

# Libertarianism, Moral Character, and Alternative Possibilities in Thomas Reid

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## Abstract:

In the following paper, I wish to examine a problem for the theist libertarian. On the one hand, libertarians insist that freedom requires possible alternatives open to the agent. On the other hand, God's perfectly formed moral character implies that He always does the morally best. Give His moral character, then, it appears that there are no possible alternatives open to God. We thus get a dilemma for the theist libertarian: either a) God is not libertarian free – because His moral character rules out possible alternatives; or b) God's character is not perfectly formed – because libertarian freedom requires that it is possible for God to act out of character. In the present paper, I argue that Thomas Reid, a paradigmatic libertarian, has the theoretical tools to retain a robust account of libertarian freedom without compromising a robust account of perfectly formed characters. In sum, it is necessary that agents with fully formed characters always act in character (read *de dicto*), but it is possible that agents with fully formed characters act out of character (read *de re*). The former claim captures the robustness of perfectly formed moral characters and the latter claim captures the robustness of libertarian freedom.

Keywords: Libertarianism, perfectly formed characters, alternative possibilities, Thomas Reid.

Perfectly formed moral characters seem to present a problem for a theist who is also a libertarian about freedom.<sup>1</sup> It seems plausible to think that agents with perfectly formed moral characters, such as God, always do what is morally best. And from this fact it seems to follow that it is not possible for agents with

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<sup>1</sup> The core idea in libertarian accounts of freedom is that there is freedom and that it is incompatible with causal determinism. Besides this core idea, libertarian accounts of freedom vary widely. See footnote 2 for some examples.

perfectly formed moral characters to act out of character. God, it seems, *must* do what is morally best *given* His character. However, that there is only one possible course of action available to an agent is anathema to libertarian freedom, for central to libertarianism is the tenet that it is possible for an agent to do otherwise – i.e., that freedom requires possible alternatives to choose from.<sup>2</sup> Whether perfectly formed moral characters pose a challenge to libertarian freedom depends on whether they restrict alternative possibilities in a sense *relevant* for libertarian freedom. Unfortunately for the libertarian it seems quite plausible that they do.<sup>3</sup> I shall refer to this general challenge as ‘The Moral Character Challenge’ to libertarian freedom.

The present paper provides a plausible libertarian answer to this challenge on the basis of the views of one of the great libertarian philosophers: namely, Thomas Reid. The paper will be directly concerned with God, as perhaps the only plausible example of an agent with a perfectly formed moral character.<sup>4</sup> I shall argue that Reid has the theoretical tools to accommodate both a robust account of libertarian freedom and a robust account of moral characters. The latter he can maintain by insisting that it is necessary that agents

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Kane 2007: pp. 5-7, and 2011: pp. 3-5; Flint 1998: pp. 22-31; and O'Connor 2002. It is worth noting that there is an impressive minority view within the libertarian camp that disagrees. Influenced by Frankfurt's well-known counterexample to the principle of alternative possibilities (1969), this minority view has come to be known as ‘Frankfurt Libertarianism.’ This view appears in Zagzebski 1991, Hunt 1999, and 2000, Hasker 2001, and in Stump 1996, for example. I will not be engaging with this minority view in this paper, however.

<sup>3</sup> With regards to God, this is an old problem. For example, Aquinas (SCG, 1.37) worries that God's perfect goodness necessitates His act of creation, and whether God is free to create other than the best, given His perfect goodness and wisdom, is a central issue in the famous Leibniz and Clarke Correspondence. More recently, a variation of this problem is addressed in Adams 1972, Kretzmann 1991, Grover 1988, Flint 1983, Hasker 1984, and Rowe 2006 and 2007, for example. Regarding humans, Kane 2007, for example, notes that actions which follow from a moral character are themselves not libertarian free actions precisely because they deprive the agents of alternative possibilities. He argues, however, that as long as the moral character itself was formed partly by libertarian free acts, or ‘self-forming actions,’ it is plausible to think of the agent as free. What matters, Kane insists, is that agents have free *wills* – that is, abilities for forming their moral characters and motivations. Agents are responsible for the actions that follow from a moral character only if they are responsible for forming these moral characters partly by their libertarian free-forming actions.

