

# Thomas Reid on Character and Freedom

Kenneth L. Pearce  
University of Southern California

159

Recent challenges notwithstanding,<sup>1</sup> it is widely held that a necessary condition of freedom is the power or ability to do otherwise. It is also widely held that the *power* to do something entails the *possibility* of doing it: that is, if S has the power to  $\phi$ , then, possibly, S  $\phi$ s. This condition is, however, hardly sufficient. It is possible that I should walk through walls, but I do not have the power to walk through walls, because this possibility is distant and, indeed, outlandish. A common way of ruling out these sorts of cases is to insist that in order for me to have the power to perform some action, there must be a possible world *sufficiently similar to the actual world* in which I perform that action.

Incompatibilists understand this ‘sufficient similarity’ condition as requiring that, in order for me to have the power to perform some action, my performing that action must be consistent with all the actual facts about the past and the laws of nature: I do not have the power to perform any action that the past and the laws of nature together entail that I do not perform. Thomas Reid is often held up as a classic exemplar of this view.<sup>2</sup> Reid holds that in order for me to have the power to perform some action, all the necessary conditions for my performing that action must either already obtain or be within my power to bring about. Since it is not within my power to bring about changes either to the past or to the laws of nature, I do not have the power to perform actions incompatible with the past and the laws being as they actually are.<sup>3</sup>

Views of this sort appear to have difficulty explaining how actions are influenced by the agent’s motives and character. Facts about the agent’s motives and character are presumably facts about the past, and rules whereby the agent’s actions followed from his motives and character would presumably be laws of nature. On the one hand, then, the incompatibilist appears to be committed to claiming that free actions do not follow inexorably from the agent’s motives and character. On the other hand, it seems that we are responsible for our actions when we act in character, and that, at least where the agent’s character is good, the ability to act out of character is a defect. Indeed, as we shall see, Reid holds that God, who is supremely free and is to be praised for his goodness, *necessarily* always acts in character.

160

1. Harry G. Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 3 (1969): 829–839.

2. See, e.g., Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32–34 and 190–192.

3. Cf. Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), ch. 3.

In this paper, I argue that consideration of the role of character in free action led Reid to adopt a form of incompatibilism quite different from, and in certain respects weaker than, the one typically attributed to him in his role as exemplar. Specifically, I argue that Reid is committed to the seemingly paradoxical position that an agent may have the power to do otherwise despite the fact that, due to her character and motives, it is impossible that she do otherwise. Because of his peculiar views on power, Reid's claim that freedom requires the power to do otherwise is not, in fact, a version of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities.<sup>4</sup> When it is an agent's character that deprives her of alternate possibilities, she is not thereby deprived of either power or freedom, and this is true even if the agent was not free or active in the formation of her character.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Reid nowhere addresses the nature of character directly. He does, however, discuss three key issues related to the subject: (1) the formation of character, (2) the morally significant character traits known as 'virtues' and 'vices', and (3) the predictability of agents. I will first discuss Reid's views on each of these issues, then use the results of this discussion to clarify the relationship between character and freedom in Reid's philosophy. Finally, I will draw from this discussion some general morals about the nature of Reid's incompatibilism.

## 1 The Formation of Character

Reidian character traits are generally identified with *fixed resolutions*.<sup>6</sup> This view has strong support in Reid's text. For instance, he writes:

A general purpose may continue for life; and, after many particular actions have been done in consequence of it, may remain and regulate further actions.

Thus, a young man proposes to follow the profession of law, or medicine, or of theology. This general purpose ... has ... a considerable effect in forming his character.

There are other fixed purposes which have a still greater effect in forming the character. I mean such as regard our moral conduct.<sup>7</sup>

---

4. Contrary to Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, 32-33.

5. Reid is therefore committed to the claim, rejected even by many compatibilists, that Susan Wolf's character JoJo, the son of the evil dictator Joe the First, is free and responsible in his actions. See Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in *Free Will*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary Watson, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 379-385.

6. Gideon Yaffe, *Manifest Activity: Thomas Reid's Theory of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 79-87; Esther Kroeker, "Explaining Our Choices: Reid on Motives, Character and Effort," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2007): 195-200; James A. Harris, "Reid and Hume on the Possibility of Character," in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

7. Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, ed. Knud Haakonssen and James A.

Reid often uses the terms *purpose* and *resolution* as synonyms, including in the immediate context of this quotation. However, the claim that a character trait is a fixed purpose or resolution is highly ambiguous. First, the claim may mean that character traits are *acts of resolving*. Reid defines a ‘fixed resolution’ as an

operation of the mind ... which may be called voluntary ... [and which] naturally takes place, when any action, or course of action, about which we have deliberated, is not immediately to be executed, the occasion of acting being at some distance (EAP, 2.3 65).

