

# Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought.—The ‘volume’ referred to at the outset contained the present work, the *Dissertation on the Passions* and the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which were all published together.]

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## Section 6: Probability

Even if there were no such thing as chance in the world, our ignorance of the real cause of any event has the same effect on the understanding, and generates the same kinds of belief or opinion, as knowledge about chances does.<sup>4</sup>

It can certainly happen that an outcome is probable because the chances of its occurring are greater than the chances of its not occurring; and the probability is greater—and the corresponding belief or assent stronger—in proportion as those chances exceed the chances of the outcome's not occurring. If a die were marked with two spots on four of its sides and with three spots on the two remaining sides, then it would be more probable that when the die was thrown it would turn up *two* than that it would turn up *three*. If it had a thousand sides, with 999 of them marked with two spots and the remaining one side marked with three spots, the probability of its turning up *two* would be much higher, and our belief or expectation of that outcome would be more steady and secure. This process of thought or reasoning may seem trivial and obvious, but it offers plenty to think about for those who attend to it carefully.

It seems clear that when the mind looks to the future to learn which outcome will result from the throw of such a die, it considers the turning up of each particular side as equally probable; and this is the very nature of chance, to render all the particular outcomes that it covers entirely equal. But the mind, finding that a greater number of sides involve one outcome (turning up *two*) than in the other (turning up *three*), is carried more frequently to the former outcome, and meets

it oftener in revolving the various possibilities or chances on which the ultimate result depends. This situation in which several views involve one particular outcome immediately generates—by an inexplicable contrivance of nature—the sentiment of *belief*, and gives that outcome the advantage over its antagonist, which is supported by a smaller number of views and crops up frequently in the mind. Although I have called it inexplicable, this operation may perhaps be in some measure accounted for if we allow that belief is nothing but a firmer and stronger conception of an object than what accompanies the mere fictions of the imagination. The combination of these several views or glimpses imprints the idea more strongly on the imagination; gives it superior force and vigour; renders its influence on the passions and affections more obvious; and, in short, creates that reliance or security which constitutes the nature of belief and opinion.

With the probability of *causes* the situation is the same as it is with the probability of *chance*. Some causes are entirely uniform and constant in producing a particular kind of effect, with no instance having ever been found of any failure or irregularity in their operation. Fire has always burned, and water has always suffocated, every human creature. The production of motion by impact and gravity is a universal law which up to now has had no exceptions. But other causes have been found to be more irregular and uncertain: rhubarb hasn't always worked as a purge, or opium as a soporific, on everyone who has taken these medicines. It is true that when any cause fails to produce its usual effect, scientists don't

<sup>4</sup> Locke divides all arguments into demonstrative and probable. On this view, we must say that it is only probable that all men must die or that the sun will rise to-morrow, because neither of these can be demonstrated. But to conform our language more to common use, we ought to divide arguments into demonstrations, *proofs*, and probabilities—by 'proofs' meaning arguments from experience that leave no room for doubt or opposition.

ascribe this to any irregularity in nature; but rather suppose that some secret causes in the particular structure of parts have prevented the operation. But our reasonings about the outcome are the same as if this principle ·concerning ‘secret causes’· didn’t apply. Custom has determined us to transfer the past to the future in all our inferences; so where the past has been entirely regular and uniform, we expect the ·usual· outcome with the greatest confidence, and leave no room for any contrary supposition. But where different effects have been found to follow from causes that *appear* exactly alike, all these various effects must occur to the mind when it moves from the past to the future, and must enter into our thoughts when we estimate the probability of an outcome. Though we give preference to the one that has been found to be the most usual, and believe that this effect will occur this time too, we have to take into account the other effects, assigning to each a particular weight and authority in proportion as we have found it to be more or less frequent. In almost every country of Europe it is more probable that there will be frost some time in January than that the weather will continue frost-free throughout that whole month; though

this probability varies according to the different climates, and comes near to certainty in the more northern kingdoms. Here then it seems evident that when we transfer the past to the future in order to predict the effect that will result from any cause, we transfer all the different outcomes in the same proportion as they have appeared in the past, and conceive (for instance) one to have existed a hundred times, another ten times, and another once. As a great number of views here point to one outcome, they fortify and confirm it to the imagination, generate the sentiment that we call *belief*, and make us prefer that outcome to the contrary one that isn’t supported by as many experiences and doesn’t show up so frequently in our thought in transferring the past to the future. Try to account for this operation of the mind on the basis of any of the received systems of philosophy and you will become aware of the difficulty. For my part, I shall be satisfied if the hints that I have given arouse the curiosity of philosophers, and make them aware of how defective all common theories are in their treatments of these interesting and elevated subjects.

## Section 7: The idea of necessary connection

The mathematical sciences have a great advantage over the sciences that deal with human nature, namely that the ideas of the former—because they come from the senses—are always clear and determinate, the smallest distinction between them is immediately perceptible, and the same terms continue to stand for the same ideas without ambiguity

or variation. An oval is never mistaken for a circle, nor a hyperbola for an ellipse. The isosceles and scalenon triangles are distinguished by boundaries more exact than those between vice and virtue, right and wrong. When a term is defined in geometry, the mind always promptly substitutes the definition for the term defined. And even

when no definition is employed, the object itself may be presented to the senses and by that means be clearly and firmly grasped. But the more subtle sentiments of the mind, the operations of the understanding, the various agitations of the passions, though really in themselves distinct from one another, easily escape us when we reflectively look in on them; and we are not able to recall the original object every time we have occasion to think about it. Ambiguity, by this means, is gradually introduced into our reasonings; similar objects are readily taken to be the same; and eventually the conclusion goes far beyond the premises.

Still, it's safe to say that if we consider these sciences in a proper light we'll see that their respective advantages and disadvantages make them nearly equal. Although the mind more easily retains clear and determinate ideas in geometry, it must carry on a much longer and more intricate chain of reasoning, and compare ideas that are much wider of each other, in order to reach the abstruser truths of that science. On the other side, although ideas relating to human nature are likely, if we aren't extremely careful, to fall into obscurity and confusion, the inferences are always much shorter in these enquiries, with far fewer steps from premises to conclusion than in the sciences that treat of quantity and number. Almost every proposition in Euclid's *Geometry* consists of more parts than are to be found in any fully coherent reasoning about human nature. When we trace the principles of the human mind through a few steps, we can be well satisfied with our progress, considering how soon nature puts up barriers to all our enquiries into causes, and reduces us to admitting our ignorance. Thus, •the chief obstacle to our making advances in the human or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas and the ambiguity of the terms. •The principal difficulty in mathematics is the length of inferences and scope of thought needed for

reaching any conclusion. And it may be that what chiefly holds back our progress in natural science is the lack of relevant experiments and phenomena, which are often found only by chance, and sometimes when they are needed can't be found at all, even by the most persistent and careful enquiry. As the study of human nature seems until now to have advanced less than either geometry or physics, we may conclude that if there is any difference in this respect among these sciences, the difficulties that obstruct the progress of the human sciences require the greater care and skill to be surmounted.

Of all the ideas that occur in metaphysics, none are more obscure and uncertain than those of *power*, *force*, *energy* or *necessary connection*, which we have to employ at every moment in our enquiries. So I'll try in this section to fix (as far as possible) the precise meaning of these terms, thereby removing some of the obscurity that is so much complained of in this kind of philosophy.

It seems that there won't be much dispute about this proposition:

All our ideas are merely copies of our impressions, so it is impossible for us to *think* of anything that we haven't previously *felt* through either our external or our internal senses.

I tried in Section 2 to explain and prove this proposition, expressing my hope that by applying it properly men may make their philosophical reasonings clearer and more precise than ever before. Perhaps complex ideas can be well known by definition, for a definition merely enumerates the parts or simple ideas that make up the defined idea. But when we have pushed definitions back to the most simple ideas, and still find some ambiguity and obscurity, where can we turn for help? What technique can we use to throw light on these ideas and give our minds an altogether precise and

determinate grasp of them? The answer is that we can produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied. These impressions are all strong and sensible. There can be no ambiguity in *them*. They are not only placed in a full light themselves, but may throw light on the corresponding ideas that lie in the dark. Perhaps by this means we can come to have a new microscope, so to speak, through which in the human sciences the smallest and simplest ideas can be enlarged enough to be readily grasped and to be as well known as the biggest and most sensible ideas that we can enquire into.

