

# A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals

Richard Price

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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. Every four-point ellipsis. . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. Price sometimes puts between sentences a dash like this—usually to indicate that the line of thought is changing direction a bit, but not enough to merit starting a new paragraph. Such dashes between sentences are all Price’s. So are all extra spaces between some pairs of paragraphs. Many of Price’s uses of the word ‘principle’ give it the meaning of ‘source’, ‘cause’, ‘drive’, ‘mechanism’ or the like. In this version, every occurrence of it in that sense of it will be written ‘principle<sub>c</sub>’, suggesting ‘principle = cause’. A ‘principle’ without the subscript is a proposition.

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## Preface

I am well aware that this work comes to the public with many disadvantages, and at a time when it isn't likely to get much attention from people. But the questions discussed in it are so important that if along with its many imperfections it has some merit, it can't be badly timed and will probably get a candid and careful reading from some people. The Notes that I include are mainly a result of my having set this work aside for several years, during which time I intermittently revised it. —By far my greatest intellectual debt is to Dr. Butler, the late Bishop of Durham. Whenever I have been conscious of following him in something I write, I either mention him or quote his words; and I am careful to do the same with respect to other writers as well. [The present version omits many of the footnotes in which Butler and others are quoted.]

The part of this work that I most want you to attend to, and that needs attention, is chapter 1, especially its section ii. If I fail in that section, then I fail in what I primarily set out to achieve in this book. But I would be sorry if you reached that conclusion without first going through the whole thing and comparing the different parts of it—you'll find that they

have a considerable dependence on one another. [In Price's day to 'compare' two things was not necessarily to *liken* them; it could be just to consider them together in order to see how they are related.]

•The result I try to prove in chapter I section iii will seem *obvious* to readers who haven't much studied the question of the foundation of morals, or who haven't looked at it in the light that I have placed it in. So obvious, indeed, that I'm afraid that those readers will find it hard to avoid the conclusion that in taking so much trouble to establish •it I have merely been trifling [= 'pointlessly fooling around']. I sympathize with this view, because the •result in question *ought* to found obvious by everyone. I'm talking about the thesis that right and wrong, or moral good and evil, signify something that is really true of *actions* and not merely of *sensations*. Recent controversies, and the doubts of some of the wisest men, have made it necessary to defend this view with many arguments. My own belief in it is so strong that I can't help seeing it as a reproach to human reason that there is any *need* for these arguments.

## Introduction

The readers of a book have a right to pass judgment on its merits; and a writer who objects to this, or isn't ready to face what comes of it, isn't properly equipped to *be* a writer. But it is not satisfactory that readers generally pass judgment on a book without spending much time thinking about what it says. Very few subjects are so straightforward that a competent judgment of them can be reached without care and attention. So what are we to think of those whom we continually see making free with their opinions on matters they have never thought about, and dogmatically answering the most difficult questions without thought or study? If they are ever right about anything it can be only by chance! They speak and think entirely at random, and therefore don't deserve to be taken seriously. As for those who *do* take some trouble to examine the issues, many even of *them* are as little entitled to be taken seriously; they are equally incompetent judges, equally careless and unthinking, and are led to their opinions by the most trifling arguments under the influence of passions that are harmful to the discovery of truth. It is a sad sight!

These considerations present a discouraging prospect to writers in general, and especially to ones who write on abstruse and controversial subjects. Most people don't *attend*; they think quickly and carelessly, yet decide boldly; and they mostly like or dislike according to their pre-conceived notions and prejudices and not •according to reason or •guided by any close and impartial consideration. All this is so true that an author who allowed himself optimistic hopes of success—whatever he might think of his doctrines or his arguments—would probably be letting himself in for humiliation. I should add that we are generally as much inclined

to •attach ourselves immoderately to our opinions as we are to •embrace them before thinking them out thoroughly.

Speaking for myself: I have such a sense of the truth of these remarks that there may be few people who are more pessimistic than I am about their chances of ever convincing one person that he has been guilty of error! The more we know of men, the more we find that in forming and maintaining their opinions they are governed by their temperaments, their interests, their moods and passions, and a thousand nameless causes and particular turns and casts of mind that •are bound to produce the greatest diversity of opinions among them and •make it impossible for them not to err. The fact is that none of us has the cool and calm temperament, the freedom from all wrong biases, the habit of attention and patience of thought, or the sharpness and competence in thinking, that are the proper guarantees against error. [Price quite often expresses emphatic assertions in the form of questions. Here is an example of that, and of the kind of way in which this version will often deal with such 'questions':]

**Price's next sentence:** How much then do modesty and diffidence become us? how open ought we to be to conviction, and how candid to those of different sentiments?

