



## The Concept of Active Power in the Philosophy of Thomas Reid

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Research Article

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on the concept of active power as an ability that activates the agent, who is the implementer of common sense principles in Thomas Reid's philosophy. Reid argues that the use of active power in the process of realizing the principles of common sense in action is very important for the morality of the agent. While the correct use of active power ensures the emergence of honorable and moral actions, the wrong use of this power causes the emergence of evil and immorality. For this reason, Reid defines the concept of active power as a distinctive feature of humans, such as the ability to think. In addition, Reid argues that people are conscious of the existence of their active power. Thus, people are also aware of their own limits. By being aware of other people's active powers, they can regulate their moral relationships. After briefly summarizing Reid's philosophical method in the article, the relationship between common sense principles and active power, which are presented as two important components of action, is discussed.

**Keywords:** Active power, action, common sense, agent, Thomas Reid.

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## Introduction

Although Thomas Reid (1710-1796) is not a philosopher whose name is frequently heard in the history of philosophy and whose philosophy is widely taught, he is a thinker who made important contributions to the history of philosophy and especially the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Scots Common Sense School founded by Thomas Reid and his contemporary criticisms of David Hume's (1711-1776) philosophy within the Enlightenment philosophy are very valuable. Reid made a serious effort to understand and analyze Hume's philosophy, and then systematically criticized Hume's philosophy through his own system of thought. Although the philosopher dealt with Hume's philosophy in more detail, he did not hesitate to criticize names such as Descartes (1596 - 1650), John Locke (1632 - 1704), and Berkeley (1685 - 1753).

Although Reid made important contributions in many fields such as philosophy of religion, philosophy of language, epistemology, philosophy of mind and ethics, because of Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), James Beattie (1735 - 1803) and James Oswald (1703-1793) and the Scottish Common Sense School, his common sense philosophy is better known. However, Reid's philosophy still has not received the attention it deserves in the last century. Reid and his ideas are still open to interpretation beyond common sense philosophy.

Those who study Reid's philosophy have generally interpreted it in two different ways as rationalist and sentimentalist. The rationalist definition argues that rationalism predominates in Reid's philosophy, based on the existence of moral principles. On the other hand, many points in his philosophy that do not conform to rationalist views are also noteworthy. The philosopher does not base solely on the existence of moral principles. He also claims that there is a feeling for these principles in normal and mature people. Thus, moral principles are confirmed by an intuitive sense. In this case, it would not be correct to categorize Reid's philosophy, especially his moral understanding, as rational or sensu-

ous. Reid's philosophy includes features and traces from both paradigms.<sup>1</sup>

Reid uses linguistic analysis as a method in his philosophy. Because the thinker gave great importance to the use of words and language. For this reason, Reid was extremely careful while conceptualizing words and using concepts and subjected them to some linguistic analysis. According to him, all philosophers should be able to use language well before philosophizing. Primarily used concepts, the use of these concepts in daily language, their technical use, or their use as terms should be determined and separated. Thus, misunderstandings about the concept are avoided and the intent can be revealed. As a matter of fact, Reid makes a long conceptual analysis before revealing his main thought in *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. When using the concept, he reveals what it means as meaning and the meanings of the concepts related to this concept. Reid, who uses language as a tool and argues that philosophical thought can be conveyed more easily with the correct use of language, also uses the concepts related to the main concept to explain the main concept clearly.

The reason why Reid's philosophy is referred to with the concept of common sense is not only the Scottish Common Sense School. Reid developed a theory based on the criticisms he brought to Hume's philosophy. He found Hume's idea-impression explanation insufficient and tried to justify the subject-object relationship through common sense. As a result, he put forward an intuitive philosophy that brings together agent-centered rational and sensuous elements. The reason why the agent is at the center of the theory is that apart from being the carrier of common sense and morality, an agent has an active power, unlike other living things. In other words, Reid establishes the ontological relationship between the subject and the object through the use of the skill, which he calls active power and which he claims enables the

<sup>1</sup> Terence Cuneo, "Thomas Reid," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reid-ethics> (Accessed: 21 July 2021).

agent to both act and behave correctly. In this case, in Reid's philosophy, an agent must be able to use his active power appropriately in order to act in accordance with the principles of common sense. For Reid, a reasoning ability that does not show itself in action will lose its value.