To be fully acquainted with the idea of power or necessary connection, therefore, let us examine the impression that it copies; and in order to find that impression with greater certainty, let us search for it in all the sources from which it might have been derived.

When we look around us at external objects, and think about the operation of causes, we are *never* able to discover any power or necessary connection, any quality that ties the effect to the cause and *makes it an infallible consequence* of it. All we find is that the one event *does in fact follow* the other. The impact of one billiard-ball is accompanied by motion in the other. This is all that appears to the outer senses. The mind feels no sentiment or inward impression from this sequence of events: so in no single particular instance of cause and effect is there anything that can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection.

When we experience something for the first time, we never can conjecture what effect will result from it. But if the power or energy of any cause were discoverable by the mind, we would be able to foresee the effect even if we had no previous

experience of similar items, and would be able straight off to say with confidence what the effect would be, simply through thought and reasoning.

In fact no material thing ever reveals through its sensible qualities any power or energy, or gives us a basis for thinking it will produce anything or be followed by any other item that we could call its effect. Solidity, extension, motion—these qualities are all complete in themselves, and never point to any *other* item that might result from them. The scenes of the universe are continually shifting, and one object follows another in an uninterrupted sequence; but the power or force that drives the whole machine is entirely concealed from us, and never shows itself in any of the sensible qualities of material things. We know that in fact heat constantly *accompanies* flame; but we have no basis on which to conjecture or imagine—let alone to know—what the *connection* is between flame and heat. So the idea of power can't be derived from our experience of bodies in single instances of their operation; because no bodies ever reveal any power that could be the origin of this idea.<sup>5</sup>

Since external objects as they appear to our senses give us no idea of power or necessary connection by their operation in particular instances, let us see whether this idea is derived from our reflection on the operations of our own minds, and thus copied from some internal impression. Here is something that may be said:

We are conscious of internal power all the time, while we feel that by the simple command of our will we can move our limbs or change our thoughts. An act of volition produces motion in our limbs, or raises a new idea in our imagination. We know this influence of our

<sup>5</sup> Locke, in his chapter on power [*Essay* II.xxi] says that when we find from experience that matter undergoes changes, we infer that there must be somewhere a power capable of producing them, and this reasoning leads us to the idea of power. But no reasoning can ever give us a new, original, simple idea, as Locke himself admits. So this can't be the origin of that idea.

will by being conscious of it. That is how we acquire the idea of power or energy; and it is what makes us certain that we ourselves and all other intelligent beings are possessed of power. So this idea is an idea of reflection, since it arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and on the command that is exercised by will over the organs of the body and faculties of the soul.

I shall examine this claim, first with regard to the influence of volition over the organs of the body. This influence, like all other natural events, can be known only by experience; it can never be foreseen from any apparent energy or power in the cause which connects it with the effect and makes the effect absolutely certain to follow. The motion of our body follows the command of our will; we are conscious of this at every moment. But *how* this comes about—the *energy* through which the will performs such an extraordinary operation—is something of which we are so far from being immediately conscious that it we can never discover it, however hard we look. I now give three reasons for believing this.

*First:* the most mysterious principle in nature is that of the union of mind and body, in which a supposed spiritual substance gets so much influence over a material substance that the most refined thought can drive large portions of matter—such as human limbs—. If we had the power to move mountains or control the planets just by secretly *wishing* these results to occur, this wide-ranging power wouldn't be more extraordinary or further from our understanding—than the power our thoughts do have over our bodies—. But if we perceived any power or energy in our own will just by being conscious of it, we would know—this power, know—its connection with the effect, know—the secret union of soul and body, and know—the nature of both these substances through which one is able to operate so often on the other.

*Secondly:* we know from experience that we don't have an equal command over all the organs of our body, though we can't explain why there is this remarkable difference between one and the other. *Why can the will influence the tongue and fingers, not the heart or liver?* This question wouldn't perplex us if we were conscious of a power in the former case and not in the latter. We would then perceive, independently of experience, why the authority of will over the organs of the body is kept within certain limits. Being fully acquainted with the power or force by which the will operates, we would also know why its influence reaches precisely as far as it does and no further.

It often happens that someone who has been suddenly struck with paralysis in a leg or arm, or who has recently lost a limb, tries to move the paralysed or lost limb and to make it perform its usual tasks. In this case he is as much conscious of power to command such limbs as a man in perfect health is conscious of power to move any limb that remains in its natural state and condition. But consciousness never deceives. Consequently, we are never conscious of any power in *either* case—i.e. with a limb lost or paralysed, or with all limbs present and correct—. We learn the influence of our will from experience alone. And experience teaches us only how one event constantly *follows* another, without instructing us in the secret connection that binds them together and makes them inseparable.

*Thirdly:* we learn from anatomy that in voluntary motion the—immediate object of power is not the body-part that is moved but certain muscles and nerves and animal spirits (and perhaps something still tinier and more unknown)—through which the motion is passed along until it eventually reaches the body-part whose motion is the—immediate object of volition—i.e. the part the person is trying to move—. Can there be a more certain proof that the power by which this

whole operation is performed, so far from being directly and fully known by an inward feeling or consciousness, is utterly mysterious and impossible to understand? The mind wills a certain event: immediately another event is produced, one that we don't know and that is totally different from the one intended; this event produces another, which is equally unknown; and finally, through a long sequence of such intermediaries, the desired event is produced. But if the original power were felt, it would be known; if it were known its effect would also be known, because all power is relative to its effect—that is, knowing a power *is* knowing it as the power-to-produce-x for some specific x. And vice versa: if the effect isn't known in advance, the power can't be known or felt. Indeed, how can we be conscious of a *power to move our limbs* when we have no such power? All we have is a power to move certain animal spirits which, though they eventually make our limbs move, operate in a manner that is wholly beyond our understanding.

From all of this we can safely conclude that our idea of power is not copied from any feeling or consciousness of power within ourselves when we get our limbs to perform their normal functions. That their motion follows the command of the will is something we find from common experience, like other natural events; but the power or energy by which this is brought about, like that in other natural events, is unknown and inconceivable.<sup>6</sup> Well, then, shall we assert that we are conscious of a power or energy in our

own minds when, by an act or command of our will, we make something happen in our *minds*; for example, when we raise up a new idea, make our mind focus on it, turn it on all sides, and finally dismiss it when we think that we have inspected it with enough accuracy? [See note on page 2 regarding 'accuracy'.] I believe the same arguments will show that even *this* command of the will gives us no real idea of force or energy.

(1) It must be allowed that when we know a power we know what it is about the cause that enables it to produce the effect. For these are supposed to be synonymous. [That is, 'x's power to produce y' is supposed to be synonymous with 'what it is about x that enables it to produce y'.] To know the power, therefore, we must know both the cause and effect and the relation between them. But do we claim to be acquainted with the nature of the human mind and the nature of an idea, or the aptitude of the mind to produce the idea? Producing an idea is a real *creation*, a production of something out of nothing; and that implies a power so great that it may seem at first sight to be beyond the reach of any finite being. At least it must be admitted that such a power isn't felt or known by the mind, and isn't even conceivable by it. We only feel the event, namely the existence of an idea following a command of the will. How this operation is performed, the power by which it is produced, is entirely beyond our understanding.

(2) Like its command over the body, the mind's command over itself is limited; and these limits are not known by

<sup>6</sup> It may be claimed that the resistance we meet with in bodies, because it often requires us to exert our own force and call up all our power, gives us the idea of force and power. According to this view, this strong endeavour that we are conscious of in ourselves is the original impression from which this idea is copied. There are two objections to this. (i) We attribute power in a vast number of cases where we never can suppose that this resistance or exertion of force occurs: to God, who never meets with any resistance; to the mind in its command over its ideas and limbs, in common thinking and motion, where the effect follows immediately upon the will without any exertion or summoning up of force; to inanimate matter, which is not capable of conscious effort. (ii) This feeling of an endeavour to overcome resistance has no known connection with any event. We know *by experience* what follows it; we could not know it *a priori*. Still, it must be admitted that the animal effort which we experience, though it cannot give us an accurate precise idea of power, looms large in the common everyday inaccurate idea which is formed of it.



reason, or any acquaintance with the nature of cause and effect, but only—as we know all other natural events—by experience and observation. Our authority over our feelings and passions is much weaker than our authority over our ideas; and even the latter authority is contained within narrow boundaries. Will anyone claim to assign the ultimate reason for these boundaries, or show why the power is lacking in one case and not in another?