**How we should understand it:** That is all the more reason for us to be •modest and cautious in our opinions, to be •open to having our minds changed, and to be •fair and open with those whose beliefs are different from our own.

Indeed, when you think about the various ways in which error can slide into our minds—

- the many latent prejudices by which we're liable to be influenced,

- the countless facts about our own dispositions, and about the appearances of things, that can lead us astray without our noticing it, and
- the unavoidable darkness and infirmities of even the best and ablest men, often showing up in mistakes of the strangest kind

—such reflections are enough to lead a thinking man to distrust almost all his opinions.

But it would be unreasonable to go that far. Despite these difficulties and discouragements, •truth *is* still discoverable, and honest hard-working people can expect to have at least some success in their search for •it—at least on the most important points. The facts I have called attention to provide the strongest arguments for caution and care in enquiring, but none for despair or casual joking and lightly switching

opinions. They shouldn't make us sceptical, though they do demonstrate the folly of being dogmatic.

In this book most of the questions that are of any importance regarding morality and virtue will be considered—many in a different way from any previous treatment of them. I am somewhat shy about offering this work to the public because I am aware that it has many defects, and conscious of my liableness to the causes of blindness and error that I have mentioned. My principal aim has been to trace •the obligations of virtue up to •the truth and the nature of things, and these to •the Deity. The considerations I shall offer on this important matter have to a large extent satisfied my own mind, and this has led me to hope they may give some help to others enquiring into these matters.

## Chapter 1

### The origin of our ideas of right and wrong

In considering the actions of moral agents we have three different perceptions concerning them, and these must be carefully distinguished.

- (1) Our perception of right and wrong.
- (2) Our perception of beauty and ugliness. [chapter 2]
- (3) What we express when we say what actions, for better or worse, *deserve*. [chapter 4]

I shall examine each of these perceptions separately, with special emphasis on the first, with which I shall begin. . . .

#### **i: What is the question concerning the foundation of morals?**

[In Price's day, to be 'determined to' do something was to be made or caused or led to do it.] There are some actions that we all feel ourselves irresistibly determined to approve, and others to disapprove. There are some that we can't help thinking to be right, and others wrong. And of every action we are led to form some opinion—

- that it ought to be performed, item
- that it ought not to be performed, or

•that it neither ought nor ought not to be performed—  
i.e. it is indifferent.

The question we are to consider is: What is the power within us that determines us to make these judgments?

A very distinguished writer, the late Dr. Hutcheson, derives our moral ideas from a 'moral sense', meaning by this a power within us, different from reason, which makes certain actions pleasing to us and others displeasing. Hutcheson's view went like this [not a quotation from him]:

We are so made that certain impressions on our bodily organs arouse certain ideas in our minds, and certain outward forms when presented to us inevitably give rise to pleasure or pain. Similarly, we are so made that certain affections and actions of moral agents inevitably give rise to agreeable or disagreeable sensations in us, and get us to love or dislike them.

[•This work often uses 'form' to mean 'action', 'item of behaviour'—a sense that the word has since lost. 'Outward forms' are simply bits of physical behaviour. Occasionally, e.g. on page 7, Price seems to use 'forms' for any kind of particular item, not necessarily a particular *action*. •In this work, as in other writings of the same period, 'affection' means something like 'feeling that includes a desire or practical attitude'; see the paragraph starting 'This may give. . . ' on page 39. An 'affection' (in this sense) might be full of hate.]

He has indeed well shown •that we have a faculty ·or power· that determines us immediately to approve or disapprove of actions, setting aside any thought of private advantage; and •that the highest pleasures of life depend on this faculty. If he had left it at that, meaning by 'the moral sense' nothing but our moral faculty in general, there would have been little to object to in his position. But then what he was saying wouldn't have been anything new—he couldn't have been regarded as the discoverer of it. ·Anyway, he *didn't* 'leave it at that'. •His choice of the term 'sense' as a label