<sup>4</sup> Whether the Moral Character Challenge is a problem only for God depends on how alternative possibilities matter for freedom. On the one hand, one can think that the quantity of alternative possibilities is correlated to the robustness of libertarian freedom: the more options the freer one is in choosing, and vice versa. In this case, the problem is widespread: the more robust a moral character the more it restricts alternative possibilities and thus the less robust the libertarian freedom of the agent. Kane (2007) uses Martin Luther's famous statement “Here I stand, I can do no other” to motivate this possibility; Luther's character is formed enough that not standing to the Catholic Church is no longer an alternative for him. At the limit case, the agent with a perfectly formed moral character is not free at all, for her character fully deprives the agent of alternatives; acting in character is her only option. On the other hand, one can think that robust libertarian freedom is preserved as long as there are *some* alternative possibilities open to the agent. In this case, mere reduction in the quantity of alternatives possibilities does not pose a threat to robust libertarian freedom; the problem is only present at the limit case where a perfectly formed character rules out all alternatives for the agent but that of acting in character.

with fully formed characters always act in character (*read de dicto*), and the former by insisting that it is possible even for agents with fully formed characters to act out of character (*read de re*). Understanding Reid's commitments on this topic is intrinsically valuable historically, to be sure. However, the conclusions in this paper should also be of interest beyond historical understanding of Thomas Reid, for exemplar representatives of libertarianism like Reid help identify and define the limits and plausibility of libertarianism itself.

The plan for the paper is the following. In section 1, I shall briefly present the extent to which Reid endorses crucial tenets undergirding The Moral Character Challenge. Importantly, Reid endorses a version of the claim that agents with perfectly formed moral characters always act in character – namely, that the most perfect being always does what is best. Section 2 is dedicated to The Moral Character Challenge proper. In sub-section 2.1, I present an initially plausible argument from the claim that the most perfect being always does what is best to the conclusion that it is impossible for God not to do the best, and from this latter claim I derive a couple of unpalatable conclusions from the libertarian perspective. In 2.2, I argue, however, that despite its initial plausibility the argument in section 2.1 fails. The central step in my response is noting an ambiguity in the claim that the most perfect being always does what is best. In sub-section 2.3 I present two further plausible arguments that aim to attenuate Reid's version of robust libertarianism on the basis of the now disambiguated claim. I conclude that neither argument is successful, and that Reid has the theoretical tools to offer a plausible response to The Moral Character Challenge which retains a robust account of libertarian freedom even at the limit case of perfectly formed moral characters. Hence, for Reid, it is plausible to think that God has a perfectly formed moral character while also being free in the libertarian sense.

## **1. Thomas Reid on Freedom and Moral Character**

In this section I wish to briefly present the extent to which Thomas Reid endorses crucial tenets undergirding The Moral Character Challenge. First, and as is common knowledge in the secondary literature, Reid is a paradigmatic proponent of a robust account of libertarian freedom.<sup>5</sup> Here is a brief sketch of his basic account. For Reid it is something akin to a conceptual truth that all powers are two-way powers. That is, according to Reid, an agent S has a power to  $\phi$  at time t if and only if S has the power not to  $\phi$  at t. One of these powers implies the other: they are necessarily coextensive. Reid writes “Power to produce any effect implies power not to produce it.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the connection between these two powers is more than merely being necessarily coextensive; it is that of ontological interdependence. What it is for something to be a power, according to Reid, is for it to be a two-way power. A one-way power is no power at all. Thus, only agents who enjoy the power not to produce effects can truly be said to have the power to produce those effects.

Importantly for our purposes, freedom for Reid essentially involves having a two-way power with respect to one’s volitions. He writes “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.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, according to Reid, an action is done freely if and only if the action is caused by the agent willingly.<sup>8</sup> Reid writes “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 that determination of his own will, he was free in that action, and it is justly imputed to him.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, for Reid freedom requires that the agent be the agent cause of her volitions and being the agent cause of her volitions essentially requires having a two-way power over the

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<sup>5</sup> Kane 1996: pp. 32-4; pp. 190-2; O’Connor 1994, and 2000.