(3) This self-command is very different at different times. A healthy man has more of it than a sick one; we are more master of our thoughts in the morning than in the evening, and more when fasting than after a full meal. Can we give any reason for these variations, except experience? Where then is the power of which we claim to be conscious? Isn't there here, in either a spiritual or material substance or both, some secret mechanism or structure of parts on which the effect depends? And since this is entirely unknown to us, isn't the power or energy of the will equally unknown and incomprehensible?

Volition is surely an act of the mind with which we are sufficiently acquainted. Reflect on it. Consider it on all sides. Do you find anything in it like this creative power through which it creates a new idea out of nothing, and with a kind of *Let it be so!* imitates the omnipotence of God (if I may be allowed so to speak), who called into existence all the various scenes of nature ·by saying things like *Let there be light!·?* So far from being conscious of this energy in the will, we need solid experiential evidence if we are to be convinced that such extraordinary effects ever *do* result from a simple act of volition.

People in general find no difficulty in accounting for the more common and familiar operations of nature, such as the falling of heavy bodies, the growth of plants, the procreation of animals, and the nourishment of bodies by food. They

think that in all these cases they perceive the very force or energy of the cause that connects it with its effect and guarantees that the effect will always follow. Through long habit they come to be in a frame of mind such that, when the cause appears, they immediately and confidently expect its usual outcome, and think it virtually inconceivable that any other outcome could result from that cause. It's only when they encounter extraordinary phenomena such as earthquakes, plague, and strange events of any kind, that they find themselves at a loss to assign a proper cause and to explain how the effect has been produced. In such difficulties men usually fall back on some *invisible thinking cause* as the immediate cause of the event that surprises them and cannot (they think) be accounted for through the common powers of nature. But philosophers, who look a little deeper, immediately perceive that the energy of the cause is no more intelligible in the most familiar events than it is in the most unusual ones, and that we only learn by experience the frequent *conjunction* of things without ever being able to grasp anything like a *connection* between them. Here, then, many philosophers—most notably Malebranche—think that reason obliges them to appeal to the same cause that common people appeal to only in cases that appear miraculous and supernatural. These philosophers hold that an intelligent mind is the *immediate and sole* cause of *every* event that appears in nature, not merely the *ultimate and original* cause of all events, ·or the immediate and sole cause of *seemingly miraculous* events·. They claim that the items that are commonly called *causes* are really nothing but *occasions*, and that the true and direct cause of every effect is not any power or force in nature but a volition of the supreme being, who wills that such-and-such particular pairs of items should for ever be conjoined with each other. Instead of saying that ·one billiard-ball moves another by a

force that the author of nature bestowed on it, they say that •it is God himself who moves the second ball by a particular act of will, having been led to do this by the impact of the first ball—in conformity with the general laws that he has laid down for himself in the government of the universe. But philosophers push their enquiries further, and discover that, just as we are totally ignorant of the power through which bodies act on one another, so we are equally ignorant of the power through which mind acts on body or body acts on mind; and that neither our senses nor our consciousness tells us what the ultimate cause is in that case any more than in the other. So they are led by the same ignorance to the same conclusion. They assert that God is the *immediate* cause of the union of mind with body, and that sensations in the mind are not produced by sense-organs that have been activated by external objects, but rather it is a particular volition of God's that arouses a particular kind of sensation in consequence of a particular motion in the sense-organ. Similarly, the movements of our limbs aren't produced by any energy in our will; rather (they say), it is God himself who chooses to back up our will (which in itself has no power to do anything) and to command the bodily motion which we wrongly attribute to our own power and efficacy. And •these• philosophers don't stop there. They sometimes extend the same inference to the internal operations of mind itself. Our mental vision or conception of ideas (•they say•) is nothing but a revelation made to us by our Maker. When we voluntarily turn our thoughts to any object, and bring up its image in the imagination, it isn't our will that creates that idea; it is the universal Creator who reveals it to the mind and makes it present to us.

Thus, according to these philosophers, everything is full of God. Not content with the principle that nothing exists except by his will, that nothing has any power except with his

permission, they rob nature and all created beings of every power, in order to render their dependence on God still more obvious and immediate. They overlook the fact that by this theory they *diminish* instead of *magnifying* the grandeur of the divine attributes that they purport to celebrate so much. God's delegating some power to lesser creatures surely shows him as *more* powerful than would his producing everything by his own immediate volition. It indicates more wisdom to •structure the world from the outset with such perfect foresight that it will serve all the purposes of providence, by its own way of operating when left to itself, than •if God needed moment by moment to adjust the world's parts and animate by his breath all the wheels of that stupendous machine.

But if you want a more philosophical •rather than theological• case against this theory, perhaps the two following reflections may suffice.

**(1)** It seems to me that this theory of the universal energy and operation of the supreme being is too bold ever to convince someone who is properly aware of how weak and limited human reason is. Even if the chain of arguments leading to the theory were ever so logical, there would have to be a strong suspicion (if not absolute certainty) that it has carried us quite beyond the reach of our faculties, when it leads to conclusions that are so extraordinary and so remote from common life and experience. Long before we have reached the last steps of •the argument leading to• our theory, we are already in Fairyland; and *there* we have no reason to trust our common methods of argument or to think that our usual analogies and probabilities carry any weight. Our line is too short to fathom such immense depths. We may flatter ourselves that we are guided every step of the way by a kind of likelihood and experience; but we can be sure that this supposed experience has no authority when

(as here) we apply it to subjects that lie entirely outside the sphere of experience. I'll have occasion to say more about this in section 12.

(2) I can't see any force in the arguments on which this theory is based. It's true that we are ignorant of *how* bodies act on one another; their force or energy is entirely incomprehensible. But aren't we equally ignorant of the manner or force by which a mind, *even the supreme mind*, acts either on itself or on body? I ask you, from where do we acquire any idea of that force? We have no feeling or consciousness of this power in ourselves. We have no idea of the supreme being but what we learn from reflection on our own faculties. So if our ignorance were a good reason for denying anything, it would justify •denying all energy in the supreme being as much as •denying it in the crudest matter. We surely understand the operations of the former as little as we do those of the latter. Is it harder to conceive that motion may arise from impact than to conceive that it may arise from volition? All we know is our profound ignorance in both cases.<sup>7</sup>

## Part 2

We have looked at every possible source for an idea of *power* or *necessary connection*, and have found nothing. However

hard we look at an isolated physical episode, it seems, we can never discover anything but one event *following* another; we never find any force or power by which the cause operates, or any connection between it and its supposed effect. The same holds for the influence of mind on body: the mind wills, and then the body moves, and we observe both events; but we don't observe—and can't even conceive—the tie that binds the volition to the motion, i.e. •the energy by which the mind causes the body to move. And the power of the will over its own faculties and ideas—i.e. over the mind, as distinct from the body—is no more comprehensible. Summing up, then: throughout the whole of nature there seems not to be a single instance of *connection* that is conceivable by us. All events seem to be entirely loose and separate. One event follows another, but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem associated, but never connected. And as we can have no idea of anything that never appeared •as an impression• to our outward sense or inward feeling, we are forced to conclude that we have no idea of 'connection' or 'power' at all, and that those words—as used in philosophical reasonings or in common life—have absolutely no meaning.

One escape route may be still open to us: there is one possible source for the idea of connection or power that I haven't yet examined. When we are confronted by any

<sup>7</sup> I needn't examine at length the *inertia* which is so much talked of in the new science, and which is ascribed to matter. We find by experience that a body at rest or in motion continues in that state until some new cause acts upon it; and that when a body is bumped into it takes as much motion from the bumping body as it acquires itself. These are facts. When we call this a *power of inertia*, we merely record these facts without claiming to have any idea of the inert power; just as in talking of gravity we mean certain *effects* without having any grasp of that active power. Sir Isaac Newton never meant to deny all force or energy to causes other than God, though some of his followers have tried to establish that theory on his authority. On the contrary, that great scientist invoked an ethereal active fluid to explain his universal attraction; though he was cautious and modest enough to allow that this was a mere hypothesis, not to be insisted on without more experiments. I have to say that there's something odd about what happens to opinions. Descartes hinted at the doctrine that only God has real power or efficacy, though he didn't insist on this. Malebranche and other Cartesians made it the foundation of all their philosophy. But the doctrine had no authority in England. Locke, Clarke, and Cudworth never so much as mention it, and assume all along that matter has real power, though of a subordinate and derived kind. By what means has it—that is, the doctrine that God is the only being with causal power—become so prevalent among our modern metaphysicians?

natural object or event of which we have had no experience, no amount of cleverness and hard work will enable us to discover or even guess what event will result from it, or to make any prediction that goes beyond what is immediately present to our memory and senses. Even after we know from experience what the result was in a particular case, we aren't entitled to bring it under a general rule, or to predict what will happen in similar cases in the future. Basing a view about the whole course of nature on a single experiment, however accurate or certain it may be, is rightly thought to be too bold. But if events of one kind have *always* in *all* instances been associated with events of some one other kind, we no longer shrink from predicting an event of the latter kind when we experience one of the former kind. We then call one the 'cause', and the other the 'effect'. We suppose there to be some connection between them; some power in the cause by which it infallibly produces the effect, operating with the greatest certainty and strongest necessity.