So Reid at least sometimes uses the term *resolution* to refer to an act of resolving, and it might be thought that character traits are meant to be identified with such acts.

Alternatively, Reid might be thought to hold that character traits are the *products* or *results* of such acts. This interpretation can, in turn, be divided in two: it might be taken as part of an analysis of the notion of a character trait that all character traits are formed by acts of (fixed, general) resolving, or it might be taken as part of an analysis of acts of (fixed, general) resolving that such acts aim at the production of character traits.

This last interpretation is *prima facie* less likely since it would be somewhat odd for Reid to call character traits ‘resolutions’ if they are not always connected with acts of resolving. However, in addition to being the most philosophically plausible of the three views, this is the only one that is consistent with Reid’s account of character formation. Reid treats character traits as persistent features of agents that are *sometimes*, but *not always* formed by acts of resolving. The above-quoted discussion of a resolution to become a lawyer is an example of the agent’s character being formed by an intentional act of resolving (or ‘proposing’). However, Reid also acknowledges that character may be formed by other means.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Reid claims that “instinctive imitation has no small influence in forming ... national characters, and the human character in general” (EAP, 3.1.2 85). Acts of resolving, according to Reid, stem from deliberation, but instinctive acts take place without deliberation (EAP, 3.1.2 78). Since some character traits are formed by an instinctive process, some character traits evidently do not stem from acts of resolving.

It might be objected that Reid uses the word *character* in several different senses, and the quoted passage is using the word in a different sense from the one that is relevant to Reid’s theory of action. James Harris has identified three senses in which Reid uses *character*: reputation, national character, and fixed purpose. However, these uses are not totally discrete. Harris recognizes a complicated interplay between the first and third senses, but has little to say about the second.<sup>9</sup>

---

Harris (1788; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 2.3 66. Henceforth cited in-text as ‘EAP.’ In citations to this work the essay, part (where appropriate), and chapter, separated by periods, are followed by the page number, so that, for instance, ‘2.3 66’ refers to essay 2, chapter 3, page 66.

8. This point has not been recognized by any of the previous treatments of Reid on character.

9. Harris, “Reid and Hume.”

National character (and human character), one supposes, is a generalization about the characters of the individual members of the nation (species). Although the evidence on which this generalization is made will certainly be the reputation of those individuals, the generalization must be about the character properly so-called, that is, the reliable tendencies to act on certain motives, possessed by the individuals. This is because the primary way in which instinctive imitation influences reputation is by influencing actions. Reid's claim is that the characters of individuals are formed in part by the practices of the societies in which they find themselves, so that certain character traits are often shared by most members of a particular nation, or even by most human beings, although these traits are acquired and not innate. Thus, for instance, an individual may be humble or prideful, shy or outgoing, not on the basis of either her natural constitution or any resolution of her own, but simply because she has witnessed these traits practiced in her society from childhood. This conclusion is further supported by a retrospective passage later in the *Essays*: "When to that instinctive imitation, which I spoke of before, we join the force of habit, it is easy to see, that these mechanical principles have no small share in forming the manners and character of most men" (EAP, 3.1.3 118). Thus "forming the character of most men" is treated as equivalent to "forming national characters, and the human character in general."

According to Reid, the adoption of fixed resolutions is perhaps the most important way of forming character. It is not, however, the only way. As Reid himself says: "among the various characters of men, there have been *some*, who, after they came to years of understanding, deliberately laid down a plan of conduct" (EAP, 4.8 329, emphasis added). There are other characters, Reid could have gone on to say, that are formed without any deliberation or act of resolution at all.

## 2 Virtue and Vice

The attractiveness of the mistaken view that character, for Reid, is always formed by acts of resolving stems in part from the fact that the character traits in which Reid is most interested are the virtues, and virtues must, by definition, be formed by acts of resolving. Reid distinguishes agents into three categories: virtuous, vicious, and lacking character. Reid understands both the virtuous and the vicious agent as having correctly grasped a moral rule, with the virtuous agent having successfully resolved to follow the rule, and the vicious agent having successfully resolved to break the rule. The acts of resolving are successful in that they have resulted in reliable tendencies to act according or contrary to the rule in question. The agent who lacks character, on the other hand, is one who simply follows his strongest impulse without regard for any rule.<sup>10</sup>

---

10. Note that this three-fold division is not exhaustive; there is no place in this taxonomy for an agent who has grasped an incorrect moral rule, and resolved to act either according or contrary to it.