for this faculty, •his rejection of all the arguments that have been used to show it to be an intellectual power, and •the whole of his language on this subject—all these make it clear that he regarded the moral faculty as an upshot of the way our minds are constructed, an implanted and arbitrary principle<sub>c</sub> that makes us like certain moral objects and dislike others, similar to the likes and dislikes created by our other senses. [Any principle<sub>c</sub> resulting from how our minds are constituted is 'implanted' in us by God, and is 'arbitrary' in the early modern sense of 'chosen by someone'—in this case, chosen by God. It isn't implied that the choice is capricious or unreasonable.] In other words, if Hutcheson is right then our ideas of morality have the same origin as our ideas of the sensible qualities of bodies, the harmony of sounds, or the beauties of painting or sculpture—namely God's mere *choice* to make our mind and its organs responsive in a certain way to certain objects. [In Price's day, 'object' often had an *extremely* broad meaning. Any item *x*—any item at all—could be called an 'object' in the context of 'idea of *x*', 'think about *x*', 'respond to *x*', 'make a moral judgment about *x*', 'see or feel etc. *x*', 'have a belief about *x*', 'have a duty towards *x*'; e.g. 'moral objects' a few lines back, 'objects that the understanding perceives to be contingent' page 10.] According to those who accept this theory, virtue is *a matter of taste*. The moral terms 'right' and 'wrong' don't stand for anything **in the objects**—the actions or affections—to which they are applied, any more than do 'agreeable' and 'harsh', 'sweet' and 'bitter', 'pleasant' and 'painful'; all they signify are certain effects **in us**. Our perception of right (wrong) or moral good (bad) in actions is merely the agreeable (disagreeable) emotion or feeling that certain actions produce in us. They are particular states of our minds—impressions they are made to receive from contemplating certain actions, impressions that would have come from the contrary actions if the Author of nature had so chosen; and to suppose them to belong to those

actions themselves is as absurd as to ascribe the pleasure or unpleasure that comes from observing a particular form to the form itself. According to this account, therefore, it is improper to say of an action that ‘it is right’, in about the same way as it is improper to say of an object of taste that ‘it is sweet’ or of pain that ‘it is in fire’.

So this is the question that now confronts us: Is this a true account of virtue? Does it have a foundation in the nature of its object? Are right and wrong real features of actions or only qualities of our minds? In short, do ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ stand for •what actions are or only for •what sensations we get from actions because of the particular frame and structure of our natures?

Any attentive person who hasn’t already thought about this question will, I am sure, be surprised at its being a subject of dispute, and will think that there is no need for what I am going to undertake. I have given the naked and just state of it [that sentence is verbatim Price]. . . . It is in fact the *only* question about the foundation of morals that can rationally and properly be made a subject of debate. We do have perceptions of moral ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and those words must name either **(1)** the nature of the actions to which we apply them or **(2)** the nature of our feelings; and the power of perceiving them must be either **(1)** the power whose object is truth or **(2)** some implanted power or sense. If **(1)** is true, then morality is as unchangeable as all truth is; and if **(2)** is true, then morality is only what it appears to be to our senses, according to their various constitutions.

[We are about to meet the phrase ‘positive laws’. That means ‘laws that were laid down or ordained by *someone*’—it could be a human being or God.] As for theories that base morality on self-love, on positive laws and compacts, or on the Divine will: they must

either

**(a)** mean that ‘morally good’ and ‘morally evil’ are only other words for ‘advantageous’ and ‘disadvantageous’, ‘willed’ and ‘forbidden’,

or else

**(b)** relate to a very different question—not to the question ‘What is the nature and true account of virtue?’ but ‘What is the subject-matter of virtue?’, i.e. what kinds of items are virtuous?’<sup>1</sup>

To the extent that the theories I have mentioned intend **(a)**, they afford little room for controversy. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’, when applied to actions that are commanded or forbidden by the will of God, or that produce good or harm, don’t mean merely that such actions are commanded or forbidden, or that they are useful or hurtful. Rather, they express an opinion concerning them and our consequent approval or disapproval of the performance of them. If that were not so, it would be obviously absurd to ask whether it is right to obey a command or wrong to disobey it, or whether it is right to produce happiness. The propositions *Obedying a command is right* or *Producing happiness is right* would be utterly trivial, because all they would mean is that obeying a command is obeying a command, or that producing happiness is producing happiness! Furthermore, on the supposition that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ denote only the relations of actions to will and law, or to happiness and misery, there could be no dispute about the faculty that perceives right and wrong—it would have to be agreed by everything that *these* relations are objects of the investigations of reason.