The source of this idea of a necessary connection among events seems to be *a number of similar instances of the regular pairing of events of these two kinds*; and the idea cannot be prompted by any one of these instances on its own, however comprehensively we examine it. But what can a *number* of instances contain that is different from any *single* instance that is supposed to be exactly like them? Only that when the mind experiences many similar instances, it acquires a habit of expectation: the repetition of the pattern affects it in such a way that when it •observes an event of one of the two kinds it •expects an event of the other kind to follow. So the feeling or impression from which we derive our idea of power or necessary connection is a feeling of connection in the mind—a feeling that accompanies the imagination's habitual move from observing one event to expecting another of the kind that usually follows it. That's

all there is to it. Study the topic from all angles; you will never find any other origin for that idea. This is the only difference between a single instance (which can never give us the idea of connection) and a number of similar instances (which do suggest the idea). The first time a man saw motion being passed from one thing to another in a collision, as when one billiard ball hits another, he couldn't say that the red ball's starting to move •was connected with the white ball's hitting it, but only that one event •followed the other. After seeing several instances of this kind, he then says that they—i.e. the two events within each instance—are connected. What has happened to give rise to this new idea of connection? Only that he now *feels* these events to be connected in his imagination, and can predict the occurrence of one from the appearance of the other. So when we say that one event is connected with another, all we mean is that they have come to be connected in our thought so that we're willing to conduct this inference through which they are taken to be proofs of each other's existence. This is a strange conclusion! But it seems to be well supported by the evidence. Even people who are in a general way cautious about what the understanding can achieve, or sceptical about every conclusion that is new and extraordinary, shouldn't on that account be suspicious of *this* conclusion. It announces a discovery about the weakness and narrow limits of human reason and capacity—nothing could be more agreeable to scepticism than it is.

And what stronger example than this could we find of how surprisingly ignorant and weak our understanding is? If there is any relation between objects that it matters to us to know perfectly, it is that of cause and effect. It is the basis for all our reasonings about matters of fact or existence; it alone assures us about objects that are not now present to memory or senses. The only immediate use of all the

sciences is to teach us how to control and regulate future events through their causes. So our thoughts and enquiries are at every moment concerned with the relation of cause to effect; yet our ideas regarding it are so imperfect that we can't accurately define 'cause' except in terms of something that is extraneous to the cause, forming no part of it. There are two ways of doing this. (1) Similar events are always associated with similar. Of this we have experience. Suitably to this experience, therefore, we may define a 'cause' to be

- an event followed by another, where all events similar to the first are followed by events similar to the second.

Or in other words

- where if the first event hadn't occurred the second wouldn't have occurred either.

[Hume states all this in terms of the 'existence' of 'objects' rather than the occurrence of events.] (2) The appearance of a cause always conveys the mind—in a transition brought about through custom—to the idea of the effect. Of this also we have experience. We could embody this experience in another definition of 'cause':

- an event followed by another, where the appearance of the former always conveys the thought to the latter.

Each of these definitions brings in something that lies right outside the cause itself, because definition (1) brings in earlier events similar to the cause, while (2) brings in events in the mind of the speaker; but there's no remedy for this drawback. We can't replace those definitions by a more perfect one that picks out something *in the cause itself* that connects it with its effect. We have no idea of this connection; nor even any clear notion of what we are aiming at when we try to form a conception of it. When we say, for instance, that the vibration of this string is 'the cause of this particular sound, we mean that this vibration is followed by this sound and *either* that all similar vibrations have been followed by

similar sounds *or* that when the mind sees the vibration it immediately forms an anticipatory idea of the sound. We can look at the cause-effect relation in either of these ways; we have no other idea of it.

·START OF A VAST FOOTNOTE·

According to these explanations and definitions, the idea of *power* is as relative as the idea of *cause* is. Each refers to an effect, or some other event constantly associated with the former. When we consider the unknown nature of an object that fixes what effects it will have, we call that its 'power'; which is why everyone agrees that a thing's effects provide a measure of its power. But if they had any idea of *power* as it is in itself, why couldn't they measure it in itself? Similarly with the dispute about whether the force of a body in motion is proportional to its velocity or to the square of its velocity: if we had an idea of power as it is in itself, this dispute could be settled by direct measuring and comparison, with no need to compare effects in 'power'; which is why everyone agrees that a thing's effects provide a measure of its power. But if they had any idea of *power* as it is in itself, why couldn't they measure it in itself? Similarly with the dispute about whether the force of a body in motion is proportional to its velocity or to the square of its velocity: if we had an idea of power as it is in itself, this dispute could be settled by direct measuring and comparison, with no need to compare effects in equal or unequal times.

It is true that the words 'force', 'power', 'energy' etc. occur frequently throughout everyday conversation as well as in philosophy; but that doesn't show that we are ever acquainted with the connecting principle between cause and effect, or that we can account ultimately for one event's causing another. These words, as commonly used, have very loose meanings, and their ideas—i.e. the associated ideas that give them their meanings—are very uncertain

and confused. Those ideas fall into two groups, each of which is animistic, treating inanimate causes and effects as though they were alive. (1) One group comes into play when a cause-effect transaction is thought of as involving a transfer of motion from one object to another. (2) The other group are the ideas that are treated in my account of causal reasoning. (1) No animal can set external bodies into motion without a feeling of effort; and every animal knows the feeling of being pushed or hit by a moving external object. These sensations—which are merely animal, and from which we can *a priori* draw no conclusions—we are inclined to transfer to inanimate objects, and to suppose that *they* have some such feelings whenever motion is transferred by them or to them. For example, we suppose or pretend that the white billiard ball exerts an effort which it feels, and that the red one feels the impact of the white one. (2) When one event causes another and we don't bring the thought of motion-transfer into play, we have no way of bringing in the ideas based on the feelings of pushing or being pushed, and so we take into account only the constant experienced association of the two kinds of events. That has set up in our minds a habitual connection between our ideas of the two events, and we transfer the feeling of that mental connection to the objects. We attribute to external bodies internal sensations which they induce in us; this is absolutely normal human practice. [In another of his works, Hume writes: 'The mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions which they occasion.']

·END OF THE VAST FOOTNOTE·

To sum up the reasonings of this section: Every idea is

copied from a previous impression or feeling, and where we can't find any impression we may be certain that there is no idea. No isolated episode of mental or physical causation yields any *impression* of power or necessary connection. Therefore, no such episode can prompt us to form any *idea* of power or necessary connection. When many similar episodes are observed to occur, however, and events of one kind are always followed events of a second kind, we then start to form the notion of cause and connection. The experience of this regularity gives us a new *impression*, namely *the feeling or impression of a custom-induced connection in our thought or imagination between one event and another; and the idea that we have been hunting for—the idea of power or necessary connection—is copied from this impression. Here is why this must be right.* The idea arises from a series of similar episodes and not from any one taken singly; so it must arise from whatever it is that differentiates the series from each individual episode; and the *only* difference is this customary connection or transition of the imagination. In every other respect, each individual episode is just like the whole series. To return to our humdrum example: The first time we saw motion being transferred through a collision between two billiard balls, what we saw was exactly like any other such collision that we might see now; the only difference was that on that first occasion we couldn't infer one event from the other, as we can now after such a long course of uniform experience. I do not know whether the reader will easily grasp this reasoning. I am afraid that if I were to go on longer about it, presenting it from a greater variety of angles, it would only become more obscure and complicated.