<sup>6</sup> EAP 1.5, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> EAP 4.1, p. 267.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth pointing out that for Reid *willing* is itself an action (EAP 4.2, p. 276). According to Maria Alvarez (2000) this gives rise to at least one form of a vicious regress. Timothy O’Connor (1994) has presented what I take to be a successful response to these kinds of infinite regress objections.

<sup>9</sup> EAP 4.1, p. 273.

determination of these volitions. All of this is built into agent causation, as Reid sees it. This account certainly seems to be a paradigmatic case of libertarianism.

Thomas Reid thus clearly endorsed a central tenet that gives rise to The Moral Character Challenge, namely a robust account of libertarian freedom. Reid's account of moral characters, however, is not as straightforward. In fact, Reid never directly and systematically developed an account of the nature of characters.<sup>10</sup> He only addressed this topic when dealing with other issues. For example, in his discussion of prescience 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.<sup>11</sup>

Here Reid insists that perfect knowledge of a human character together with perfect knowledge of the situation a human agent finds himself in is insufficient to predict human action with certainty. The clear implication, I take it, is that in the case of human agents it is always possible to act out of character. Thus, at least with regards to human agents, The Moral Character Challenge is not a particularly pressing problem for Reid. Human characters are contrasted with the divine character, however. And Reid insists that God's moral character is indeed sufficient grounds for predicting with certainty how God would act. Why is this? Does Reid think that God's character is a sufficient ground for predicting divine action precisely because it is impossible for God to act out of character? This is no trivial question. In the following section I will present some initially plausible reasons for thinking that this is indeed what Reid is committed to, and if so that his robust account of libertarian freedom seems compromised in the case of God. I will argue, however, that despite initial plausibility these reasons are not good enough. I will conclude that Reid can retain a robust

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<sup>10</sup> It is somewhat common in secondary literature to think that for Reid character traits are *fixed resolutions*. See, for example, Yaffe 2004 and Kroeker 2007. Kenneth L. Pearce (2012), however, persuasively argues that this account is not quite correct.

<sup>11</sup> EAP 4.10, pp. 352-3.

account of libertarian freedom regarding God, and has the theoretical tools to provide a plausible answer to The Moral Character Challenge.

## 2. The Moral Character Challenge

### 2.1 An Apparent Response: Attenuating Libertarianism

Speaking about the limit case of perfectly formed moral character Reid writes:

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: For it is a contradiction to say, That a perfect being does what is wrong or unreasonable.<sup>12</sup>

In this passage Reid insists that it is an “identical proposition” (something akin to our notion of analytic truth) that “the most perfect being always does what is best” – I shall refer to this proposition simply as ‘The Identical Proposition.’ It seems at least initially plausible that by describing The Identical Proposition as an identical proposition Reid is in effect endorsing a modal analysis of the robustness of moral characters at least at the limit case – namely, that it is not possible for an agent with a perfectly formed character to act out of character. Here is an argument to this effect (I shall refer to this as ‘The Initially Plausible Argument’):

1. The most perfect being always does what is best.
2. Premise 1 is an identical proposition.
3. Identical propositions are necessarily true.<sup>13</sup>
4. Therefore, it is necessarily true that the most perfect being always does what is best.
5. Therefore, it is impossible for the most perfect being to act out of character.
6. Therefore, it is impossible for God to do other than the best.

The Initially Plausible Argument seems to be an initially plausible way of understanding Reid’s commitments in the quoted passage, and its sole philosophical commitment seems to be deeming The Identical Proposition to be an identical proposition. If this is the correct way of understanding Reid’s commitments regarding The

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<sup>12</sup> EAP 4.4, pp. 292-3.

<sup>13</sup> I take this premise to follow uncontroversially from Reid’s insistence that “it is a contradiction to say” the opposite of an identical proposition.

Identical Proposition, then Reid is indeed committed to the mentioned modal analysis of the robustness of moral characters. This would indeed create problems for Reid's version of libertarianism. It seems that this modal analysis leads Reid to abandon his robust account of libertarianism for a more attenuated form.<sup>14</sup> This attenuated form of libertarianism allows for violations of the following two paradigmatically libertarian principles ('PAP' for *Principle of Alternative Possibilities*; and 'PP' for *Power implies Possibility*):

PAP: an agent S freely  $\phi$ -s at t only if it is possible for S not to  $\phi$  at t.