Happiness requires something in its own nature or in ours to give it influence, and to make us want it and approve

<sup>1</sup> Bear in mind that the phrase ‘foundation of virtue’ is ambiguous. It may refer to **(i)** a consideration or principle implying virtue and proving it in particular cases, or **(ii)** a motive for the practice of virtue. I am using it in sense **(i)** only.

of pursuing it. Similarly, all laws, will, and compacts are effective only because of independent facts about what is right; so instead of being the constituents of right they owe their whole force and obligation to it.

After these preliminary remarks, I return to our question: What is the power ·or faculty· within us that perceives the distinctions of right and wrong?

My answer is. **The understanding.** [Price always treats ‘understanding’ and ‘reason’ as equivalent terms. See for example footnote 2. He also equates them with ‘intellect’ and with ‘intelligence’.]

To show that this is right, I must ·first· explore in detail the origin of our ideas in general, and the distinct domains of the understanding and of the senses.

### (ii): The origin of our ideas in general

Sensation and reflection have commonly been regarded as the sources of all our ideas, and Locke went to a lot of trouble to prove this. Greatly as I admire his excellent *Essay*, I don’t think he was sufficiently clear or explicit on this subject. It is hard to work out exactly what he meant by ‘sensation’ and ‘reflection’. At the start of his *Essay* he said that sensation is the effects arising from the impressions made on our minds by external objects, and that reflection is the notice the

mind takes of its own operations. If those are right, it will be impossible to derive some of the most important of our ideas from sensation or reflection. But what Locke mainly meant, probably, was that all our ideas are either •derived immediately from those two sources or •ultimately based on ideas that are derived from them; which is to say that *they provide us with all the subjects, materials, and occasions of knowledge, comparison, and internal perception.* This is far from saying that sensation and reflection are ‘the sources’ of all our ideas in any proper sense of ‘source’, ·but Locke seems to have thought otherwise·. Despite all that he had to say about the mind’s operations on its ideas, he doesn’t seem to have thought that we have any faculty other than sensation and reflection that •could give rise to any simple ideas, or •could do more than compounding, dividing, abstracting, or enlarging ideas that are already in the mind. Well, be this as it may, I believe that the ·rival· view that I am going to present will be found to be true.

I contend that we have a source of new ideas in •the power that understands, i.e. •the faculty within us that discerns truth, and that compares all the objects of thought and makes judgments concerning them.<sup>2</sup>

Because the question before us is ‘Are our moral ideas derived from the understanding or from a sense?’, we need

<sup>2</sup> Please bear in mind that by ‘ideas’ I nearly always mean *simple* ideas, basic uncompounded perceptions of the mind. [An example of a ‘compounded perception of the mind’ is the idea of *squareness*, which is ‘compounded’ out of planeness, four-sidedness, rectangularity and equal-sidedness. An example of an uncompounded idea is the idea of *redness*, which is simple or uncompounded because there is no way of completing a definition of the form ‘for something to be *red* is for it to be—and ...’.] I shall later be arguing that our ideas of right and wrong are of this sort. I should point out too that I am always using ‘the understanding’ in the most confined and proper sense of that phrase. Some writers have ·used it much more broadly·, dividing all the powers of the soul into •understanding and •will, so that ‘the understanding’ covers all the powers of external and internal sensation, as well as those of judging and reasoning. . . .

The understanding performs actions of two kinds—intuition and deduction, I have in view intuition; but it’s obvious that the writers who argue against referring our moral ideas to reason usually have in mind only deduction. [‘Intuition’ as used here refers to *seeing at a glance* that necessarily P or that Q follows necessarily from P; while ‘deduction’ was *seeing through a several-step argument* that necessarily P or that Q follows necessarily from P.]



first to do something that hasn't been given the attention it deserves, namely to say clearly how the nature and the domain of the senses differs from the nature and domain of reason. My first point about this is the following. The power that

- judges regarding the perceptions of the senses and contradicts their decisions, and that
- discovers the nature of the sensible qualities of objects, enquires into their causes, and distinguishes what is from what is not real in them,

must be a power within us that is superior to the senses.

It's obvious that one sense cannot judge regarding the objects of another sense—the eye can't judge harmony, or the ear judge colours. So the faculty that views and compares the objects of all the senses cannot itself be a sense. For example, when we consider sound and colour together, we observe in them •essence, •number, •identity, •diversity etc., and determine that their reality consists not in their being properties of external substances but in their being states of our souls. The power that takes note of all this and gives rise to these notions must be a power that can inspect *anything* and can acquaint itself with necessary truth and existence.