The focus of the essay is the concept of active power, which has an important place in Reid's philosophy. After Reid puts the principles of common sense based on his moral philosophy, he ensures the realization of these principles on a practical basis through the agent. According to him, the agent takes part in some concepts such as freedom, will, sufficient reason and active power in the process of acting. Among these concepts, active power is the first and most important reason for the action to take place. The right use of this power will lead to the right actions, and its wrong use will lead to wrong actions. Therefore, for Reid, the application of these principles is as important as common sense principles. The agent should act according to the principles of common sense by using his active power correctly in his actions.

### **An Ontological Binding Between the Agent and the Action; Active Power**

Reid points out that we make some judgments, voluntarily or involuntarily, in the face of events throughout our lives. According to the thinker, some of these judgments are intuitive, while others are based on certain arguments. It is not in our power to judge as we please because, by our nature, the judgment process continues irresistibly. In the process of intuitive judgment, a normal and mature person can fully grasp the process without having to believe it to be right or wrong. But judgment hangs on until a strong conviction is formed about right or wrong. Other propositions cannot be understood earlier than believed. These two processes have been given to humans by nature. Propositions of the second type are called axioms when used in science, while in other uses they are called first principles, common concepts, self-evi-

dent facts, common sense principles or first principles.<sup>2</sup> Reid's purpose in making this distinction is to separate judgments made by first principles from judgments that can be attributed to reasoning power.

In order to reveal this distinction more clearly, Reid underlines that a person has to use a certain effort in reasoning. According to Reid, we learn to reason by trying, sometimes by failing, that is, by making an effort, just as we learn to walk. But judgment on clear principles is as spontaneous as we know how to swallow food. We know it quite naturally, without any training, without any particular effort.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the existence of these self-evident principles must be accepted. Being skeptical about these is not a problem that can be solved by reasoning anyway.

In other words, Reid argues that people are given some clear principles by nature and that people by their very nature should believe in these principles. Because of this feature in human nature, people do not look for a reason when making judgments with these principles.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to these self-evident truths, a person reaches a certain power of judgment. Thus, they can be in a position that can think independently and avoid prejudice. But agreeing on and defining these principles can always be a contentious issue. Therefore, Reid mentions some features and criteria that the principles should include;

1. They must be the basis of all knowledge obtained by reasoning.<sup>5</sup>
2. "Some first principles yield conclusions that are certain, others such as are probable in various degrees from the highest probability to the lowest."<sup>6</sup>
3. The fact that these principles are the basis of all research

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1785), <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/authors/reid> (Accessed: 20 June 2021), 242-243.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 244.

<sup>4</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 228.

<sup>5</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 244.

<sup>6</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 244.

will enable humanity to obtain consistent information and develop.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it will be easier to overcome difficulties, make new inventions and solve problems thanks to principles. This is already evident in experience.

4. Honest people do not differ in the content and function of these principles.<sup>8</sup> According to Reid, when these people disagree about the first principles, the special abilities given by nature will show people which are meaningful and which are meaningless in thought and practice. People have special instruments in their nature to reach consensus by consensus.<sup>9</sup>

But still, the question marks about the first principles have not dissipated. There are still many situations or principles that fit these characteristics. In this case, the issue of which beliefs and judgments are first principles will become controversial. In order to solve such problems, Reid argues that these principles and beliefs are universal, that they were known by all humanity before philosophy, that their denial is an absurd act, and that those who deny actually use these principles in their practical lives.<sup>10</sup>

After drawing a general picture of Reid's principles of common sense, he also explains how these principles will take place in judgment and actions through the agent. He argues that the agent that he appoints as the implementers of the principles have certain competencies and characteristics. Therefore, he places the agent as well as common sense at the center of his moral philosophy. In order for the principles to be applied correctly and efficiently, the perpetrator must be able to properly use his abilities such as power, specificity, will and sufficient reason

For Reid, the realm in which morality manifests itself is in the actions of the agent. In order to talk about the moral status of an individual, we rely on his actions. What makes principles and

<sup>7</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 249.