Reid defines ‘virtuous habits’<sup>11</sup> as “fixed purposes of acting according to the rules of virtue” (EAP, 2.4 72), and speaks of these purposes as being formed intentionally, “after due deliberation” with the exercise of the “intellectual and moral faculties” (EAP, 2.3 66). In other words, in order to be truly virtuous, the agent must grasp the moral rule in question and actively and consciously resolve to follow it. “By this,” Reid says, “the virtues may be easily distinguished ... from natural affections that bear the same name” (EAP, 2.3 67). Unfortunately, despite Reid’s claim that the distinction is ‘easy,’ the discussion that follows is not entirely perspicuous. Reid observes that “there is a natural affection of benevolence, common ... to the virtuous and the vicious” (EAP, 2.3 67), but the ensuing discussion contrasts the virtuous agent not with a vicious agent, but with an agent who lacks character altogether. Such an agent, Reid says, “will be honest, or dishonest, benevolent or malicious, compassionate or cruel, as the tide of his passions and affections drives him” (EAP, 2.3 69). This, however, is rather puzzling, for it seems that the supposedly character-less agent might be acting according to a rule after all: he may have consciously adopted the rule of acting according to his affections. It is sometimes thought that the reason the man who acts according to his affections has no character is that, due to the constant change in his affections, his actions are not sufficiently predictable.<sup>12</sup> However, as Reid recognizes (EAP, 3.2.8 150), there could be creatures whose affections were much more predictable than ours. Would these creatures count as having character, even if they just acted according to their affections? It seems not. Alternatively, Gideon Yaffe has suggested that an agent who did indeed take note of the rule of acting according to her affections and regarded conformity with this rule as a reason for action would have a character trait; in describing an agent as lacking character, Reid means to deny that the agent is intentionally following such a rule.<sup>13</sup>

Although Yaffe is correct that an agent who consistently and intentionally followed some rule would exemplify a character trait regardless of the content of that rule, he is incorrect in supposing that it is possible, on Reid’s view, to have the character trait of acting according to one’s affections. For Reid, to have a character trait is to exercise reliably the power of self-command or self-government in certain ways. But Reid conceives of this power precisely as a power of resisting impulses (EAP, 4.4 218). To be “carried by the strongest moving force ... requires no exertion, no self-government, but passively to yield to the strongest impulse” (EAP, 3.2.1 97). Character involves having reliable tendencies to exercise self-command, but the following of one’s strongest impulse is not the exercise of self-command but the abdication of it. It does not make sense to speak of a character trait of always following one’s strongest impulses, because it is impossible that following this rule should ever require the exercise of self-command. This rule cannot be adopted in the way that rules must be adopted in order to become character traits.

164

---

11. Reid’s use of the word ‘habit’ is somewhat troubling, since in his official treatment of habit (EAP, 3.1.3) he treats it as a mechanical principle; this must be regarded as a slip.

12. Kroeker, “Explaining Our Choices,” 197-198.

13. Yaffe, *Manifest Activity*, 83-84.

To exercise self-command is to favor some motive at the expense of others, when the favored motive is not strongest according to the ‘animal test’ (EAP, 4.4 218), that is, when following the favored motive requires an exertion of effort, not a mere passive yielding. To have a character trait is to have a reliable tendency to exercise self-command in favor of some particular sort of motive. Since following the strongest impulse, the strongest ‘animal’ motive, does not require an exercise of self-command, to have a reliable tendency to follow the strongest impulse is not to possess a character trait.

This is not to say that an agent cannot have a character trait if the motive favored by that trait is usually or always that agent’s strongest impulse. On the contrary, by acting according to one’s character – whether character is formed by resolving, by instinctive imitation, or by some other means – one develops habits (EAP, 2.3 69, 3.1.3 88-89, 4.6 234). These habits are impulses that become stronger the more one follows them, so that an agent who acts in character very consistently will eventually cease to struggle, the motives she favors having become, through habit, the strongest impulses. The lesson is not that character must lead to action contrary to impulse, but rather that a character trait is a tendency to action that is stable across variation in the strength of impulse.<sup>14</sup> Thus an agent who has both the virtue and the affection of benevolence is an agent who would act benevolently even if benevolent affection ceased to be her strongest impulse.<sup>15</sup>

A character trait is just any reliable tendency to exercise self-command in favor of certain motives, regardless of the felt strength of impulse. Reid says that “the opinion of an agent in doing the action gives it its moral denomination” (EAP, 3.3.5 174), and he takes the same view of character traits: it is possible, at least given favorable circumstances, to possess a character trait that produces all the same actions as benevolence but is not a virtue. What is crucial to the virtue of benevolence is that the agent understands that benevolence is her duty, and this sense of duty is a motive or principle of action that she favors, regardless of her impulses and their strength.

