

# Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind

Thomas Reid

1788

ESSAY I—OF ACTIVE POWER IN GENERAL.

CHAPTER IV.

OF MR HUME'S OPINION OF THE IDEA OF POWER.

THIS very ingenious author adopts the principle of Mr Locke before mentioned—that all our simple ideas are derived either from sensation or reflection. This he seems to understand, even in a stricter sense than Mr Locke did. For he will have all our simple ideas to be copies of preceding impressions, either of our external senses or of consciousness. “After the most accurate examination,” says he, “of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exception, and that every simple idea has a simple impression which resembles it, and every simple impression a correspondent idea. Every one may satisfy himself in this point, by running over as many as he pleases.”\*

I observe here, by the way, that this conclusion is formed by the author rashly and unphilosophically. For it is a conclusion that admits of no proof, but by induction; and it is upon this ground that he himself founds it. The induction cannot be perfect till every simple idea that can enter into the human mind be examined, and be shewn to be copied from a resembling impression of sense or of consciousness. No man can pretend to have made this examination of all our simple ideas without exception; and, therefore, no man can, consistently with the rules of philosophizing, assure us, that this conclusion holds without any exception.[27]

The author professes, in his title page, to introduce into moral subjects the experimental method of reasoning. This was a very laudable attempt; but he ought to have known, that it is a rule in the experimental method of reasoning, that conclusions, established by induction ought never to exclude exceptions, if any such should afterward appear from observation or experiment. Sir Isaac Newton, speaking of such conclusions, says, “Et si quando in experiundo postea, reperiatur aliquid, quod a parte contraria faciat; tum demum, non sine istis exceptionibus affirmetur conclusio oportebit.”\*\* “But,” says our author, “I will venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exception.”

Accordingly, throughout the whole treatise, this general rule is considered as of sufficient authority, in itself, to exclude, even from a hearing, every thing that appears to be an exception to it. This is contrary to the fundamental principles of the experimental method of reasoning, and therefore may be called rash and unphilosophical.

Having thus established this general principle, the author does great execution by it among our ideas. He finds, that we have no idea of *substance*, material or spiritual; that body and mind are only certain trains of related impressions and ideas; that we have no idea of *space* or *duration*, and no idea of *power*, active or intellectual. [28]

Mr Locke used his principle of sensation and reflection with greater moderation and mercy. Being unwilling to thrust the ideas we have mentioned into the *limbo* of non-existence, he stretches sensation and reflection to the very utmost, in order to receive these ideas within the pale; and draws them into it, as it were by violence.

But this author, instead of shewing them any favour, seems fond to get rid of them.

Of the ideas mentioned, it is only that of power, that concerns our present subject. And, with regard to this, the author boldly affirms, “That we never have any idea of power; that we deceive ourselves when we imagine we are possessed of any idea of this kind.”\*\*\*

He begins with observing, “That the terms *efficacy*, *agency*, *power*, *force*, *energy*, are all nearly synonymous; and therefore it is an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest. By this observation,” says he, “we reject at once all the vulgar definitions which philosophers have given of *power* and *efficacy*.”

Surely this author was not ignorant, that there are many things of which we have a clear and distinct conception, which are so simple in their nature, that they cannot be defined any other way than by synonymous words. It is true that this is not a logical definition, but that there is, as he affirms, an absurdity in using it, when no better can be had, I cannot perceive.

He might here have applied to *power* and *efficacy* what he says, in another place, of *pride* and *humility*. “The passions of pride and humility,” he says, “being simple and uniform impressions, it is impossible we can ever give a just definition of them. As the words are of general use, and the things they represent the most common of any, every one, of himself, will be able to form a just notion of them without danger of mistake.”\*\*\*\* [29]

He mentions Mr Locke’s account of the idea of power—that, observing various changes in things, we conclude. that there must be somewhere a power capable of producing them, and so arrive at last, by this reasoning, at the idea of Power and Efficacy.

“But,” says he, “to be satisfied that this explication is more popular than philosophical, we need but reflect on two very obvious principles; first, *That Reason alone can never give rise to any original idea*; and secondly, *That Reason, as distinguished from Experience, can never make us conclude, that a cause, or productive quality, is absolutely requisite to every beginning of existence*.”

Before we consider the two principles which our author opposes to the popular opinion of Mr Locke, I observe—

*First*, That there are some *popular* opinions, which, on that very account, deserve more regard from philosophers, than this author is willing to bestow.

That things cannot begin to exist, nor undergo any change, without a cause that has power to produce that change, is indeed so popular an opinion, that, I believe, this author is the first of mankind that ever called it in question. It is so popular, that there is not a man of common prudence who does not act from this opinion, and rely upon it every day of his life. And any man who should conduct himself by the contrary opinion, would soon be confined as insane, and continue in that state, till a sufficient cause was found for his enlargement. [30]

Such a popular opinion as this, stands upon a higher authority than that of philosophy; and philosophy must strike sail to it, if she would not render herself contemptible to every man of common understanding.