<sup>10</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 248-251.

knowledge valuable is the power to direct people about their actions. Knowledge is valuable to the extent that it can broaden and direct our power of action. Action, on the other hand, is an important indicator of whether a person uses his power correctly or not. While all honorable and dignified behavior stems from the correct use of this power, evil, corruption and immorality are related to the abuse of this power.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is not enough to be aware of common sense and first principles in Reid's philosophy. The power to perform the action, which is a bridge between this knowledge and action, is also very important. Depending on the use of this power, which Reid defines as active power, knowledge and principles acquire a moral or immoral quality. Reid establishes a relationship between this power and the action and agent.

According to Reid, the active power in humans is a faculty that distinguishes them from animals and other living things, as well as the power of thinking. Animals' actions are often driven by their instincts, appetites, and desires. They follow the strongest of them. In this case, there is no will. Therefore, we cannot hold animals responsible for their actions. Humans, on the other hand, are motivated by different and higher things than animals. A certain value measurement can be made in human actions, but this distinction cannot be made in other living things. Any human being can take it upon himself to follow a worthwhile path, whether his appetite or feelings are important. When he fulfills this task, he may feel an inner sense of satisfaction and victory, unlike appetite satisfaction. In this case, the active power of man gains a very important quality. Because active power has a distinctive feature. Whether a person is morally good or bad depends on the use of this power. Again, the value of knowledge is related to the use of this power. In this case, active power is as distinctive as intellectual power.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1788), <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/authors/reid>, Accessed: 25 June 2021, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 1.

Knowledge of intellectual and active powers is important to the extent that it helps them to be used properly. According to Reid, acting properly is far more valuable than thinking solidly or reasoning sharply.<sup>13</sup> Because the indicator of these abilities of people is again their actions. A person who lacks sharp judgment will avoid extremes as long as he acts with average accuracy. But it will be meaningless for people who do not have actions in accordance with their correct reasoning to reason correctly.

According to Reid, who associates the realization of common sense and the proper use of first principles with the correct use of active power by the agent, what is meant by the concept of active power should be understood correctly. For this reason, Reid subjects the concept of active power to linguistic analysis. In the linguistic research process, the philosopher examined and explained the concept in detail and asked, "What are the characteristics of the agent?" "What is the relationship between the change brought about by the action of the perpetrator?" "What are the reasons and factors that push the perpetrator, who causes the change by performing the action, to this action?" "Is the perpetrator free to act?" He aims to find answers to this type of questions.

For this, firstly, he makes explanations about the concept of power and its properties. According to Reid;

1. Power is not something we perceive with our external senses or are consciously aware of.<sup>14</sup>

This shows that power cannot be tested with the senses and is not an operation of the mind. In fact, "every operation of the mind is an effort of the mind power; but we only become instantly conscious of the operation. We remove the power behind the operations from the operations again; but this inference cannot form the subject of consciousness."<sup>15</sup> Reid has a different point of view on this subject than Locke, who argues that all our simple ideas

<sup>13</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Aynur İlhan Tuñç, *Moral Understanding of Thomas Reid*, PhD Dissertation (Ankara: Ankara University, 2003), 96.



are obtained through external sensations or consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

According to him, “reasoning is necessary in order to perceive the concept of power.”<sup>17</sup> This reasoning is possible by observing and experiencing the change of simple ideas. Here, Locke argues that while one realizes that there is a change in some things with reasoning, others will see that this change is the cause. In other words, two kinds of power will be realized; active (active) power that changes power, and passive power that changes power. For Locke, the source of power is spirit. According to him, power belongs to the person who acts. He attributes the power that does the action to a medium ore. For example, “when the ball moves with the kick of the billiard stick, it is not an act of the ball, but its passion”. When this ball moves another ball, it will not generate power, but it may have transmitted the motion. The real power is the one who moves the billiard stick. According to Locke, there is a power in our minds to do or not to do an action, to continue or not to do it. Locke calls this power will.<sup>18</sup> He calls it “the actual exercise of this power that directs any particular action or renunciation of will”.<sup>19</sup>

Reid argues that we do not have the idea of power, so as not to fall into contradiction, because he realized that we have David Hume's idea and consciousness of power (he observed that power is assumed to be without experience or reasoning), as opposed to Locke. According to him, people mislead themselves when they say that they have such an idea. What actually happens is that people attribute power to an individual to perform an action. Because

<sup>16</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com>, Accessed: 25 June 2021, book I, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Tunç, *Moral Understanding of Thomas Reid*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 72-74.