PP: an agent S has the power to  $\phi$  at t only if it is possible for S to  $\phi$  at t.

To see how these principles are violated, consider the following. First, it being impossible for God, because of His perfectly formed moral character, not to do the best does not take away God's *power* not to do the best. For, as noted earlier, according to Reid all powers are two-way powers. Thus, God's power to do the best implies God's power not to do the best. Thus, we get a clear violation of PP: God has the power not to do the best (per Reid's account of two-way powers together with God's power to do the best), yet it is not possible for God not to do the best (per The Initially Plausible Argument). Thus, God's power not to do the best seems to be a necessarily unexercised power.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, this kind of impossibility also does *not* take away God's freedom, on Reid's view. This is so because what is essential for Reid's account of freedom is for the agent to be the agent cause of her actions. Reid writes: "To say that man is a free agent, is no more than to say, that in some instances he is truly an agent, and a cause, and is not merely acted upon as a passive instrument."<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, built into Reid's account of agent causation is a robust account of two-way powers over the determination of one's will, and so being an agent cause implies this kind of two-way power. What would take away freedom would be a foreign cause usurping the agent of her causal role. Clearly, however, the fact that it is impossible for God not to do the best does not take away God's freedom in doing the best precisely because neither this impossibility, nor God's perfect moral character which grounds it, amount to *foreign causes* which deprive God

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<sup>14</sup> This is Kenneth L. Pearce's main thesis (2012).

<sup>15</sup> His is how Pearce (2012: p. 167) aptly puts it.

<sup>16</sup> EAP 4.3, p. 289.

of His agent-causal role in the action of doing the best. God's agent-causal role, together with its robust two-way power over His volitions, is preserved. Thus, PAP is also violated: God freely does the best (per God being the agent cause of His action), yet it is not possible for God not to do the best (per The Initially Plausible Argument).<sup>17</sup>

In sum, on the basis of an initially plausible reading of The Identical Proposition it seems that Reid is committed to attenuating his account of libertarian freedom to accommodate perfectly formed moral characters. This attenuated version of libertarianism includes violations of both PP and PAP, but it still counts as a variation of libertarianism because Reid's basic account of agent causation, with its built in two-way powers over the determination of the agent's will, need not be abandoned. God is still the agent cause of His actions and still retains the power to do otherwise, so He still counts as free in Reid's sense.

Before concluding, I will like to point out that the argument presented in this subsection can be extended. One can further argue that violations of PP are inconceivable, and so that the right conclusion is not that Reid's version of libertarianism regarding God must be attenuated. The right conclusion instead is that Reid must abandoned libertarianism regarding God altogether, for necessarily unexercised powers are not powers at all. If so, God's perfectly formed moral character deprives God of His freedom by depriving Him of alternative possibilities which ultimately deprive Him of the power to do otherwise.

In the next sub-section I will argue that despite endorsing The Identical Proposition, Reid is not committed to conclusion 6 of The Initially Plausible Argument. If I'm right, Reid is not committed to the mentioned attenuated version of libertarianism nor is committed to the more radical abandonment of freedom regarding God. Reid, I shall argue does not need to attenuate his robust account of libertarian freedom to accommodate perfectly formed moral characters.

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<sup>17</sup> The view adumbrated in this sub-section resembles in important ways the view defended in Wielenberg 2000.



## 2.2 The Identical Proposition and Robust Libertarianism

My argument begins by pointing out that Reid explicitly repudiated violations of PP, or necessarily unexercised powers. Reid writes: “It is no less a contradiction to say, that a cause has power to produce a certain effect, but that he cannot exert that power: For power which cannot be exerted is no power, and is a contradiction in terms.”<sup>18</sup> This is not an isolated remark. Reid also writes: “To be subject to necessity is to have no power at all; for power and necessity are opposites.”<sup>19</sup> From these quotations it is clear that Reid endorses PP. Now PAP follows from PP together with Reid’s view on two-way powers and his agent causation account of freedom. To better appreciate this, consider the following argument:

1. Suppose agent S freely  $\phi$ -s at t.
2. If S freely  $\phi$ -s at t, then S is the agent cause of his  $\phi$ -ing at t (By Reid’s account of freedom).
3. If S is the agent cause of his  $\phi$ -ing at t, then S has the power not to  $\phi$  at t (By Reid’s account of two-way powers).<sup>20</sup>
4. If S has the power not to  $\phi$  at t, then it is possible for S not to  $\phi$  at t (By PP).
5. Therefore, S freely  $\phi$ -s at t only if it is possible for S not to  $\phi$  at t (By hypothetical syllogism).

