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William L. Rowe, THOMAS REID ON FREEDOM AND MORALITY

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Reid on Freedom and Morality, by **William L. Rowe**. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. x and 189. \$26.95 (cloth).

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Rowe begins by laying out the background against which Thomas Reid develops his libertarian theory of free will. Particularly important here is the theory of freedom presented by John Locke. As Rowe understands him, Locke distinguishes between a *free agent* and a *necessary agent* as follows:

S is a *free agent* with respect to action A just in case it is in S's power to do A should S will to do A and it is in S's power to refrain from doing A should S will to refrain from doing A.

S is a *necessary agent* with respect to action A just in case either it is not in S's power to do A should S will to do A or it is not in S's power to refrain from doing A should S will to refrain from doing A (p. 3).

Further, on Rowe's account, Locke holds that an action is *voluntary* insofar as the agent wills to perform the action and does so as a result of his volition. An action is *free* insofar as it is voluntary and it is true that had the agent willed to refrain from doing it he would have been able to refrain (p. 3). Thus, on Rowe's account of Locke, "an action of a necessary agent could be a voluntary action, but it cannot be a free action" (p. 4). So a man who is ignorant of the fact that he is locked in a room may stay in the room voluntarily; but as he is not free with respect to staying in the room, his staying in the room is not a free action.

Rowe points out that Locke's account of freedom is inadequate. Locke claims that one is free to perform an action if it is in one's power to perform the action, if one should will to do so. But, as Rowe points out, a person may be unable to will to perform the action and thus lack the freedom to perform the action, even though he meets Locke's condition. Because of this well-known problem with the sort of analysis offered by Locke, Rowe concludes that "freedom that is worth the name...must include power *to will or not will*, not simply power *to do if we will*" (p. 14).

After an interesting discussion of what might be interpreted as responses to the inadequacy of a Lockean conception of freedom by "necessitarians" such as Anthony Collins and libertarians such as Samuel Clarke, Rowe turns to a detailed discussion of Thomas Reid's theory of freedom. The crucial passage for Rowe's discussion is:

By the *liberty* of a moral agent, I understand, a power over the determinations of his own will. If, in any action, he had power to will what he did, or not to will it, in that action he is free. But if, in every voluntary action, the

determination of his will be the necessary consequence of something involuntary in the state of his mind, or of something in his external circumstances, he is not free; he has not what I call the liberty of a moral agent, but is subject to necessity (p. 599 of *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, Georg Olms Verlag, 1983; cited by Rowe on p. 75).

Rowe denies that "Reidean freedom" consists in nothing more than the "negative thesis" that an agent is free in some action only if his decision to do that act is not causally necessitated by any involuntary event, whether internal or external (p. 76). As Rowe points out, Reid follows libertarians such as Samuel Clarke, Edmund Law, and others in asserting "agent-causation." What these theorists affirm is that "free acts of will are caused by the agent whose acts they are" (p. 76).

Rowe points out that the standard interpretation of Reid's view of freedom is Lockean freedom supplemented by power over the will. Rowe says:

In what follows, the first account of freedom (free1) is Locke's. I then state *the standard account* of Reid's notion of free will, using it to state *the standard account* of his view of being free (free2) with respect to an action.

S is free1 with respect to action A just in case it is in S's power to do A if S should will to do A and in S's power to refrain from doing A if S should will to refrain.

S has free will with respect to action A just in case it is in S's power to will to do A and in S's power to will to refrain from doing A.

S is free2 with respect to action A just in case S is free1 with respect to action A and has free will with respect to action A.

For Rowe, a crucial insight is that (contrary to the standard interpretation) Reid does *not* say that the agent must have had the power to will otherwise (or to will to refrain); instead, Reid speaks of the power *not to will* (p. 78). Rowe elaborates as follows:

Reid tells us that a willed action is free provided you had the power to will it and the power not to will it. Having looked at his view of agent-causation..., it is clear that the power to will is the power *to cause* the act of will, and the power not to will is the power *not to cause* the act of will. According to Reidian freedom, therefore, any action we perform as a result of our act of will to do that action is a *free* action provided that we were the agent-cause of the act of will to perform that action. And since to agent-cause an act of will includes the power not to cause it, we can say that every act of will resulting in a *free* action is an act of will we had power to produce and power not to produce (p. 79).

Thus, rather than supplementing Lockean freedom with the demand that the agent have the power to will otherwise, Rowe understands Reid to be adding the demand that the agent have the power not to will the action in question. On the standard account of Reidean freedom, an agent acts freely in doing A

only if “1) she could have avoided doing A had she so willed and 2) she could have willed to refrain from doing A” (p. 80). Rowe argues that 1) is simply not in the text, and 2) is incorrectly substituted for the power not to cause the act of will to do A (pp. 80-81).