<sup>19</sup> Here, Locke's inference from power is about whether the will is a substance or tool to which power is attributed, or whether it is the agent who has power. Locke fixes freedom on these two points. The issue to be discussed is whether the perpetrator with power has influence or initiative over his will. Locke's negative answer to this question is criticized by Reid.

this assumption is repeated over and over, we infer from experience that a person has power and can use it.<sup>20</sup> Despite this, Reid argues that man has the idea or concept of power but is not conscious of having power. At this point, Reid examines the state of being conscious of something and says that it should not be taken as we use it in daily life. In such everyday situations, consciousness can be affected by some factors.<sup>21</sup>

2. While we have a direct grasp of some things, we grasp some things through their connections, power is of the second kind.<sup>22</sup>

According to Reid, our thoughts about all the qualities that Locke calls secondary are also of the kind that we grasp through connections, like power. In all cases that come through our senses or in which we are conscious, information comes directly. We can have an opinion about some things, both directly and indirectly. The concept of power exists even though it has no connections or indications. But their signs cannot exist without power.<sup>23</sup>

3. It is clear that power is quality and must be attributed to something. It cannot be argued that power exists without a subject. But contrary to ordinary opinion, it can be said that power exists without attributing it to any subject or thing as quality. In addition, power is a quality that can be diversified not only as a degree but also as a type.<sup>24</sup>

We can distinguish degrees and types of power according to the effect they produce. Therefore, the power to fly differs from the power of reason because of its effects. There is a species difference between them. But the strength to carry a weight of fifty kilograms differs from the strength of carrying a weight of one hundred kilograms, not in type, but degree.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hacı Mustafa Açıköz, *Sağduyu Eylem Felsefesi* (Ankara; Elis Yayınları, 2017), 135.

<sup>21</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 5.

4. When a power is not used, we cannot conclude that it is not possessed, and when power is used only to a certain degree, we cannot deduce that a higher degree is not possessed.<sup>26</sup>

Reid explains this situation with two examples; a person has the power to speak even if he does not say anything in a given situation. Or the man who carries 10 kilograms has the potential to carry 20 kilograms.

5. Some qualities have opposites, some don't. And power is one of those without opposites.<sup>27</sup>

Reid also examines the concept of weakness, which he foresees as criticism within the scope of this article. For him, weakness is not the opposite of strength. This concept includes only power defect or lack of power. The reason why Reid made explanations about the concept of power is his desire to separate this concept from the concept of active power and to reveal the difference between the two more clearly. Another important reason is the effort to show that we have an idea of power against the philosophers who argue that we do not have an idea of power.

Reid also examines the concept of active after the concept of power, as he argues that in order to convey thoughts and ideas correctly, the concepts should be analyzed in terms of grammar and their use in sentences. Accordingly, the word active was not always used to indicate the action that was taken at that moment. Although the action is not active at the moment, it can be seen as active because it is thought to be active. Or it can be thought that the activity continues because the effect of the action continues. The reason why Reid even shows such misuse is his desire to use language as a means of evidence. According to Reid, the emergence of such thoughts about active action or power, even if it is wrong, in the human mind actually indicates the existence of the concept of active power. In other words, when Reid exemplifies the usage of the word active in daily life, he proves the existence

<sup>26</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 5.

of the concept of active power in minds, even if it is wrong or incomplete.<sup>28</sup> In fact, while he distinguishes the concepts of active and passive, he argues that the fact that languages have active and passive voices is an indication that there is a great difference between these concepts.