## Section 8: Liberty and necessity

It might reasonably be expected, in questions that have been eagerly discussed and disputed since science and philosophy first began, that the disputants would at least have agreed on the meanings of all the terms, so that in the course of two thousand years we could get away from verbal disputes and come to the true and real subject of the controversy. Isn't it easy enough to give exact definitions of the terms used in reasoning, and then focus our attention on these definitions rather than on the mere sound of the words? But if we look more closely we'll be inclined to think that that's not what happens. From the mere fact that a controversy has kept going for a long time and is still undecided, we may presume that there is some ambiguity in how the disputants express themselves, and that they assign different ideas to the words used in the controversy. Here is the basis for this presumption. The intellects of human beings are supposed to be naturally alike (and if they weren't, there would be no point in reasoning or disputing together); so if men attached the same ideas to the words they use, they couldn't go on for so long forming different opinions of the same subject—especially when they communicate their views to one another, and cast about in every direction for arguments that may give them the victory over their opponents. Admittedly, if men try to discuss questions that lie right outside the reach of human capacity, such as those concerning the origin of worlds, or the workings of the domain of spirits, they may for a long time beat the air in their fruitless contests, and never arrive at any definite conclusion. But when the question concerns any subject of common life and experience, the only thing that could keep the dispute alive for a long time is (one would think)

some ambiguous expressions that keep the antagonists at a distance and prevent them from coming to grips with each other.

That's what has been happening in the long dispute about liberty and necessity. I think we shall find that all people—both learned and ignorant—have always had the same view about liberty and necessity although they have differed in how they expressed it, and have thus seemed to be in disagreement. I think that a few intelligible definitions would have immediately put an end to the whole controversy. This dispute has been so vigorous and widespread, and has led philosophers into such a labyrinth of obscure sophistry, that it would be understandable if a reader had the good sense to save himself trouble by refusing to listen to any side in a debate that he can't expect to find instructive or interesting. But perhaps he will return to it, given my account of how the debate stands: my account has more novelty than its predecessors, promises at least some resolution of the controversy, and won't put him to much trouble by any intricate or obscure reasoning.

There is my project, then: to show that all men have always agreed about both *necessity* and *liberty*, when those terms are taken in any reasonable sense, and that the whole controversy until now has turned merely on words. I shall begin by examining the doctrine of necessity.

Everyone agrees that matter in all its operations is driven by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so exactly settled by the energy of its cause that in those particular circumstances no other effect could possibly have resulted from that cause. The laws of nature prescribe the speed and direction of every motion so exactly that the

collision of two bodies *has to* produce motion with precisely the speed and direction that it does in fact produce; it could no more have resulted in any other motion than it could have resulted in the formation of a living creature. So if we want to get a correct and precise idea of necessity, we must consider where that idea comes from when we apply it to the operation of bodies.

It seems obvious that if

all the scenes of nature were continually changed in such a way that no two events bore any resemblance to each other, but every event was entirely new, without any likeness to whatever had been seen before, we would never have acquired the slightest idea of necessity, or of a connection among these objects. We might then say that one object or event has *followed* another, but not that one was *produced by* the other. The relation of cause and effect would have to be utterly unknown to mankind. Inference and reasoning about the operations of nature would come to a halt; and memory and the senses would remain the only channels through which knowledge of any real existence could possibly have access to the mind. This shows that our idea of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity we observe in the operations of nature, where •similar items are constantly conjoined, and •the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. The necessity that we ascribe to matter consists only in those two—•the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and •the consequent *inference* from one to the other. Apart from these we have no notion of necessity or connection.

If it turns out that all mankind have always held, without any doubt or hesitation, that these two factors are present in the voluntary actions of men and in the operations of minds—i.e. that like is followed by like, and that we are

disposed to make inferences on that basis—it follows that all mankind have always agreed in the doctrine of necessity, and have been disputing simply because they didn't understand each other.

Here are some points that may satisfy you concerning the constant and regular conjunction of similar events. Everyone acknowledges that there is much uniformity among the actions of men in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains the same in its forces and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions; the same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit—these passions, mixed in various proportions and distributed throughout society, are now (and from the beginning of the world always have been) the source of all the actions and projects that have ever been observed among mankind. Do you want to know the feelings, inclinations, and course of life of •the Greeks and Romans? Then study well the character and actions of •the French and English: you can't go far wrong in transferring to •the former most of your observations regarding •the latter. Mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange on this topic. The chief use of history is only to reveal the constant and universal principles of human nature by showing men in all kinds of circumstances and situations, and providing us with materials from which we can form our observations and become acquainted with the usual sources of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many sets of data that the political theorist or moral philosopher uses to fix the principles of his science; just as the natural scientist learns the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects by the tests he puts them through. •The earth, water, and other elements examined by Aristotle and Hippocrates don't



resemble those we find now any more closely than •the men described by Polybius and Tacitus resemble those who now govern the world.

If a traveller, returning from a distant country, were to bring us an account of men wholly different from any we have ever encountered—men with no trace of greed, ambition or vengefulness, knowing no pleasure except friendship, generosity, and public spirit—we would immediately spot the falsehood of his account, and would judge him to be a liar just as confidently as if he had filled his report with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies. And when we want to expose an historical document as a forgery, we can't make use of a more convincing argument than to show that the actions ascribed to some person in the document are directly contrary to the course of nature, and that no *human* motives in such circumstances could ever lead him to behave in that way. The veracity of Quintus Curtius is as suspect when he describes •the supernatural courage by which Alexander was hurried on to attack multitudes single-handed as it is when he describes •the supernatural force and activity by which Alexander was able to resist the multitudes. So readily and universally do we acknowledge a uniformity in human motives and actions, as well as in the operations of material things.

If we have a long life and a variety of business and social contacts with other people, that experience is beneficial in teaching us the •general• principles of human nature, and guiding us in our future conduct as well as in our theory-building. Guided by this experience we infer *upwards* from men's actions, expressions, and even gestures to their inclinations and motives; and in the *downward* direction we interpret •and predict• their actions on the basis of our knowledge of their motives and inclinations. The general observations that we store up through a lifetime's experience

give us the clue to human nature and teach us to disentangle all its intricacies. Pretences and mere show no longer deceive us. Public declarations pass for the specious colouring of a cause [=, roughly, 'We take public declarations of politicians to be the work of spin-doctors']. And though we allow virtue and honour their due weight and authority, the *perfect unselfishness* that people so often lay claim to is something we never expect in multitudes and parties, seldom in their leaders, and not much even in individuals at any level in society. But if there were no uniformity in human actions, and if the outcomes of all the tests of these matters that we conducted were irregular and didn't fit any general patterns, we couldn't possibly assemble any general observations concerning mankind, and no experience, however thoughtfully pondered, would ever serve any purpose. •To revert for a moment to the general point about the need for uniformities if there is to be understanding: Why is the old farmer more skillful in his calling than the young beginner if not because there is a certain uniformity in how the operation of the sun, rain, and earth affects the production of plants, and experience teaches the old practitioner the rules by which this operation is governed and directed?

But we mustn't expect this uniformity of human actions to be so complete that all men in the same circumstances will always act in precisely the same way, for that wouldn't be allow for differences among characters, prejudices, and opinions. Such complete uniformity is never found in nature. On the contrary, from observing the variety of conduct in different men we are enabled to form a greater variety of generalizations, which still presuppose a degree of uniformity and regularity •underlying the variety•.

•Does the behaviour of men differ in different ages and countries? That teaches us the power of custom and education, which mould the human mind from its infancy

and form it into a fixed and established character. •Is the conduct of the one sex very unlike that of the other? From that we learn the different characters that nature has given to the sexes and preserved in them with constancy and regularity. •Are the actions of one person very different in the different periods of his life from infancy to old age? This invites many general observations about the gradual change of our feelings and inclinations, and the different patterns that human creatures conform to at different ages. Even the characteristics that are special to each individual have a uniformity in their influence; otherwise our acquaintance with the individuals and our observation of their conduct could never teach us what their dispositions are or serve to direct our behaviour towards them.

I admit that we may encounter some actions that seem to have no regular connection with any known motives, and that are exceptions to all the patterns of conduct that have ever been established as governing human conduct. But if we want to know what to think about such irregular and extraordinary actions, we might consider the view that is commonly taken of irregular events that appear in the course of nature and in the operations of external objects. All causes are not conjoined to their usual effects with the same uniformity. A workman who handles only dead matter may be thwarted in what he is trying to do ·by something unexpected in the dead material he is working with·, just as a politician directing the conduct of thinking and feeling agents can be thwarted ·by something unexpected in the people he wants to control·.