What is the significance of these points, apart from the goal of exegetical felicity? Rowe answers as follows:

The importance of these two differences between the standard account and the correct account becomes apparent when we examine Reid’s claim of a logical connection between responsibility and freedom. For there are, I believe, good reasons to doubt the traditional claim that an agent is morally responsible for doing A only if she could have avoided doing A. And there are good reasons to doubt the claim that an agent is morally responsible for doing A only if she could have willed to refrain from doing A (or avoided willing to do A). The significance of the correct account of Reidian freedom is that none of these reasons applies to it (p. 81).

Rowe believes that the “Frankfurt-style” examples in which some “counterfactual intervener” is poised to ensure that the agent wills and acts as he actually does, should he show any inclination to will or act otherwise, refute the traditional claims about the relationship between responsibility and freedom. But interestingly such examples do *not* cast any doubt on the requirement of Reidean freedom for moral responsibility.

Let us suppose that there is a counterfactual intervener—perhaps a mad scientist—who wishes to see you kill Jones. He has rigged up a device which will stimulate your brain to ensure that you will to kill Jones and do so, should you show any inclination not to will to kill Jones. If you voluntarily kill Jones on your own and the scientist’s device plays no role in your deliberations or action, it seems that you can be held morally responsible for your action, even though you lack the traditionally required alternative possibilities: you cannot will to do otherwise nor can you do otherwise. Rowe accepts these conclusions, but insists that this sort of case does not imply that moral responsibility for killing Jones does not require *Reidean freedom*. That is to say, Rowe argues that even in this Frankfurt-type case, you have the power *not to cause* the volition to kill Jones. As Rowe puts it,

The scientist can cause our agent to will to do A. He does this by causing that act of will in the agent. But if he does so then the agent does not agent-cause his volition to do A. The real agent-cause is the scientist. So if the agent has the power to cause his volition to do A, he also has the power *not to cause* that volition. If he does not cause the volition and the machine activates, he nevertheless wills to do A—but *he* is not the cause of that act of will. ...the agent caused his volition to kill Jones and had it in his power not to cause that volition (pp. 85-86).

Rowe thus attributes to Reid and also defends a version of what I would call a “flicker of freedom” strategy with regard to moral responsibility: this sort

of strategy suggests that even in the fanciest Frankfurt-type case, one can find at least *some* alternative possibility, even if it is a rather exiguous one. The Reid/Rowe flicker theory embraces the principle that a person is morally accountable for his action A only if he causes the volition to do A and it was in his power not to cause his volition to do A (p. 85).

This flicker theory is very significant within the context of debates about the relationship between moral responsibility and causal determinism. If moral responsibility requires alternative possibilities and causal determinism rules out such possibilities, then causal determinism rules out moral responsibility. Some philosophers have argued that since Frankfurt-type examples show that moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities of the traditional sort, causal determinism need not be incompatible with moral responsibility, even if causal determinism rules out traditionally construed alternative possibilities. But the Reid/Rowe view points out that even if the Frankfurt-type examples show that moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities as traditionally interpreted, it *does* require alternative possibilities: moral responsibility requires at least a flicker of freedom. Further, the most powerful argument for the conclusion that causal determinism rules out alternative possibilities of the traditional sort *also* implies that causal determinism rules out alternative possibilities of the sort envisaged by Rowe and Reid; causal determinism extinguishes even the flicker of freedom. Thus, there is good reason stemming from the analysis of Reid and Rowe to claim that causal determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility, even granting the kernel of Frankfurt's examples.¹

I believe that the Rowe/Reid flicker theory is fascinating and powerful. It bears considerably more scrutiny and discussion than I can give it here. My basic worry is that although Reid and Rowe have shown that there is always *some* way of describing cases (even of the Frankfurt sort) such that one can find *some* alternative possibility, this alternative possibility is not sufficiently *robust* to ground moral responsibility ascriptions. Put slightly differently, even if there are flickers of freedom of the sort identified by Reid and Rowe, it is not plausible to suppose that it is *in virtue* of their existence that we are morally responsible. It is not enough to secure the Rowe/Reid position to point out that one can always find some sort of alternative possibility, even in Frankfurt-type cases. What needs to be shown is that these alternative possibilities *play a certain role*: that it is these alternative possibilities which ground and explain our moral responsibility. And this is what I find somewhat unnatural and implausible.

