know what it is like to be a mindless object efficiently causing something, mindless objects cannot be efficient causes. However, if the conceivability argument proves anything, it proves too much. We know what it feels like to fall. We cannot know what it feels like to be a falling stone. But such necessary ignorance does not show that stones cannot fall.

Perhaps Reid's argument, as Yaffee interprets it, could be restated be saying that: we have an idea of efficient causation; the source of this idea was either external events or our own volitions; external events could not have been the source of our idea; therefore, the source of our idea of efficient causation was our own volitions; our conception of our own volitions essentially includes subjective experience of exertion; therefore, our idea of efficient causation essentially includes the subjective experience of exertion. A subjective experience of exertion requires will and understanding. If successful, this argument supports the conclusion that our idea of efficient causation is of something that requires will and understanding. It falls short of showing that efficient causation requires will and

understanding. A relation between entities in the world might not be constrained by our ability to conceive of them. Furthermore, it is not clear that our ability to conceive of efficient causation be so constrained, and that the content and applicability of an idea must be limited by its source. If the source of our idea of efficient causation is our own volitions, we can extrapolate from that, leaving out the subjective, intellectual part, and applying the concept to inanimate matter.

In chapter 2, Yaffee explores a different argument for the claim that efficient causes must have will and understanding: the argument from the power to do otherwise. According to the argument from the power to do otherwise, power to perform and action requires the power not to perform that action, and that requires a will. The major premise of the argument from the power to do otherwise is that, if an agent has the power to perform an action, then she has the power not to perform it. This premise is defended against Locke's counterexample of a man who freely stays in a room, unaware that he could not leave if he wanted to. The reply is roughly that, even in this case, the person has the power to try to perform the action.

In the case of persons, the premise that an agent with a power to act has a power not to act has some plausibility. However, this premise does not seem to apply to mindless things. For example, acid does not have the power to not turn litmus paper pink. But that does seem to support the claim that acid does not have the power to turn litmus paper pink. Again, Yaffee considers a debate over the powers of agents, and the possibility of mindless power does not enter the discussion. This absence is odd, since this is just this possibility, which is supposed to be refuted in chapters 1 and 2. Perhaps there is some kind of first cause argument that supports the idea that only agents can originate event sequences, that is, be efficient causes. Perhaps the idea of a mindless event or object originating a sequence of events is incoherent. But those arguments are not found in *Manifest Activity*.

In chapter 3, Yaffee argues that Reid shows that all events are efficiently caused; that every event is brought about by an entity with active power. These events include human actions, efficiently caused by people, and natural events, efficiently caused by God. Yaffee does not question Reid's view that events, which are physically caused, that is, which happen in accordance with a law, are efficiently caused by the author of that law. Yet Yaffee notes that Reid acknowledges that it is one thing operate in accordance with laws and another thing to be caused. It follows that it is one thing to set up the laws, and another to initiate the events, which occur in accordance with those laws. If a pawn moves a space during a chess game, the author of

the rules of chess seems like a distant causal factor at best, rather than the power behind that move. Part of Reid's view discussed by Yaffee in chapter 3 is that all events serve the ends of some creature. Either people are acting to serve their own ends, or God set up the laws to serve the ends of His creation. Central to this picture is a belief in divine providence. Yaffee never defends this belief, nor offers an argument for the existence of God, which is necessary to support Reid's causal picture of the world. It is fine to place Reid's views in the context in which they were offered, consistent with his larger belief system. However, it is less clear what these arguments have to offer people with secular world views.

In chapter 4, Yaffee considers Reid's argument for the claim that human beings are efficient causes of their actions that derives from the observation that people make and execute plans. To make and execute plans, an individual must adopt a principle of behavior, and act in accordance with it. Being the author of the rule he follows, an agent is an efficient cause of his behavior. However, this argument rests on the same questionable principle which shows God to be the efficient cause of all physically caused events: that the author of a rule is the cause of events which happen in accordance with the rule.

In chapters 5 and 6, Yaffee provides responses to the view that people do not cause actions, but motives do. In chapter 5, Yaffee addresses Reid's argument against the view that motives are efficient causes of action. Reid's argument is roughly that: a motive is a state of affairs that an action is aiming towards; typically, if that state of affairs ever exists, it does not exist until after the agent performs the action; something that does not exist when the event occurs cannot be the efficient cause of that event; therefore, motives are not efficient causes of actions.

A proponent of the view that motives efficiently cause actions could reject Reid's definition of motives as states of affairs that actions are aiming toward and instead claim motives are prior thoughts about such states of affairs. Beyond the linguistic issue, an adversary of Reid's could restate his view as: thoughts about the end in virtue of which an action is performed are the efficient causes of actions. Furthermore, it is not clear why Reid does not use the resources Yaffee discusses in the first two chapters of *Manifest Activity* for a quicker and more intuitive argument against the view that motives cause actions. If Reid has indeed shown that an efficient cause must have will and understanding, a motive, construed either as an end or a thought about that end, is not the sort of thing that could be an efficient cause. If the arguments in chapters 1 and 2 are correct, there is no need to delve into the obscure discussion about the non-existence of abstract entities we find in chapter 5.

In chapter 6, Yaffee discusses Reid's arguments for the claim that motives are not among the physical causes of human action; that there are no laws of nature covering motives and human actions. The first argument, that there is no non-trivial yet accurate way to specify any laws governing human behavior, comprises perhaps the most interesting and well-argued part of *Manifest Activity*, and is well worth reading for anyone concerned with action theory, free will, or the like. Reid also argues that motives are not necessary for actions, and that the influence of a motive is like the influence of advice, and both are unlike the influence of physical causes. Here, Reid adopts the view that motives are thoughts about ends, not the ends themselves. Reid's view is more subtle than Yaffee originally states. There are laws that govern some human actions, since a person who exhibits a character trait acts in accordance with a rule. It is more correct to say that, on Reid's view, the only laws governing an agent's behavior are the laws that the agent legislates.

In his concluding chapter, Yaffee defends the position that Reid is an agent causalist who maintains that there is a basic causal relation between agents and events. Some philosophers might hold this position to stop an infinite regress of acts. If an agent's overt behavior was caused by some prior event of the agent's making an effort, and that event was caused by the agent trying to act, which was in turn caused by some previous state, and that chain of events will extend back, prior to the history of the agent, or stop somewhere, not at an event, but at the agent herself. However, according to Yaffee, Reid equates an agent's trying with the agent's doing, in the case where the agent successfully acts. However, in the case where the agent fails to carry out her intended action, the agent merely tried, but did not do.

To assess this view, let us consider the man who wants to exit a room and does. His trying to leave the room is the same act as his leaving the room. Let us also consider a perfect duplicate of the man who wants to exit the room, but is blocked at the last minute by invisible bars. The duplicate has the same intentions and performs the same bodily movements as the man who successfully exits the room. Their tryings are perfectly similar, but the duplicate's trying is not also a doing. It seems to follow from Reid's view, as Yaffee interprets it, that two instances of behavior could be intrinsic duplicates, but differ with respect to whether they are doings.

Jennifer McKitrick
Department of Philosophy
1010 Oldfather Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588-0321
USA