Common people, who judge things by their first appearance, explain these unexpected outcomes in terms of an intrinsic uncertainty in the causes, a weakness that makes them often fail to have their usual effects even though there are no obstacles to their operation. But scientists, observing

that in almost every part of nature there are vastly many different triggers and causes that are too small or too distant for us to find them, judge that it's *at least possible* that the contrariety of events comes not from any contingency in the cause—i.e. the cause's being inherently liable to fail to produce the usual effect—but from the secret operation of contrary causes. This *possibility* is converted into *certainty* when by further careful observation they discover that a contrariety of effects always reveals that there *was* indeed a contrariety of causes, and comes from their mutual opposition. A peasant can give no better reason for a clock's stopping than to say that it often does not go right; but a clock-maker easily sees that the same force in the spring or pendulum has always the same influence on the wheels, but ·in this one case· fails of its usual effect because a grain of dust (perhaps) has put a stop to the whole movement. From observing a number of parallel instances, scientists arrive at the maxim that the connection between all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances comes from the secret opposition of contrary causes.

In the human body, for instance, when the usual symptoms of health or sickness are not as we expect, when medicines don't operate with their usual effect, when some cause leads irregularly to different effects—the scientist and the physician aren't surprised by this, and are never tempted to deny the necessity and uniformity of the forces that govern the animal system. They know that a human body is a mighty complicated machine, that many secret powers lurk in it that we have no hope of understanding, that to us it must often appear very uncertain in its operations, and that therefore the irregular events that outwardly appear are not evidence that the laws of nature aren't observed with the greatest regularity in its internal operations and control

systems.

The scientist, if he is consistent, must apply the same reasoning to the actions and decisions of thinking agents. The most irregular and unexpected decisions of men may often be explained by those who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation. A normally obliging person gives an irritable answer; but he has toothache, or hasn't dined and is hungry. A sluggish fellow reveals an unusual briskness in his step; but he has met with a sudden piece of good fortune. Sometimes a person acts in a way that neither he nor anyone else can explain; but we know in a general way that the characters of men are somewhat inconstant and irregular. This inconstancy is, in a way, the constant character of human nature, though there is more of it in some persons who have no fixed rule for their conduct and frequently act in a capricious and inconstant manner. Even in these people the internal forces and motives may operate in a uniform manner, despite these seeming irregularities; just as the winds, rain, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by unchanging forces, though our skill and hard work can't easily tell us what they are.

Thus it appears not only that the relation of motives to voluntary actions is as regular and uniform as that of cause to effect in any part of nature, but also that this regular relation has been universally acknowledged among mankind, and has never been the subject of dispute in science or in common life. Now, it is from past experience that we draw all our conclusions about the future, and in these inferences we conclude that objects that we find to have always been conjoined will always be conjoined in the future; so it may seem superfluous to argue that the experienced uniformity of human actions is a source from which we infer conclusions concerning them. But I shall do so, though briefly, so as to

show my over-all position from a different angle.

In all societies people depend so much on one another that hardly any human action is entirely complete in itself, or is performed without some reference to the actions of others that are needed if the action is to produce what the agent intends. The poorest workman, who labours alone, still expects at least the protection of the law to guarantee him the enjoyment of the fruits of his labour. He also expects that when he takes his goods to market, and offers them at a reasonable price, he will find buyers, and will be able through the money he earns to get others to supply him with what he needs for his subsistence. In proportion as a man's dealings with others are wide-ranging and complicated, to that extent his way of life involves a variety of voluntary actions by other people—things people do from their own motives, but which he expects to co-operate with his motives. In arriving at these expectations he goes by past experience, in the same manner as in his reasonings about external objects; and he firmly believes that men, as well as all the kinds of stuff, will continue to behave in the ways that he has found them to do. A manufacturer relies on the labour of his employees for getting a job done, as much as he relies on the tools that he uses, and he would be equally surprised if either the men or the tools disappointed his expectations. In short, this empirical inference and reasoning about the actions of others enters so much into human life that every man is engaged in it at every waking moment. Isn't this a reason to affirm that all mankind have always agreed in the doctrine of necessity, according to my account of it?

Nor have philosophers or scientists ever thought differently about this. Almost every *action* of their life presupposes the common people's opinion, which is also essential to most branches of *learning*. What would become of history if we didn't, on the basis of the experience we have had of

mankind, depend on the truthfulness of the historian? How could politics be a science if laws and forms of government didn't have a uniform influence on society? Where would the foundation of morals be if people's characters had no certain or determinate power to produce sentiments [here = 'feelings and opinions'], or if these sentiments had no constant effect on actions? And what could entitle us to pass critical judgment on any dramatic poet or author if we couldn't say whether the conduct and sentiments of his actors were natural for such characters in such circumstances? It seems almost impossible, therefore, to engage either in learning or in action of any kind without acknowledging •the doctrine of necessity, and •this *inference* from motives to voluntary actions, from characters to conduct.

And indeed, when we consider how aptly we can form a single chain of argument involving both •human nature and •other parts of the natural world, we shan't hesitate to agree that these are of the same nature and are derived from the same sources. A prisoner who has neither money nor influence can't escape, and he learns the impossibility of this as well when he considers •the obstinacy of the gaoler as when he considers •the walls and bars with which he is surrounded; and in trying to escape he chooses to work on •the stone and iron of the latter rather than on •the inflexible nature of the former. The same prisoner, when led to the scaffold, foresees his death as certainly from the constancy and fidelity of his guards as from the operation of the axe. His mind runs along a certain train of ideas:

the refusal of the soldiers to consent to his escape;  
the action of the executioner;  
the separation of the head from the body;  
bleeding, convulsive motions, and death.

Here is a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions; but our mind feels no difference between them when

it passes from one link to the next. And we are just as certain of the future event as we would be if we inferred it, from objects present to the memory or senses, through a sequence of causes linked by so-called *physical* necessity. The same experienced union has the same effect on the mind, whether the united objects are •motives, volitions, and actions or rather •shapes and movements. We may change the names of things, but their nature and how they operate on the understanding never change.

If an intimate friend of mine, whom I know to be honest and wealthy, comes into my house where I am surrounded by my servants, I rest assured that he isn't going to stab me before he leaves, in order to rob me of my silver ink-well; and I no more suspect such behaviour from him than I expect the collapse of the house itself which is new, solidly built, and well founded. ·You may object·: 'But he may have been seized with a sudden and unknown frenzy, ·in which case he *may* attack and rob you·.' I reply: A sudden earthquake *may* start up, and shake and tumble my house about my ears; ·so that the two possibilities are still on a par, though admittedly they are not examples of absolute certainty·. Very well, I shall change the examples. I shall say that I know with certainty that •my friend will not put his hand into the fire and hold it there until it is consumed; and I can foretell this with the same confidence as I can that •if my friend throws himself out of the window and meets with no obstruction he won't remain for a moment suspended in the air. No suspicion of an unknown frenzy can give the least possibility to the former event, which is so contrary to all the known principles of human nature. ·Here is another example, equally certain·. A man who at noon leaves his purse full of gold on the pavement of a busy street may as well expect that it will fly away like a feather as that he will find it still there an hour later! More

than half of human reasonings contain inferences like this, accompanied by varying degrees of certainty proportioned to our experience of the usual conduct of mankind in situations of the kind in question.

I have often wondered what could possibly be the reason why all mankind, though they have always unhesitatingly acknowledged in all their behaviour and reasoning that human conduct is governed by necessity, have nevertheless shown so much reluctance to acknowledge it in words, and have rather tended, all through the centuries, to proclaim the contrary opinion. Here is what I think may be the explanation. If we examine the operations of inanimate bodies and the production in them of effects from their causes, we shall find that our faculties can never give us more knowledge of this cause-effect relation than merely to observe that particular objects are *constantly conjoined* together and that the mind is carried by a *customary transition* from the appearance of one to the expectation of the other. This conclusion concerning a limit on human knowledge is the result of the strictest scrutiny of this subject, which I have conducted, and yet men are still very inclined to think that they penetrate further into the powers of nature and perceive something like a *necessary connection* between the cause and the effect. When they turn their reflections back towards the operations of their own minds, and *feel* no such connection between the motive and the action, they are inclined to infer that the effects arising from thought and intelligence are unlike those resulting from material force. But once we are convinced that all we know of causation of *any* kind is merely the constant conjunction of objects and the consequent inference of the mind from one to the other, and have grasped that these two circumstances—the constant conjunction and the consequent inference—are agreed by everyone to occur in voluntary actions, we may be

more easily led to admit that the same necessity is common to all causes. And though this reasoning may contradict the systems of many philosophers by ascribing necessity to the decisions of the will, we shall find when we think about it that they disagree with it only in words and not in their real beliefs. Necessity, in the sense I have been giving the word, has never yet been rejected, and I don't think it ever could be rejected by any philosopher. Someone wanting to reject it would have to claim that the mind can perceive in the operations of matter some further *connection* between cause and effect, and that no such connection occurs in the voluntary actions of thinking beings. Now whether this is right or not can only appear on examination of the empirical facts, and the onus is on these philosophers to justify their assertion by defining or describing that *connection* and pointing it out to us in the operations of material causes.