For though, in matters of deep speculation, the multitude must be guided by philosophers, yet, in things that are within the reach of every man's understanding, and upon which the whole conduct of human life turns, the philosopher must follow the multitude, or make himself perfectly ridiculous.

*Secondly*, I observe, that whether this popular opinion be true or false, it follows, from men's having this opinion, that they have an idea of power. A false opinion about power, no less than a true, implies an idea of power; for how can men have any opinion, true or false, about a thing of which they have no idea?

The *first*, of the very obvious principles which the author opposes to Mr Locke's account of the idea of power, is—*that Reason alone can never give rise to any original idea.*

This appears to me so far from being a very obvious principle, that the contrary is very obvious.

Is it not our reasoning faculty that gives rise to the idea of reasoning itself? As our idea of sight takes its rise from our being endowed with that faculty, so does our idea of reasoning. Do not the ideas of demonstration, of probability, our ideas of a syllogism, of major, minor, and conclusion, of an enthymeme, dilemma, sorites, and all the various modes of reasoning, take their rise from the faculty of reason? Or is it possible, that a being, not endowed with the faculty of reasoning, should have these ideas? This principle, therefore, is so far from being obviously true, that it appears to be obviously false. [31]

The *second* obvious principle is—*That Reason, as distinguished from Experience, can never make us conclude, that a cause, or productive quality, is absolutely requisite to every beginning of existence.*

In some "Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man," I had occasion to treat of this principle, that every change in nature must have a cause; and, to prevent repetition, I beg leave to refer the reader to what is said upon this subject, Essay vi. chap. 6. I endeavoured to shew, that it is a first principle, evident to all men come to years of understanding. Besides its having been universally received, without the least doubt, from the beginning of the world, it has this sure mark of a first principle, that the belief of it is absolutely necessary in the ordinary

affairs of life, and, without it, no man could act with common prudence, or avoid the imputation of insanity. Yet a philosopher, who acted upon the firm belief of it every day of his life, thinks fit, in his closet, to call it in question.

He insinuates here, that we may know it from *experience*. I endeavoured to shew, that we do not learn it from experience, for two reasons.

*First—Because it is a necessary truth, and has always been received as a necessary truth. Experience gives no information of what is necessary, or of what must be.*

We may know from experience, what is, or what was, and from that may probably conclude what shall be in like circumstances; but, with regard to what must necessarily be, experience is perfectly silent.

Thus we know, by unvaried experience, from the beginning of the world, that the sun, and stars rise in the east and set in the west. But no man believes, that it could not possibly have been otherwise, or that it did not depend upon the will and power of Him who made the world, whether the earth should revolve to the east or to the west. [32]

In like manner, if we had experience, ever so constant, that every change in nature we have observed, actually had a cause, this might afford ground to believe, that, for the future, it shall be so; but no ground at all to believe that it must be so, and cannot be otherwise.

*Another* reason to shew that this principle is not learned from experience, is—*That experience does not shew us a cause of one in a hundred of those changes which we observe, and therefore can never teach us that there must be a cause of all.*

Of all the paradoxes this author has advanced, there is not one more shocking to the human understanding than this, that things may begin to exist without a cause. This would put an end to all speculation, as well as to all the business of life. The employment of speculative men, since the beginning of the world, has been to investigate the causes of things. What pity is it, they never thought of putting the previous question. whether things have a cause or not? This question has at last been started; and what is there so ridiculous as not to be maintained by some philosopher?

Enough has been said upon it, and more, I think, than it deserves. But, being about to treat of the active powers of the human mind. I thought it improper to take no notice of what has been said by so celebrated a philosopher, to shew, that there is not, in the human mind, any idea of power. [33]

#### CITATIONS (Not given by Reid)

\**A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part I, Section 1. Two sentences occurring between the quoted sentences are omitted. “That idea of red, which we form in the dark, and that impression, which strikes our eyes in sun-shine, differ only in degree, not in nature. That the case is the same with all our simple impressions and ideas, ’tis impossible to prove by a particular enumeration of them.”

\*\**Optics*, Query 29. “[And although the arguing from experiments and ob-

servations by induction be no demonstration of general conclusions, yet it is the best way of arguing which the nature of things admist of, and may be looked upon as so much stronger by how mich the induction is more general. And if no exception shall occur from phenomena, the conclusion may be pronounced generally.] But if at any time afterward any exception shall occur from experiments, it may then begin to be pronounced with such exceptions as occur.”

\*\*\* *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section 14. The relevant passage reads as follows: “If we have really an idea of power, we may attribute power to an unknown quality: But as it is impossible, that that idea can be derived from such a quality, and as there is nothing in known qualities, which can produce it; it follows that we deceive ourselves, when we imagine we are possest of any idea of this kind, after the manner we commonly understand it. All ideas are derived from, and represent impressions. We never have any impression, that contains any power or efficacy. We never therefore have any idea of power.”

\*\*\*\* *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part I, Section 2.

\*\*\*\*\* *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part I, Section 14.