And conclusion (5) just is PAP. So, it is clear that Reid is also committed to PAP. Thus, we should accept that Reid is committed to violations of these principles, contrary to what he explicitly stated, as a last interpretative resort only. Fortunately, I shall argue, we do not need to come to this.

Crucial to the argument in the previous sub-section is the claim that it is impossible for God not to do the best. Both instances of purported violations of PAP and PP rely on this kind of impossibility. If it can be shown that Reid was in fact not committed to this kind of impossibility, it would thereby be shown that Reid was not committed to the violations of these principles (not on the basis of the mentioned argument, anyway). I contend that Reid is indeed committed to the claim that it is a *contradiction* to claim that it is not the case that the most perfect being always does what is best, but, I shall argue, Reid is *not* committed to the claim that it is *impossible* for God not to do the best.

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<sup>18</sup> EAP 4.2, p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> EAP 4.4, p. 293.

<sup>20</sup> This is so because, as we have seen, for Reid to be an agent cause of an action  $\phi$  implies having the power to  $\phi$ , and this power to  $\phi$  implies having the power not to  $\phi$ .

My basic response begins by pointing out that the sentence “the most perfect being always does what is best” is ambiguous, for it can be read either *de dicto* or *de re*.<sup>21</sup> The argument adumbrated in the previous sub-section requires the latter, but, I shall argue, Reid is only committed to the former. Our first task is thus to disambiguate The Identical Proposition. For our purposes the basic difference between a *de dicto* (“of the dictum” or “of the statement”) and a *de re* (“of the thing”) reading of a proposition is best expressed using possible world analysis of modality. To say that The Identical Proposition read *de dicto* is necessary is to say that the proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best” is true in every possible world. To say that The Identical Proposition read *de re* is necessary is to say of the object that is *in fact* the most perfect being that *he* has the property of *always doing what is best* in every possible world in which he exists. A plausible way of capturing this difference in symbolic form is the following: for the *de dicto* reading,  $\Box\forall x (MPx \rightarrow ABx)$  [where “MP(x)” = “the most perfect being” and “AB(x)” = “always does what is best”], and for the *de re* reading,  $\exists x (x=g \wedge MPg \wedge \Box ABg)$  [where ‘g’ is a proper name for God].<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that from ascribing necessity to the *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition  $[\exists x (x=g \wedge MPg \wedge \Box ABg)]$  it *does* immediately follow that it is impossible for God not to do the best – it takes just two steps of existential and conjunction elimination. In fact, it is this immediate logical implication of this reading of the Identical Proposition that endows The Initially Plausible Argument that with it is initial plausibility. On the other hand, merely ascribing necessity to the *de dicto* reading of The Identical Proposition  $[\Box\forall x (MPx \rightarrow ABx)]$  does not immediately imply that it is impossible for God not to do the best. More premises need to be introduced for this to logically follow. Crucially for our present purposes, conclusion 6

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<sup>21</sup> Arguably, there are multiple different distinctions that can be characterized as *de dicto/de re*; McKay 2010, for example, distinguishes between syntactic, semantic and metaphysical *de dicto/de re* distinctions. The distinction I have in mind is metaphysical. I read ‘*de dicto*’ as ascribing necessity to a proposition, and ‘*de re*’ as ascribing necessity to the exemplification of a property in the object the proposition is about. I do not wish to hang too much on the distinction I have in mind having to be characterized as a version of the *de dicto/de re* distinction. Everything I have to say can be said merely in terms of ambiguity of The Identical Proposition, which can be disambiguated by utilizing existential and universal quantifiers and difference in the scope of the necessity operator. I find talk of *de dicto* vs. *de re* readings of The Identical Proposition much simpler, so I will rely on this kind of talk in the main text.