To elaborate a bit. If one is an alternative-possibilities theorist, one should be inclined to the view that agents must have alternative possibilities *of a certain sort*, if they are to be held morally responsible. There are supposed to be various pathways into the future which are genuinely open to the agent,

and these paths must have certain properties. It is not enough, for the alternative possibilities theorist, to point out that an agent has various genuinely available paths into the future, on *only one* of which the agent acts freely. That is, it is not enough for such a theorist that all but one path into the future is such that the agent in question does *not* act freely. And yet this is precisely the situation in the Frankfurt-type cases. It may be that in the Frankfurt-type case discussed above, the agent has the power not to cause a volition to kill Jones. But in not causing such a volition the agent would not be acting freely; because of the nature of the intervention, it would not be appropriate to say that in the alternative scenario (in which the scientist's machine intervenes) the agent *freely* refrains from causing the volition to kill Jones. Thus, even if a certain sort of alternative possibility—a flicker of freedom—exists, it does not appear to have the requisite properties. Such a flicker is too thin and insubstantial to ground moral responsibility ascriptions.

On the traditional alternative possibilities picture, it is envisaged that an agent has a choice between two scenarios of a certain sort. In one scenario, she deliberates and forms an intention to do an act of a certain kind and then carries out this intention in an appropriate way. This is what is involved in having robust alternative possibilities; in at least one other scenario, she deliberates and forms an intention to do a different kind of act (or no act at all) and carries out this intention in an appropriate way. But it is evident that in Frankfurt-type examples these conditions do not obtain: the alternative scenarios are not of the requisite kind. On the Rowe/Reid alternative possibilities picture, it is envisaged that an agent has at least some scenarios available to her in which she fails to cause the volition in question. But note that even if this is so in the Frankfurt-type cases, in the alternative scenarios the agent does *not* form an intention to refrain from causing the volition in question and then proceed to carry out this intention in an appropriate way. Thus, even if there is a flicker of freedom in these cases, it does not seem to be robust enough to ground responsibility ascriptions. The traditional alternative possibilities picture links moral responsibility with *control* of a certain kind; but for this kind of control to exist, surely the alternative scenarios which are invoked to ground the attributions of responsibility must be more robust.

Although I find the flicker theory unsatisfying, it is an important and interesting view which deserves more sustained and careful attention. Also, I cannot here discuss other aspects of Rowe's book, including his nice discussion of various objections to the sort of libertarian view presented by Reid. I wish however to offer some overall impressions of this book. The book is very elegantly written. It is a lovely, careful, and insightful piece of exegesis; as such, it should make an important contribution to our understanding of Thomas Reid's work. But the book offers more. It is a penetrating and pow-

erful piece of philosophy. Rowe lays bare the crucial elements of all the views he attends to, especially Locke's conception of freedom and the libertarian alternative developed by Thomas Reid. And Rowe pinpoints their strengths and weaknesses with uncanny brilliance. Finally, he explores the libertarian conception of freedom with a degree of care, precision, and insight which is both admirable and quite rare in the philosophical literature. Rowe has given us a wonderful book.

NOTE

1. In my paper, "Responsibility and Control," *Journal of Philosophy*, 89 (January 1982), pp. 24-40, I pursue a strategy that is similar to the Reid/Rowe strategy to the extent that they both acknowledge certain implications of the Frankfurt-type examples but insist that these examples do not in themselves entail the compatibility of causal determinism and moral responsibility. But there is the following difference: whereas the Rowe/Reid strategy is a flicker-of-freedom approach and is thus an "alternative-sequence" model of moral responsibility, my approach in "Responsibility and Control" is an "actual-sequence" model of moral responsibility.

The Philosophy In Christianity, edited by **Godfrey Vesey**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. pp. xvi and 244. \$16.95 (paper).

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This collection of essays represents an unusually broad-ranging sampler of studies, both because it covers philosophical theology, historical theology, and philosophy of religion and because the essays are by scholars of classical, patristic, medieval, and contemporary thought. Moreover, it has, in a sense, two themes; these are not co-extensive, but overlap and weave together in interesting ways. The general aim stated by Vesey in the introduction—namely, to explore the "debt" of "early" Christian thinkers "to contemporary Platonist philosophy" (p. v)—is adhered to by most, but not all, of the contributors. At one end of the spectrum are essays paradigmatic of that theme, like John Dillon's "Logos and Trinity: Patterns of Platonist Influence on Early Christianity" and A. H. Armstrong's "On Not Knowing Too Much About God," subtitled "The Apophatic Way of the Neoplatonists and other influences from ancient philosophy which have worked against dogmatic assertion in Christian thinking." At the other end are essays, extremely valuable in their own right, but totally innocent of any (explicit, at least) concern with Platonist influence on or relevance to Christianity. Those readers with such a concern will find in those essays (the majority) which do adhere rigidly to Vesey's formulation of the guiding theme a very satisfying development of thought on the subject; they build on each other in interesting ways, in part because of the useful back-and-forth between detail and overview among them.