### 3 Predicting Free Actions

To the objection that if actions were not determined by motives, we could not predict actions on the basis of motives, Reid answers,

[L]et us suppose, for a moment, that men have moral liberty. I would ask, what use may they be expected to make of this liberty? It may

165

---

14. Cf. the discussion of the ‘counterfactual stability’ of character traits in Yaffe, *Manifest Activity*, 85-87. The agent who has a character trait that consistently agrees with her strongest impulse may be usefully compared to the ‘willing addict’ of Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 19-20.

15. A very similar treatment of the relationship between beneficence from inclination and beneficence from duty can be found in Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (1785; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11-12.

surely be expected that, of the various actions within the sphere of their power, they will choose what pleases them most for the present, or what appears to be most for their real, though distant good. When there is a competition between these motives, the foolish will prefer present gratification; the wise, the greater and more distant good (EAP, 4.4 220).

Wisdom is a character trait: it is a fixed resolution to prefer one's good on the whole over one's passions or animal impulses (see EAP, 3.3.2 156 *et passim*).<sup>16</sup> If the results of the previous section are accepted, then we must hold that folly is not a character trait, but simply extreme lack of wisdom (that is, never exercising self-command to favor one's good on the whole over the passions). Whether an agent is wise or foolish is a matter of character. In order to predict the agent's actions, we must know her character.

In fact, according to Reid, knowledge of character is the *only* means by which we can gain knowledge of future events: "All our knowledge of future events is drawn either from their necessary connection with the present course of nature, or from their connection with the character of the agent that produces them" (EAP, 4.10 257). The first category is, for Reid, subsumable under the second, because the natural laws are simply rules followed by the deity (EAP, 1.6 38, 4.9 251). According to Reid, by observing the world we can have certain knowledge that such and such events are necessarily connected with the present course of nature, that is, that they must occur *if the present course of nature continues*. However, it is only by considering God's character that we can justify our belief that the present course of nature will indeed continue, and so convert this 'hypothetical knowledge' into knowledge of the future (EAP, 4.10 257-58).

Regarding predictions based on character, Reid writes:

The character of perfect wisdom and perfect rectitude in the Deity, gives us certain knowledge, that he will always be true in all his declarations, faithful in all his promises, and just in all his dispensations. But when we reason from the character of men to their future actions, though, in many cases we have such probability as we rest upon in our most important worldly concerns, yet we have no certainty, because men are imperfect in wisdom and in virtue. If we had even the most perfect knowledge of the character and situation of a man, this would not be sufficient to give certainty to our knowledge of his future actions: because, in some actions, both good and bad men deviate from their general character (EAP, 4.10 258).

166

Character is a reliable tendency to exercise self-command. In reasoning about the future, human beings rely on these tendencies in others. This is what is

---

16. Yaffe, *Manifest Activity*, 89-90 connects wisdom with both the ability to recognize appropriate means to one's ends and the resolution to act on those means. As resolving to follow justice requires the agent to know what justice is, so resolving to follow wisdom may require knowing the rules of wisdom and resolving to follow those. A detailed account of Reid's view of wisdom would be beyond the scope of this paper.

meant by the ‘reputation’ sense of ‘character,’ mentioned above: one’s reputation is how others rely on one to act. Human beings desire that others should expect them to act virtuously, and this often serves as a motive for virtuous action (EAP, 3.2.2 102, 104). A human being also has a “character with himself,” that is, an opinion of the sort of person he is and the sorts of actions he is likely to perform, and is reluctant to perform actions that might falsify this opinion. Reid goes so far as to say that without this “pride of virtue” in oneself, “there can be no steady virtue” (EAP, 3.3.7 181-182).

The ambiguity in Reid’s use of ‘character’ is between a *reliable* tendency and a *relied on* tendency. In relying on the tendencies of agents to predict future events, we assume that they have such tendencies; if they do not, our reliance is inappropriate. As a result, character in the sense of reputation presupposes character in the primary sense. It is only by imputing character to agents, by supposing that they reliably favor some motives over others, that we can have any knowledge or reasonable belief about future events.

## 4 Character and Freedom

“If, in any action,” Reid writes, “[the agent] had power to will what he did, or not to will it, in that action he is free” (EAP, 4.1 196). A character trait is a reliable tendency to exercise one’s power in favor of certain motives at the expense of others. Having such tendencies is certainly compatible with freedom: that one should *tend* to exercise power in a certain way does not even entail that one *will not* exercise it in a different way, let alone that one *cannot*. In this section, however, it will be helpful to focus on a special case in which character might be thought to conflict with freedom. This is the case in which the tendency in question is *perfectly* reliable. In such a case I will say that the agent’s character is *fully formed*. Now, to say that a tendency is perfectly reliable implies that it always has its effect, that is, that the agent always acts according to it. It is therefore contradictory to suppose that an agent should have fully formed character but nevertheless act contrary to it.

An agent with fully formed character would, on each occasion, exercise active power according to her character. She would therefore clearly have power to will what she does. However, there is considerable textual and philosophical pressure to say that, at least if the agent is not free and active in the formation of her character, she does not have the power *not* to will what she does, and is therefore unfree. This pressure must, however, be resisted, for Reid attributes fully and unfreely formed character to God who, he says, is nevertheless supremely free. I will argue that, paradoxical though it may sound, it is Reid’s view that although it is *impossible* that a being with fully formed character should act out of character, such a being nevertheless has the *power* to act out of character. Such a being has, in other words, a necessarily unexercised power.<sup>17</sup>

167

---

17. {Leibniz sometimes appears to endorse a similar view. For instance, at *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (1710; La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), §§171-175, Leibniz’s claim that God is *morally*, but not *metaphysically*, necessitated to create the best possible world is said to



After the above-quoted definition of freedom, Reid goes on to say,

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 (EAP, 4.1 196).

Reid further emphasizes the point with the following example:

[L]et us suppose a man necessarily determined in all cases to will and to do what is best to be done, he would surely be innocent and inculpable. But, as far as I am able to judge, he would not be entitled to the esteem and moral approbation of those who knew and believed this necessity. What was, by an ancient author, said of Cato, might indeed be said of him. *He was good because he could not be otherwise.* But this saying, if understood literally and strictly, is not the praise of Cato, but of his constitution, which was no more the work of Cato, than his existence (EAP, 4.1 198).<sup>18</sup>

Reid's reasoning here is an application of the general principle that Yaffe has called "Means-End Power Transference:"<sup>19</sup> "to say that the end is in [an agent's] power, but the means necessary to that end are not in his power ... is a contradiction" (EAP, 4.1 201). If it is not in Cato's power to *will* evil, then it is not in his power to *do* evil (EAP, 4.1 200-201).

However, Reid's treatment of Cato contrasts sharply with his treatment of God:

The most perfect being, in every thing where there is a right and a wrong, a better and a worse, always infallibly acts according to the best motives. This indeed is little else than an identical proposition ... But to say, that he does not act freely, because he always does what is best, is to say, that the proper use of liberty destroys liberty, and that liberty consists only in its abuse (EAP, 4.4 214-215).

---

differ only verbally from the view, attributed to Abelard, that God does not have the power to *do* otherwise, because God does not have the power to *will* otherwise. According to Leibniz, Abelard has introduced a verbal confusion by confounding will with power; the question of what God might will is in fact irrelevant to the question of what powers God has. This bears some resemblance to the view I am attributing to Reid. However, it is unclear how this way of drawing the distinction is related to Leibniz's more usual treatment of the subject, in terms of the need for an infinite analysis (see, e.g., "On Freedom," in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 263-266). God's (alleged) ability to do otherwise is a notoriously tricky issue for Leibniz (and his interpreters). See Margaret D. Wilson, "Possible Gods," *The Review of Metaphysics* 32, no. 4 (1979): 717-733; Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 1.}

{The view that reconciling divine omnipotence with necessary moral perfection requires attributing necessarily unexercised powers to God has more recently been defended by Erik J. Wielenberg, "Omnipotence Again," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2000): 26-47.}

18. {This text may be intended against Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §75, where the same example is discussed, and the opposite conclusion drawn.}

19. Yaffe, *Manifest Activity*, 15-20.

What Reid in this discussion calls “[t]he moral perfection of the Deity,” he elsewhere calls “[t]he *character* of perfect wisdom and perfect rectitude in the Deity” (EAP, 4.10 258, emphasis added). He speaks, however, not of Cato’s *character*, but of his *constitution*. Since virtues are part of one’s character, it seems that praise of an agent’s character is praise of the agent (to say that an agent has a virtuous character is to say that the agent is virtuous), whereas, according to the Cato passage, praise of his constitution is not.

The perfect character that is attributed to God amounts to a perfectly reliable tendency to exercise self-command in favor of the wise and the good.<sup>20</sup> Because the tendency is perfectly reliable it is an analytic truth (“an identical proposition”) that a being with perfect character “infallibly acts according to the best motives.” Reid holds that it is a necessary truth that God exists and has perfect character.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Reid is committed to the claim that, necessarily, God always does what is best. Nevertheless, he insists, God is not “subject to necessity” (EAP, 4.4 215).

Both God and Cato (the imagined Cato, not the historical one) necessarily always do what is right. Yet God is free and Cato is unfree. This is because Cato’s actions are determined by his constitution, whereas God’s are determined by his character.

Like Cato, the lower animals are, according to Reid, determined to action by their constitution. It is, he says, “a law of their constitution” that “[s]uch of their actions as may be called voluntary, seem to be invariably determined by the passion or appetite, or affection or habit, which is strongest at the time” (EAP, 4.1 197). In the case of determination to action by one’s constitution, a law determines which motive will be effective: in the case of brutes, the strongest animal impulse and in the case of Cato, the moral motive. When, however, action is determined by character, the agent reliably exercises active power to favor a particular motive, and this exercise of active power forms the core of Reid’s account of freedom.

Reid compares conflicting motives to “advocates pleading the opposite sides of a cause at the bar” (EAP, 4.4 217).<sup>22</sup> The agent’s character may be compared to a bias of the judge. An agent who has character is like a judge who has a favorite advocate. An agent whose character is fully formed is like a judge who rules for his favorite advocate without bothering to hear the case. (If it sounds as if character makes an agent more, rather than less, capricious, this is due to the limitations of the analogy: we must remember that one of the ‘advocates’ represents the rational principles of action, and an agent who always listens to *this* ‘advocate’ will certainly not be capricious.) On the other hand, if an agent’s actions are determined by her constitution, it is as though one of the advocates

---

20. Reid faces a rather serious theological difficulty here: on the traditional view, God does not have impulses, at least not animal or mechanical ones. It is not clear, then, what impulses God would favor wisdom and morals over.

21. See Dale Tuggy, “Reid’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 292-293.

22. Kroeker, “Explaining Our Choices” makes much of this comparison.

has taken over the role of judge. In other words, Cato is unfree because his role as agent in determining his will has been usurped by his constitution.<sup>23</sup> God necessarily determines his will according to the rules of wisdom and morality; but it is nevertheless he who determines it, and he is therefore free.

It may, however, seem simply obvious that a being with fully formed character is unfree. A fully formed character trait is a perfectly reliable tendency to favor a certain sort of motive. Thus an agent who is perfectly benevolent is an agent who always favors the rational motive of benevolence over other motives. Suppose Jane is perfectly benevolent, and she will have a benevolent motive to serve at the soup kitchen tomorrow. Someone might argue as follows:

169

- (1) Jane always does what her benevolent motives favor.
- (2) Tomorrow, Jane's benevolent motives will favor serving at the soup kitchen.  
Therefore,
- (3) Jane does not have the power to refrain from serving at the soup kitchen tomorrow.

This argument, if sound, would show that an agent who had a fully formed character trait did not have the power to do otherwise, and so was unfree. However, the argument as stated commits the Fatalist Fallacy: the premises only justify the conclusion that Jane *will* not refrain, not the conclusion that she does not have the power to refrain. As Reid says, "I know no rule of reasoning by which it can be inferred, that, because an event certainly shall be, therefore its production must be necessary" (EAP, 4.10 254). It is true that the agent's character, combined with her circumstances, entails that she will perform the action. However, this is also entailed by God's foreknowledge of the action, and Reid argues at length that this does not undermine freedom (EAP, 4.10).

Perhaps, however, the argument can be repaired. If Jane's character is not freely formed, then it appears that it is not up to her whether premise (1) is true. It is also not up to her whether premise (2) is true. But (1) and (2) entail (3). On this basis we might conclude, by analogy to Peter van Inwagen's famous Consequence Argument, that it is also not up to Jane whether she serves at the soup kitchen.<sup>24</sup> She is therefore unfree.

From a Reidian perspective, this argument is a nonstarter. What is 'up to' the agent is just what depends on her active power. A character trait is a tendency of an agent to exercise active power in favor of certain motives at the expense of others. Thus the agent's character is up to her in at least this sense: if she exercised her active power otherwise, then the attribution of the fully formed character trait to her would be incorrect. This is how Reid can say that God's "moral perfection ... consists, not in having no power to do ill ... but ... in this, that, when he has power to do every thing, a power which

---

23. James A. Harris, "Reid's Challenge to Reductionism About Human Agency," *Reid Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 33–42 gives a similar analysis of what is at stake in Reid's insistence that our actions are not determined by our motives.

24. See Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*, 56.

cannot be resisted, he exerts that power only in doing what is wisest and best” (EAP, 4.4 215). It is necessary that God chooses only what is wisest and best, but this necessity stems from his character, from the characteristic way in which he exercises his active power, and is thus consistent with freedom. God has the power to do otherwise, and indeed the power to will otherwise, despite the fact that it is logically impossible the he should do otherwise.

This response to the character version of the Consequence Argument might be thought to trivialize the sense in which an agent with fully formed character lacks alternate possibilities. After all, given that Jane serves, it is impossible that she not serve (that is, it is impossible that she both serve and not serve), but no one ever thought that *this* impossibility was a hindrance to freedom. However, things are not so simple for Reid. According to Reid, it is only by means of our knowledge of character that we gain knowledge, or even reasonable belief, about the future (see sect. 3, above). This means that facts about character cannot themselves be facts about the future, on pain of circularity. As a result, Reid is committed to the possibility that there may be past and present facts about agents that entail that they will not perform certain actions that they are nevertheless free to perform.

## 5 The Nature of Reid’s Incompatibilism

The view I have attributed to Reid is at odds with typical incompatibilist understandings of freedom. For instance, Robert Kane rejects precisely this view when he writes,

[S]uppose a choice issues from, or can be explained by, the agent’s character and motives at the time it is made in such manner that, given this character and these motives, the agent’s doing anything other than this act would be inexplicable. Then, to be ultimately responsible for the choice, ... the agent must be responsible for the character and motives from which it issued, which in turn entails, ... that some choices or actions the agent voluntarily or willingly performed in the past must have causally contributed to the agent’s having the character and motives he or she now has.<sup>25</sup>

According to Reid, an agent can get into a state where her character and motives fully determine her choice. These motives and this character may not have resulted from the agent’s voluntary actions. Nevertheless, the agent will be free if her action follows from an exercise of her power, and a contrary action would have followed from a contrary exercise of power. Note, however, that the antecedent here is not *if she had willed otherwise*, but *if she had exercised her power otherwise*. In exercising power, the agent is a causally undetermined determiner of her will. It is this metaphysically weighty notion of power that prevents Reidian freedom from collapsing into the Humean “hypothetical liberty

---

25. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, 35.

[that] is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains.”<sup>26</sup>

Reid views determination of actions by our constitution or by the laws of nature as a threat to our freedom, but he is untroubled by the determination of actions by motives and character. The reason that acting from motives is consistent with freedom, according to Reid, is that motives, being merely *entia rationis*, cannot possibly act, or be causes (EAP, 4.4 214),<sup>27</sup> and therefore do not threaten the agent’s status as causally undetermined determiner. Character, similarly, is not the sort of thing that could act or be a cause, and so cannot possibly threaten human freedom. This suggests a quite general conclusion about the nature of Reid’s incompatibilism, namely, that freedom cannot be threatened by lack of alternate possibilities alone. What threatens freedom is the presence of foreign causes.<sup>28</sup> When a foreign cause determines the agent’s will, it usurps the role of the agent and removes her from the narrative of the action.<sup>29</sup> Reid summarizes this view nicely in the following passage:

I consider the determination of the will as an effect. This effect must have a cause which had power to produce it; and the cause must be either the person himself, whose will it is, or some other being ... If the person was the cause of the determination of his own will, he was free in that action ... But if another being was the cause of this determination ... then the determination is the act and deed of that being (EAP, 4.1 201).

Insisting that motives cannot be causes allows Reid to differentiate himself from another compatibilist adversary, Leibniz. Leibniz had compared the will to a balance, with opposing motives weighing on opposite sides.<sup>30</sup> Like Clarke,<sup>31</sup> Reid regards Leibniz’s view as having the consequence that the mind is causally acted upon by its motives, so that we, like Cato and the brutes, are determined to action by our constitution (EAP, 4.9 243-245). Leibniz’s attempt to dispel this impression could only have had the opposite effect on Reid. Leibniz identifies motives with dispositions to action. He believes that since these dispositions are features of the mind, the mind is not being determined externally, and is therefore free. The dispositions come in varying strengths, and whichever action is favored by the strongest dispositions is always taken.<sup>32</sup>

---

26. David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford Philosophical Texts (1748; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 159.

27. See Yaffe, *Manifest Activity*, ch. 5.

28. {In treating independence from foreign causes as central to the notion of freedom, Reid is in agreement with the tradition of Continental rationalism, including some of the philosophers he most adamantly opposes. See, e.g., Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), Part I, Def. 7; Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §§64-65, 228, 301.}

29. See Harris, “Reid’s Challenge.” Harris offers a helpful comparison between Reid’s concerns and those of J. David Velleman, “What Happens When Someone Acts?” *Mind* 101, no. 403 (1992): 461–481.

30. G. W. Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, “The Controversy between Leibniz and Clarke,” in Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, §§3.1, 9.14.

31. *Ibid.*, §§8.1-2.

32. *Ibid.*, §9.15.

Reid does regard determination by character as consistent with freedom. However, in Reid's view, the Leibnizian agent would not only not be determined to action by his character; he would not have character at all. To have active power is to act as judge between one's motives, and to have the power selectively to favor one over another, regardless of their felt strength. To have a character trait is to exercise this power reliably in favor of certain sorts of motives at the expense of others. Leibniz explicitly and repeatedly denies that we can have this sort of direct control over our wills.<sup>33</sup> Lacking such a power, the Leibnizian agent does not have any tendencies to exercise that power in particular ways. Like Leibniz's God whose choice is determined by the outcome of the notorious "struggle between all the possibles,"<sup>34</sup> finite Leibnizian agents have their wills determined by a 'struggle' between conflicting motives. The Reidian agent, by contrast, need not be a passive witness to the struggle; she has the power to step in and render decisive judgment between her motives. Like weights on a balance, Leibnizian motives cause; like advocates at the bar, Reidian motives persuade.<sup>35</sup>

Free choices, according to Reid, cannot be determined by a Leibnizian struggle between conflicting motives. They also cannot be determined by the laws of nature. This does not, however, mean that freedom is challenged by the mere conformity of our actions to an accidental generalization (EAP, 4.9 249-252).<sup>36</sup> In order to be a genuine law, a regularity must be willed by an agent, so that agent will be the actor in events resulting from the law. Determination of human actions by natural laws would be especially problematic, in Reid's view, since the actor involved in natural laws is God, so this determination would immediately raise the Author of Sin problem: God would be responsible for our immoral actions (EAP, 4.1 198). However, Reid's concern could not be assuaged merely by dropping the assumption of universal agent causation. In Reid's view, if there were a genuine train of efficient causes (whether deterministic or otherwise) from the configuration of certain inanimate objects over which I have no control to the determination of my will, I would not be free. This is the nature and source of Reid's incompatibilism: Reid insists that an agent is free only when he alone is responsible for determining his will.

According to Reid, "Power to produce any effect implies power not to produce it" (EAP, 1.5 29). By the previously mentioned principle of Means-End Power Transference, this implies that the agent has in her power all the necessary means to producing or refraining from producing the effect, and these necessary means include the determination of the will in the appropriate di-

---

33. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §§51, 301, 328, 404.

34. *Ibid.*, §201.

35. {As Kroeker, "Explaining Our Choices" notes, Leibniz critically discusses a similar analogy for the will, and charges it with regress (G. W. Leibniz, "Observations on the Book Concerning 'The Origin of Evil', Published Recently in London," in *Theodicy*, §16). How, Leibniz asks, can the judge make a decision unless the judge also has motives? If the judge has motives, then isn't another judge needed to decide between these? Reid does not need to be troubled by this objection, since he holds that it is possible to make decisions without motives (EAP, 4.4 215-216).}

36. See Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London: Routledge, 1989), 283-285.

rection (EAP, 4.1 201). As a result, Reidian freedom requires more than just the Humean condition that the agent would do otherwise if he so willed; if his will is determined by a foreign cause, he is unfree. It is, however, sufficient for freedom that the agent would do otherwise if he determined his will differently, that is, if he exercised his active power differently. This is not true of Cato, whose actions are determined by his constitution, for he has no active power to exercise. It is, however, true of agents with fully formed character, for an agent's character is simply a matter of how she tends to act. In order for her to act otherwise, her character would have to be different, but this is no impediment to her freedom. Freedom is only compromised when the agent's role is usurped by a foreign actor, and the agent's character is neither foreign nor an actor. 173

## 6 Conclusion

Thomas Reid is, indeed, an incompatibilist: he holds that the determination of our actions by the past and the laws of nature is inconsistent with freedom. Nevertheless, in Reid's view, this does not mean that free actions are random. They are shaped by the agent's character. Indeed it is, according to Reid, consistent with freedom that one's character and motives should fully determine one's actions. This is never the case with human beings, whose character always remains in an imperfect state of formation, but it is the case with God.

Unlike other incompatibilists who have emphasized the role of character, Reid does not insist that, in order to be consistent with freedom, character must be freely formed. Character involves, by definition, an exercise of active power – specifically, an exercise of self-command that favors certain sorts of motives at the expense of others. This exercise of active power, by which the agent himself determines his will without the interference of foreign causes, is, in Reid's view, essential to freedom. Character guides the agent's exercise of active power and it is both possible, and consistent with freedom, that character may guide an agent's actions in such a way that, although she has the power to do otherwise, it is impossible that she should exercise that power.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> For helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper, I thank Gideon Yaffe, James Van Cleve, Jeffrey Tlumak, and an anonymous referee for this journal.