It would seem, indeed, that men begin at the wrong end of this question about liberty and necessity when they start in on it by examining the faculties of the mind, the influence of the understanding, and the operations of the will. They should at first investigate a simpler topic, namely the operations of body and of brute unthinking matter, and see whether they can *there* form any idea of causation and necessity except that of a constant conjunction of objects and a subsequent inference of the mind from one to the other. If these items—the conjunction and the inference—are really all there is to the necessity that we conceive in matter, and if they are also universally agreed to occur in the operations of the mind, the dispute is at an end; or if it continues, it should be admitted to be merely verbal. But as long as we rashly suppose that we have some further idea of necessity and causation in the operations of external objects, while finding nothing further in the voluntary actions of the mind, we can't possibly resolve the issue when we start

from such an erroneous supposition. The only way out of this error is to examine the narrow extent of our knowledge relating to material causes, and to convince ourselves that all we know of such causes is the constant conjunction and inference above-mentioned. It may be hard for us to accept that human understanding has such narrow limits; but we shall afterwards have no difficulty in applying this doctrine to the actions of the will. For as it is evident that these actions have a regular conjunction with motives and circumstances and characters, and as we always draw inferences from latter to the former, we ought to acknowledge *in words* the necessity that we have already avowed in every deliberation of our lives and in every step of our conduct and behaviour.

·START OF A BIG FOOTNOTE·

Another cause for the prevalence of the doctrine of liberty may be a false sensation or seeming experience that we have, or may have, of liberty or indifference in many of our actions. The *necessity* of any physical or mental action is not, strictly speaking, a quality in the agent; rather, it resides in the thinking or intelligent onlooker, and consists chiefly in the determination of the onlooker's thoughts to infer the occurrence of that action from some preceding events; and liberty, when opposed to necessity, is nothing but the absence of that determination ·in the onlooker's thought· and a certain looseness or indifference which the onlooker feels in passing or not passing from the idea of one event to the idea of a following event. When we reflect on human actions ·as onlookers·, we seldom feel such a looseness or indifference, and can commonly infer with considerable certainty how people will act from their motives and dispositions; but it often happens that in performing the actions ourselves we are aware of something like it [= like that looseness and indifference]. And as we are prone to think, when one thing resembles another, that it *is* the other,

this ·fact about experiencing something like the looseness and indifference mentioned above· has been treated as a perfect proof of human liberty. We feel that our actions are subject to our will on most occasions; and we *imagine* we feel that the will itself is not subject to anything. Here is why: When for purposes of argument we try it out, we feel that the will moves easily in every direction, and produces an image ·or likeness· of itself even on that side that it didn't decide in favour of. ·For example, I play with the question of whether to raise my right hand or my left, and raise my left, but I have the feeling that in doing this I performed a kind of image or shadow of a decision to raise my right·. We persuade ourselves that this image or faint motion could at that time have been completed into the thing itself—for instance, into my raising my right hand—because if anyone denied this ·and we wanted to challenge the denial· we would find upon a second trial that now it can ·lead to my raising my right hand·. We overlook the fact that in this case the motive for our actions is the fantastical desire to show that we are free. It seems certain that, even when we imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves, an onlooker can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he can't, he concludes in general that he could do so if he knew every circumstance of our situation and mood, and the most secret springs of our character and disposition. And *this* is the very essence of necessity, according to my doctrine.

·END OF THE BIG FOOTNOTE·

But to continue in this reconciling project regarding the question of liberty and necessity (which is the most contentious question in metaphysics), I shan't need many words to prove that •all mankind have always agreed about liberty as well as about necessity, and that •the whole dispute about liberty has been merely verbal. For what is meant by

'liberty' when the term is applied to voluntary actions? Surely we can't mean that actions have so little connection with motives, inclinations, and circumstances that the former don't follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the latter, and that motives etc. support no inference by which we can infer actions. For these—the uniformity and the inference—are plain and acknowledged matters of fact. By 'liberty', then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will; i.e. if we choose to stay still we may do so, and if we choose to move we may do that. This hypothetical liberty—'hypothetical' because it concerns what we may do *if* we so choose—is universally agreed to belong to everyone who isn't a prisoner and in chains. There's nothing to disagree about here.

Whatever definition we may give of 'liberty', we should be careful to ensure *first* that it is consistent with plain matter of fact, and *secondly* that it is consistent with itself. If we observe these two constraints, and make our definition intelligible, I am sure that all mankind will be found to have the same opinion about it.

Everyone agrees that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that 'chance' is a mere negative word that doesn't stand for any real power existing anywhere in nature. But it is claimed that some causes are necessary while others are not. Here then is the advantage of definitions. Let anyone define a 'cause' in such a way that 'a necessary connection with its effect' isn't included in the definition, and let him show clearly the origin of the idea expressed by his definition; and I shall readily give up the whole controversy! But if my account of causation is right, there's absolutely no chance

of making and defending such a definition. If objects didn't have a regular conjunction with each other, we would never have had any notion of cause and effect; and this regular conjunction produces the inference of the understanding that is the only 'connection' we can understand. Whoever attempts a definition of 'cause' in terms of something other than regular conjunction and subsequent inference will be obliged to employ either unintelligible terms or ones that are synonymous with the term he is trying to define.<sup>8</sup>

And if the above-mentioned definition is accepted, a definition according to which liberty is contrasted not with *constraint* (·as in my definition·) but with *necessity*, liberty becomes equivalent to *chance*; and everyone agrees that there is no such thing as chance.

## Part 2

There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than to try to refute a philosophical hypothesis by claiming that its consequences are dangerous to religion and morality. When an opinion leads to •absurdities, it's certainly false; but it isn't certain that an opinion is false because its consequences are •dangerous. That line of argument ought therefore to be avoided, because it doesn't contribute to the discovery of truth but merely makes one's antagonist personally odious. I offer this as a general observation, without claiming to draw any advantage from it. I frankly submit ·my views· to the dangerousness test, and shall venture to affirm that the doctrines of necessity and of liberty that I have presented are not only consistent with

<sup>8</sup> Thus, if a 'cause' is defined as 'that which produces anything', it is easy to see that producing is synonymous to causing. Similarly, if a 'cause' is defined as 'that *by* which a thing exists', this is open to the same objection. For what does the phrase '*by* which' mean? Had it been said that a cause is that *after* which anything constantly exists, we would have understood the terms. For this is indeed all we know of the matter. And this constancy forms the very essence of necessity, of which we have no other idea but that.

morality but are absolutely essential to its support.

*Necessity* can be defined in either of two ways, corresponding to the two definitions of *cause*, of which necessity is an essential part. Necessity consists either in •the constant conjunction of similar objects, or in •the inference of the understanding from one object to another. Now, it has silently been agreed—in the universities, in the pulpit, and in common life—that the will of man is subject to necessity in each of these senses (which in fact are basically the same). Nobody has ever claimed to deny that •we can draw inferences concerning human actions, or that those inferences are founded on •the experienced union of similar actions with similar motives, inclinations, and circumstances. There are only two ways in which someone might disagree about this. **(1)** He might refuse to give the name ‘necessity’ to this property of human actions; but as long as the meaning is understood, I hope the word can do no harm. **(2)** Or he might maintain that we could discover in the operations of matter something further than the constant conjunction and the inference that I have said constitute the idea of necessity. But it must be admitted that such a discovery—because it concerns only the material world—cannot imply anything for morality or religion, whatever it may mean for natural science or metaphysics. I may have been mistaken in asserting that there is no idea of any other necessity or connection in the actions of *body* apart from constant conjunction and inference—but what I have ascribed to the actions of the mind is surely only what everyone does and must readily agree to. My views about *material* objects and causes do conflict somewhat with what is generally believed, but my views about *the will* do not. So my doctrine can at least claim to be utterly innocent.