Reid uses the concept of active power to distinguish the power to act from the power to think. According to Reid, the powers of seeing, hearing, remembering, discerning, judging and reasoning are speculative powers. The power to perform a physical task, whether based on ability or not, is active power. The use of active power will cause an action to occur. Every action leads to some changes. As a matter of fact, this situation shows that the change occurs because of an action or because of the end of the action. The cause is used for the situation that produces change, and effect is the product of that change. If one thing causes a change in another through active power, it is said to be passive. At this point, Reid states that words such as action, cause, effect, and operation are related to the concept of power. According to him, if the concept of power were meaningless as some philosophers claim, these words would also have to be meaningless or incomplete.<sup>29</sup>

Reid's argument that all humans are active forces is mental operation used by anyone with a mind and necessary for the mundane tasks of life. Whenever we try to do something, try to do something, think of doing something, if we decide to do something, we actually have a belief that we have the active power for it. Or whenever someone thinks they can fly to the moon, we don't consider them sane because we know they don't have the strength to do so. Another point where we feel active power is the belief that when we give advice, order or encourage someone to do an action, we have the active power to do what we say in them. On the other hand, when someone makes a promise to us, we are more or less aware of whether he has the power to fulfill it. At this

<sup>28</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 6.

point, Reid sees the basic belief on which promise is based on the existence of active power. Without the belief in the existence of active power, people would not make promises or believe the promise. With this argument, Reid also argues that a person can realize not only his own active power but also the active power of other people with whom he has a relationship. For him, the main source of power is God. God has given us this power free of charge and can take it back at any time.<sup>30</sup>

After examining the concept of active power in detail through Reid's explanations, we can list the results of active power in Reid's moral understanding as follows;

1. In the human mind, there is clearly a principle that allows everything that occurs, to affect or change actions or things.
2. Everything that changes must either have the power to change itself or be changed by another power. Having the power to change or being able to make changes on something is an indicator of having active power. In this equation, active power can also be associated with many concepts; passivity, agency, competence, etc.
3. The fact that we intend, reflect on, or perform an action indicates that we believe we have the necessary active power for that action.

These main features show that active power is the basic ability in the emergence of action. People are responsible for their conscious actions. In this case, the correct use of this skill is vital for people. Active power is also an important ability for people to show their change and development in the practical field. Because people can put their theoretical and intellectual knowledge and experience into action through active power. Thus, unlike other living things, humans will have the ability to consciously change, develop and transform.

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<sup>30</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 10.

## Conclusion

Although common sense principles are brought to the fore in Reid's philosophy, the process of moving these principles from the theoretical ground to the practical field is also very valuable. According to Reid, the next step in people's judgments is to turn those judgments into action. Some first principles in humans are the first elements that initiate this judgment process. After that, the step of taking action will come as a result of these judgments. The agent which has a very important place in Reid's philosophy is involved in both steps. In the judgment process, common sense principles lead him to a certain thought. This process can occur consciously or unconsciously. Then, the perpetrator takes action or does not act based on the thought/judgment he has reached thanks to his active power. When the action takes place, there will be impressive consequences for the agent or his environment. The fact that the agent does not perform the action is because he is aware of his active power. Evaluating the judgment, he has reached, the agent will also determine the meaninglessness of carrying out the action thanks to his active power. Thus, the agent also knows his own limits. Reid argues that a person can also be aware of other people's active strengths. According to him, people will thus have the chance to understand the limits of the people in front of them and arrange their relationships accordingly. For example, we can more or less predict whose commitment or promise will be fulfilled, and we can determine our relationships with people or our expectations from them accordingly.

Indeed, Reid argues that the use of active power is directly related to morality. According to him, the correct use of this power given by God leads to the emergence of moral and good actions, while its wrong use causes the emergence of immoral and bad actions. So just being aware of the principles of common sense is not enough for Reid. Thanks to the active power of the agent, he will carry these principles to his actions and in this way, he will be subjected to a moral evaluation. At this point, the concept of active power plays a decisive role in Reid's philosophy between the agent

and his action. Morality, which is included as common sense principles in the agent, is put into action with the activation of the active power, and thus the agent can represent his common sense judgments in the practical field.

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