<sup>22</sup> Once the necessity operator and both existential and universal quantifiers have been introduced, we have four potential logical candidates:  $\Box\forall x (MPx \rightarrow ABx)$ ,  $\forall x (MPx \rightarrow \Box ABx)$ ,  $\Box\exists x (x=g \wedge MPg \wedge ABg)$ ,  $\exists x (x=g \wedge MPg \wedge \Box ABg)$ . I only consider the first and last candidates in the main text because I think these are the most plausible ones.

does not follow from conclusion 5 in The Initially Plausible Argument on the *de dicto* reading of The Identical Proposition.

I think that Reid is only committed to the *de dicto*, and not the *de re*, reading of The Identical Proposition. In fact, Reid seems to have explicitly denied the *de re* reading. He writes:

The moral perfection of the Deity consists, not in having no power to do ill, otherwise, as Dr. Clarke justly observes, there would be no ground to thank him for his goodness to us any more than for his eternity or immensity; but this moral perfection consists in this, that, when he has power to do every thing, a power which cannot be resisted, he exerts that power only in doing what is wisest and best. To be subject to necessity is to have no power at all; for power and necessity are opposites.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage Reid states that “the Deity”, his preferred proper name for God, has the power to do ill, and then moves on to state that such power is opposed to necessity – that is, that it is possible for the Deity to do ill. Now, if it is possible for God to do ill, then it is not necessary for God to always do the best, and this latter just is the *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition.

I take this to be compelling evidence that Reid is not committed to the *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition. Now, conclusion 6 of The Initially Plausible Argument follows from conclusion 5 only on the *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition. Thus, it is best to conclude that Reid is not committed to conclusion 6 of The Initially Plausible Argument and neither is he committed to violations of either PP or PAP. Reid can indeed be understood as a paradigmatic libertarian even after recognizing that he maintains that The Identical Proposition is an identical proposition.

### **2.3 The *De Dicto* Reading and Robust Libertarianism**

In the previous section I argued that Reid is not committed to the *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition. From this I concluded that The Initially Plausible Argument fails and that Reid’s views can still be plausibly read as robustly libertarian. An attentive reader, however, might still worry that Reid’s

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<sup>23</sup> EAP 4.4 p. 293.

endorsement of the *de dicto* reading of The Identical Proposition together with other plausible premises might lead to the same conclusions identified in sub-section 2.1. In the present sub-section I present, and respond to, two seemingly plausible arguments beginning with the *de dicto* reading of the Identical Proposition whose conclusion is that it is impossible for God not to do the best. If either of these argument is successful, then the unpalatable conclusions in sub-section 2.1 would be vindicated after all.

The first argument I shall label ‘The Straightforward Argument.’ This argument relies on the very plausible premise that it is necessary that God is the most perfect being.<sup>24</sup>

1. It is necessary that the most perfect being always does what is best (*de dicto* reading).
2. It is necessary that God is the most perfect being.
3. Therefore, it is necessary that God always does what is best.

And conclusion (3) just is the claim that it is impossible for God not to do what is best. The Straightforward Argument is a straightforward and plausible argument indeed. I think, however, that Reid does not accept premise (2). As we have seen, Reid states that “the Deity” has the power to do ill, and that power is opposed to necessity.<sup>25</sup> Now, it is clear that it being possible for God to do ill together with premise (1) entails the denial of premise (2). This, of course, is not surprising, for the claim that it is possible for God to do ill just is the denial of (3). It is clear that if (1) and (2) entail (3), as The Straightforward Argument has it, it is also clear that (1) and the negation of (3) entail the negation of (2). The crucial question in this context is which of these arguments is to be attributed to Reid. Given the quoted passages from Reid, and the absence of textual evidence to the contrary,<sup>26</sup> it seems best to interpret Reid as denying premise (2). I conclude, then, that The Straightforward Argument fails to show that Reid is committed to the claim that it is impossible for God not to do the best.

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<sup>24</sup> Pearce’s own formulation of the argument (2012: p. 168) relies on this premise.

<sup>25</sup> EAP 4.4 p. 293.

<sup>26</sup> Pearce himself does not offer any textual support for his proposal of (2). He only cites with approval Tuggy 2004. Tuggy himself offers philosophical reasons for the plausibility of this claim, but no convincing textual support from Reid.

The second argument from the *de dicto* reading I shall call ‘The Promising Argument.’ First, here is an informal presentation of the rationale of this second argument. The proposition “The most perfect being always does what is best” is an identical proposition. Now, for God not to do the best would be for God to do something which would render this identical proposition false; but nothing can render identical propositions false. For identical propositions must be true (i.e., “it is a contradiction to say”<sup>27</sup> otherwise). Hence, God *cannot* do that which would render this identical proposition false. Therefore, God *cannot* do other than the best. And this is just another way of saying that it is *impossible* for God not to do the best. Here is the argument in premise-conclusion form:

1. The proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best” is an identical proposition.
2. It is impossible for identical propositions to be false.
3. Therefore, it is impossible that the proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best” be false.
4. God not doing the best would render the proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best” false.
5. It is impossible for God to do something which would make false a proposition which is such that it is impossible for that proposition to be false.
6. Therefore, it is impossible that God not do the best.

The Promising Argument seems intuitive indeed. This argument does not require the premise that it is necessary that God is the most perfect being, as The Straightforward Argument does. If Reid is committed to all the premises in Promising Argument he must be committed to the conclusion as well, and as we have seen he would also be ultimately committed to violations of both PAP and PP.

My response to The Promising Argument also relies on the distinction between the *de dicto* and *de re* reading of the proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best”. For the argument to be valid this proposition has to be read consistently throughout the argument as either *de dicto* or *de re*. I shall argue that neither consistent reading commits Reid to the conclusion. After disambiguating The Identical Proposition, we get two different readings of Promising Argument which are valid: a) a consistently *de dicto*

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<sup>27</sup> EAP 4.4, pp. 293.

reading of The Identical Proposition, and b) a consistently *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition. The two crucial premises that have to be disambiguated are premises 1 and 4:

1a: The proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best”  $[\Box\forall x (MPx \rightarrow ABx)]$  is an identical proposition.

1b: The proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best”  $[\exists x (x=g \wedge MPg \wedge \Box ABg)]$  is an identical proposition.

4a: God not doing the best would render the proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best”  $[\Box\forall x (MPx \rightarrow ABx)]$  false.

4b: God not doing the best would render the proposition “the most perfect being always does what is best”  $[\exists x (x=g \wedge MPg \wedge \Box ABg)]$  false.

I think that Reid is only committed to 1a and 4b, and not 1b and 4a. If so, neither the consistently *de dicto* reading nor the consistently *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition throughout The Promising Argument commits Reid to the conclusion.

As we have seen, the most plausible reading of Reid is as denying the *de re* reading of The Identical Proposition, so on the basis of the previous argument we can now conclude that Reid is committed to 1a and not 1b. The Promising Argument fails if read *de re* consistently.

As already mentioned, I think that Reid would only accept 4b and not 4a. 4b states that God not doing the best brings it about that The Identical Proposition read *de re* is false. This is obvious and trivial. 4a, however, is not. 4a states that God not doing the best would bring it about that The Identical Proposition read *de dicto* is false. It is Reid’s commitment to 1a and rejection of 1b that prevents him from accepting 4a. Because The Identical Proposition read *de dicto* is merely stating a necessary condition (*always doing what is best*) for the satisfying of a formula (“being the most perfect being”), God’s doing or not doing the best is strictly irrelevant to the truth of this proposition. Thus, making a connection between God’s not doing the best and the falsity of The Identical Proposition read *de dicto*, as 4a does, can be reasonably denied. Given that Reid is committed to 1a and not 1b, and that he is also committed to the possibility of God not doing the best (as already established), Reid has no reason to accept 4a and good reasons to reject it. Thus, I conclude it is best to read Thomas Reid as rejecting 4a. Thus neither a consistent *de dicto* reading of The Identical Proposition

throughout The Promising Argument commits Reid to the claim that it is impossible for God not to do the best.

Thus, unless an alternative plausible argument is provided the most plausible conclusion is that Reid is not committed to the claim that it is impossible for God not to do the best. As we have seen, this is a crucial step in the arguments on sub-section 2.1 for violations of both PAP and PP. Taking this impossibility away takes these violations away. I conclude that Reid was not committed to violations of either PAP or PP. He is indeed best understood as a paradigmatic libertarian.

## 2.4 Answering The Moral Character Challenge

We are finally in a position to appreciate a plausible Reidian response to The Moral Character Challenge. Given the arguments presented so far, Reid is to be understood as endorsing a robust account of libertarian freedom even for the case of God – the paradigmatic example of an agent with a perfectly formed and good moral character. This fact does not force Reid to give up a robust account of moral characters, not even for perfectly formed characters. I think that a plausible Reidian response is to insist that the robustness of moral characters is to be understood as supporting only the *de dicto* reading of the proposition “an agent with a perfectly formed character always acts in character”, and not also its *de re* reading. That is, I propose that a plausible Reidian response is to *accept* a kind of modal analysis of the robustness of moral characters, but only for the *de dicto* reading of The Identical Proposition, not the *de re* reading. This should be understood not as betraying the robustness of moral characters, but rather as making it more precise.

This plausible Reidian response to The Moral Character Challenge is thus the following. Agents with perfectly formed moral characters *retain* their robust libertarian freedom, for it is possible for them to act out of character (read *de re*), yet these agents also possess robust moral characters, for it is necessary that agents

with perfectly formed character traits always act in character (read *de dicto*). A Reidian can have his cake and eat it too!<sup>28</sup>

At this juncture a crucial question is apropos: is this plausible Reidian response Reid's own? To be frank, I am not entirely sure how to answer this question with enough precision. On the one hand, all the elements in the response are Reid's own. But, on the other hand, Reid himself did not explicitly address The Moral Character Challenge. So, in one sense it is Reid's own response and in another sense it is not. I do think that the response I provided is something Reid himself would be happy accepting, if presented with it. The crucial fact is that, if I'm right, Reid has the theoretical tools to retain both a robust account of libertarian freedom and a robust account of perfectly formed moral characters.

Before concluding, I would like to point out an important consequence of my reading. As we have seen, the presented plausible Reidian response includes the claim that it is possible for agents with perfectly formed moral characters to act out of character (read *de re*). Furthermore, it also includes the claim that it is necessary that agents with perfectly formed characters always act in character (read *de dicto*). From these two claims it follows that it is possible for agents with perfectly formed moral characters not to have perfectly formed moral characters (read *de re*). This consequence is perfectly acceptable in cases of human agents with perfectly formed moral characters, if there be any. However, traditional theists have reason to be wary of this implication regarding God. God is traditionally taken to be essentially good and wise. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that it is part of traditional theism to insist that God is essentially the most perfect being. This plausible Reidian response, however, entails that it is possible for God not to be the most perfect being. This seems to be a cost for a traditional theist like Thomas Reid, so perhaps the presented solution is not entirely free of costs.

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<sup>28</sup> By this I do not mean to imply that I have provided a complete account of the robustness of moral characters. I certainly have not. The picture presented here needs to be supplemented. Reid himself defers to Samuel Clarke's appeal to moral necessity to try to fill in more details (EAP 4.4, p. 293). Moral necessity is the kind of necessity that binds rational agents to act in accordance with the most persuasive reasons for action but which is nonetheless compatible with libertarian freedom. Murray (1995, 1996, 2004 and 2005) traces important developments of this philosophical notion up to Leibniz. I do not have space to pursue this issue further, however.



### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined a problem for a theist who is also a libertarian. The core of the problem is that the fact that agents with perfectly formed moral characters always act in character seems to entail that it is not possible for an agent with a perfectly formed character to act out of character. We thus get a dilemma for the theist libertarian: either a) God is not libertarian free – because His moral character rules out possible alternatives; or b) God’s character is not perfectly formed – because libertarian freedom requires that it is possible for God to act out of character.

I have argued that Reid has the theoretical tools to retain a robust account of libertarian freedom even for agents with perfectly formed moral characters. This plausible Reidian response can be summarized thus: agents with perfectly formed moral characters *retain* their robust libertarian freedom, for it is possible for agents with perfectly formed characters to act out of character (read *de re*), yet these agents also possess a robust moral character, for it is necessary that agents with perfectly formed character traits always act in character (read *de dicto*). Thus, it is plausible to see how God can be free in the libertarian sense while also possessing a perfectly formed moral character.

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