All laws are founded on rewards and punishments, which are based on assuming as a fundamental principle that

rewards and punishments have a regular and uniform influence on the mind, producing good actions and preventing evil ones. We may call this influence anything we like; but as it is usually conjoined with the action it must be regarded as a *cause*, and as being an instance of the kind of necessity that I have been presenting.

The only proper object of hatred or vengeance is a person or creature that thinks and is conscious; and when any criminal or injurious *actions* arouse that passion, it is only by their connection to the *person* whose actions they are. Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and when they don’t come from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither bring him credit (if they are good) or discredit (if they are bad). Even if •the actions themselves are blameable—even if they are contrary to all the rules of morality and religion—•the person isn’t responsible for them, and can’t possibly become, on account of them, the object of punishment or vengeance, because they didn’t come from anything in him that is durable and constant as his *character* is, and they leave nothing durable and constant behind them in him. So according to the principle that denies necessity, and consequently denies causes in human behaviour, a man who has committed the most dreadful crime is as pure and untainted as a newborn baby. His character is in no way involved in his actions, since they aren’t caused by it; and the wickedness of the actions never be used as a proof of the depravity of the character.

•Men are *not blamed* for actions that they perform ignorantly and casually, whatever their consequences are. Why is this, if not because the principle of such an action is only momentary, ending when the action ends? •Men are *less blamed* for actions that they perform hastily and without premeditation than they are for ones that come



from deliberation. Why is this, if not because a rash or hasty cast of mind, even if it is a constant cause or force in the mind, operates only at intervals and doesn't infect the whole character? •Repentance wipes off every crime if it is accompanied by a reform of life and manners. What can account for this, if not the thesis that actions make a person criminal only insofar as they show that he has criminal drives in the mind; and when these drives change through his repentance, his actions no longer show what they used to show, and so they cease to be criminal? But it's only upon the doctrine of the necessity of human actions that they ever did show anything about his mind; so without that doctrine they show nothing, and consequently never were criminal.

It is equally easy to prove by the same arguments that liberty—understood according to my definition, in which all men agree—is also essential to morality, and that no human actions in the absence of such liberty are capable of having any moral qualities, or can be the objects either of approval or disapproval. For actions are objects of our moral sentiment [= 'feeling' or 'opinion'] only insofar as they indicate the internal character, passions, and affections; so they can't possibly attract either praise or blame when they come not from those sources but only from external force.

I don't claim to have met or removed all objections to my theory about necessity and liberty. I can foresee other objections, derived from lines of thought that I haven't here discussed. For instance, this may be said:

If voluntary actions fall under the same laws of necessity as the operations of matter, there is a continuous chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of everything through to every single volition of every human creature. No contingency anywhere in the

universe, no indifference [= no cases where either P or not-P could come true], no liberty. When we *act* we at the same time *are acted on*. The ultimate author of all our volitions is God, who first set this immense machine in motion and placed everything in it in a particular position, so that every subsequent event had to occur as it did, through an inevitable necessity. Human actions, therefore, cannot be morally wicked when they come inevitably from so good a cause; or if there is anything wrong in them, God must share the guilt because he is the ultimate cause and author of our actions. A man who sets off an explosion is responsible for all the explosion's consequences, whether the fuse he employs is long or short; and in the same way when a continuous chain of necessary causes is fixed, whoever produces the first item in the chain is equally the author of all the rest, and must both bear the blame and win the praise that belong to them; and this holds whether the being in question is finite or (like God) infinite. Our clear and unalterable ideas of morality give us unquestionable reasons for applying this rule when considering the consequences of any human action; and these reasons must be even stronger when applied to the volitions and intentions of an infinitely wise and powerful being such as God. When it concerns such a limited a creature as man, we may plead ignorance or impotence in his defence, but God doesn't have those imperfections. He foresaw, he ordained, he intended all those actions of men that we so rashly judge to be criminal. So we have to conclude either that those actions are not criminal, or that God and not man is accountable for them. But each of these positions is absurd and impious; so it follows that the doctrine from which they are deduced

can't possibly be true, because it is open to all the same objections. If a doctrine necessarily implies something that is absurd, the doctrine itself is absurd; in the same way that an action that necessarily and inevitably leads to a criminal action is itself criminal.

This objection consists of two parts, which I shall examine separately. **(1)** If human actions can be traced up by a necessary chain to God, they can never be criminal; on account of the infinite perfection of the being from whom they are derived, and who can intend only what is altogether good and praiseworthy. **(2)** If they are criminal, we must conclude that God isn't perfect after all, and must accept that he is the ultimate author of guilt and moral wickedness in all his creatures.

**(1)** The answer to the first objection seems obvious and convincing. There are many philosophers who, after carefully surveying all the phenomena of nature, conclude that the whole universe, considered as one system, is at every moment ordered with perfect benevolence; and that the greatest possible happiness will in the end come to all created beings, not tainted by any positive or absolute ill and misery. Here is how they reconcile this with the existence of physical ills, such as earthquakes, plagues, and so on. Every physical ill, they say, is an essential part of this benevolent system, and could not possibly be removed—even by God himself, considered as a wise agent—without letting in some greater ill or excluding some greater good that will result from the removed ill. From this theory some philosophers (including the ancient Stoics) derived a theme of *comfort under all afflictions*, teaching their pupils that the ills under which they laboured were really goods to the universe; and that if we could grasp the system of nature as a whole we would find that every event was an object of joy and exultation. But though this theme is high-minded and superficially

attractive, it was soon found in practice to be weak and ineffectual. You would surely irritate rather than comfort a man racked by the pains of gout by preaching to him the rightness of the general laws that produced the poisoned fluids in his body and led them through the proper canals to the sinews and nerves, where they now arouse such acute torments! These 'grasping-the-whole' views of nature may *briefly* please the imagination of a theorizing man who is secure and at ease; but they can't stay *for long* in his mind, even when he isn't disturbed by the emotions of pain or passion; still less can they maintain their ground when attacked by such powerful antagonists—as pain and passion. Our feelings aren't affected by surveys of the entire universe; they take a narrower and more natural view of things, and—in a manner more suitable for the infirmity of human minds—take account only of nearby beings around us and respond to events according as they appear good or ill *to us*.

The case is the same with moral as with physical ills. It can't reasonably be supposed that those remote considerations that are found to have so little effect with regard to the latter will have a more powerful influence with regard to the former. The mind of man is so formed by nature that when it encounters certain characters, dispositions, and actions it immediately feels the sentiment of approval or blame. (No emotions are more essential to the human constitution than those two.) The characters that arouse our approval are chiefly those that contribute to the peace and security of human society; and the characters that arouse blame are chiefly those that tend to public detriment and disturbance. This makes it reasonable to suppose that the moral sentiments arise, either immediately or through an intermediary, from a reflection on these opposite interests—namely, public welfare and public harm. Philosophical meditations may lead to a different opinion or conjecture, namely:

everything is right with regard to the whole system, and the qualities that disturb society are in the main as beneficial and as suitable to the primary intention of nature as are those that more directly promote society's happiness and welfare;

but what of it? Are such remote and uncertain speculations able to counterbalance the sentiments arising from the natural and immediate view of the objects on which judgment is passed? When a man is robbed of a considerable sum of money, will his *vexation over his loss* be lessened in the slightest by these lofty reflections about the good of the whole? Clearly not! Why then should his moral *resentment against the crime* be supposed to be incompatible with those reflections? Indeed, why shouldn't the acknowledgment of a real distinction between vice and virtue be consistent with all philosophical systems, as is the acknowledgment of a real distinction between personal beauty and ugliness? Both these distinctions are grounded in the natural sentiments of the human mind; and these sentiments can't be controlled or altered by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever.

(2) The second objection can't be answered so easily

or satisfactorily: it isn't possible to explain clearly how God can be the ultimate cause of all the actions of men without being the author of sin and moral wickedness. These are mysteries which mere natural reason—not assisted by divine revelation—is unfit to handle; and whatever system reason embraces, it must find itself involved in inextricable difficulties and even contradictions at every step it takes with regard to such subjects. It has so far been found to be beyond the powers of philosophy to reconcile the indifference and contingency of human actions (so that men could have acted differently from how they did act) with God's foreknowledge of them, or to defend God's absolute decrees and yet clear him of the accusation that he is the author of sin. It will be a good thing if these difficulties make philosophy aware of her rashness in prying into these sublime mysteries, and get her to leave this scene which is so full of obscurities and perplexities, and return with suitable modesty to her true and proper province, which is the examination of common life. She will find there difficulties enough to keep her busy, without launching into such a boundless ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction!