Reid has been widely hailed as a champion of ‘libertarian freedom’, i.e. of the thesis that human beings have free will in a way that is incompatible with determinism (e.g. Rowe, 1991; O’Connor, 1994). I have no objection whatsoever against this portrayal of Reid; it is correct. It should be noted, however, that in Reid’s work ‘determinism’ is the name of a thesis that is strikingly different from the thesis that currently goes by that name. To the best of my knowledge, extant discussions of Reid’s moral philosophy have paid no attention to this fact. This paper aims to rectify that situation. More specifically it aims to discuss Reid’s criticisms of determinism as he understood it.

7.1 What is determinism?

According to the current lore (e.g. Fischer, 1986, p. 33; Van Inwagen 1986, p. 242) determinism is the thesis that at every point in its history, the world has only one possible future. Somewhat more picturesquely it is the thesis that were the history of the world to be ‘rolled back’ to a particular time point in the past, say 1555 and from then onwards were to enfold in the future direction again, history would take all the twists and turns that the actual history of the world has taken from 1555 onwards. Somewhat less picturesquely, determinism is the thesis that the laws of nature and the state of the world at a particular time entail the state of the world at any other time t*.

Eighteenth century determinism is defined in a strikingly different manner – as I will now proceed to show. A first step in that direction requires the introduction of the notion of ‘determination of the will’, a notion that figures prominently in Reid’s discussion of freedom and determinism. Consider the following things that one might will, or that one might not will:

- going to Amsterdam
- climbing Mt. Blanc
- going to the London Philharmonic Orchestra
and next consider someone who wills any of the things; then ask yourself: what is the mental state that person is in? Most likely you will think that person is in the state of wanting or wishing to go to Amsterdam, and so on. But that is not the way Reid and his fellow-discussants thought about willing (or about exercising the will). To will any of these things, they held, is to decide to do any of these things. When one wills to go to Amsterdam, one decides to go to Amsterdam. And when one wills to go to Amsterdam, they said, one’s will is determined. When you haven’t decided whether or not you are going to Amsterdam, your will is undetermined. But when you have decided to go, your will is determined. So, when you will to go to Amsterdam (when you decided to go there) then going to Amsterdam is ‘the determination of your will’ i.e. then that is how your will is determined.¹

The deep divide between Reid and the determinists opens up when it is asked by what our wills are determined, or what the causes of the determination of our wills are. The determinist’s answer is, basically, that our wills are always determined by what is itself involuntary: they are determined either by involuntary states of mind (desires, aversions, hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, appetites, passions, affections – see Reid, 1969b, p. 58) or by external circumstances. The determinations of our wills, they affirm, are the ‘necessary consequences’ of involuntary mental as well as non-mental states. Reid, by contrast holds that our wills are at least sometimes determined by something other than involuntary mental and non-mental (external) states. The cause of the determination of our wills he holds is, sometimes at least, we ourselves, we persons. (And reasonably enough he thus takes for granted that we ourselves are neither mental states nor non-mental external circumstances.) In contrast with the determinists, then, Reid holds that persons can cause the determination of their wills, that persons can cause their wills to be determined in certain ways. And whenever we ourselves determine our wills, Reid holds, we are free – and so are our wills.

The controversy between Reid and the determinists, then, is not about whether we have a will. All sides agree that we do. Nor is the disagreement about whether our wills are determined. All agree they are. The disagreement is about the causes of the determinations of our wills: are those causes involuntary states (mental or non-mental) or are they persons? Determinists held the former, Reid the latter – or, more cautiously, he held that our wills are at least sometimes determined by ourselves.

The controversy over freedom versus determinism was, for Reid, of prime importance because the way it is resolved, he held, decides whether or not we hold ourselves and each other morally responsible for some of the things we do. If determinism is true, then a person might do well, or he might do ill – but whatever he does, he is neither entitled to esteem and approbation, nor to blame and disapprobation.

When we compare the 18th century definition of determinism with the one currently favoured, we may note some striking differences. Whereas