Sense consists in the way certain impressions force themselves upon us, independently of our wills; but it can't perceive what they are or where they come from. Sense lies prostrate under its object [Price's phrase]. Sense is only the soul's capacity for having its own state altered by the influence of particular causes. So it remain a stranger to the objects and causes affecting it.

If sense and knowledge weren't entirely different, we

would settle for having sensible impressions—light, colours, sounds etc.—without enquiring any further into them, at least when the impressions were strong and vigorous. Whereas in fact we necessarily want some further acquaintance with them, and can't ever be satisfied until we have subjected them to the survey of reason. Here are four large differences between these two faculties. **(1)** Sense presents *particular* forms to the mind [see note on page 4], but it can't rise to any *general* ideas. It's the intellect that examines and compares the presented forms, rising above individuals to the level of universal and abstract ideas. This enables it to look *down* on objects, getting an infinity of particulars into one view, and enables it to discover general truths. **(2)** Sense sees only the *outside* of things, whereas reason acquaints itself with their *natures*. **(3)** Sensation is only a kind of *feeling* in the mind, whereas knowledge implies an active and vital *energy* of the mind. Feeling pain, for example, is the effect of sense; but the understanding is employed when pain itself is made an object of the mind's reflection, i.e. is held up before the mind in order to discover its nature and causes. Mere sense can't perceive anything in the most exquisite work of art except what is painted in the eye [Price's phrase]; it can't, for example, see that this is a picture of a plant or an animal. It is the intellect that must perceive in the art-work order and proportion, variety and regularity, design, connection, skill, and power; aptitudes, dependences, correspondences, and the inter-relating of parts so as to serve a purpose, composing one perfect whole<sup>3</sup>—things that can never be represented on a sense-organ, and the ideas of which can't be passively communicated or stamped on the mind by the

<sup>3</sup> Cudworth in his *Treatise of Eternal and Immutable Morality* remarks that the mind is prompted by outer objects to perceive much more than is represented to it by sense, just as a learned man perceives in the best written book more than is perceived by an illiterate person or a non-human animal. [Price then quotes a long passage in which Cudworth likens a learned man's ability to •read wonderful things in a book to a thinking person's ability to •'read' God's wisdom and goodness in the universe.

operation of external objects. **(4)** Sense cannot perceive any of the modes of thinking beings; these can be discovered only by the mind's survey of itself. [*Modes* are properties or qualities of things. Not essential properties: a mind's *thinking* isn't a mode of it. But also not particular episodes: a particular stab of pain suffered by a mind wouldn't be called a mode of it. Modes are universals; they are *ways things can be*.]

In short, we see that sense and understanding are totally different faculties of the soul—

- one dealing only with particulars, the other only with universals;
- one not discerning but suffering, the other not suffering but discerning.

[That involves a now rare sense of 'suffer' in which it means 'passively undergo'. Price is contrasting the understanding which actively *does* things with the senses that only passively undergo or are on the receiving end of things.] Understanding is the soul's power of surveying and examining all things, in order to make judgments about them. . . .

To get a better idea of •how small the scope of sense is (and this applies also to imagination, a faculty closely related to sense) and •how greatly we depend on our higher thinking powers for many of our basic ideas, I shall discuss six such ideas.

**(1)** The idea of **solidity** has usually been counted among the ideas we owe to sense; but it might be hard to show that we ever have actual experience of *impenetrability*, which is an ingredient in our idea of solidity and is regarded as essential to all bodies. To show this we would have to be sure that we have at some time •made two bodies really touch and •found that they wouldn't penetrate one another; but •we aren't entitled to be sure of that, because •all the facts we know by observation *could* be explained without supposing that it *ever* happens that two bodies are in abso-

lute contact. And even if we could conduct that experiment, a single experiment couldn't be a sufficient foundation for our absolute confidence that no two bodies *can* penetrate one another—nor indeed could a million experiments! Not to mention the fact that in any such experiment all we would perceive by our senses would be the •conjunction of two events, not their •necessary connection. [One event would be the coming into contact of the two bodies; the other, presumably, would be the bodies' either staying in that position or bouncing back.] Are we then to that there isn't any idea of impenetrability? That two atoms of matter could occupy the same place •at the same time• while still keeping their distinct identities, neither of them annihilating the other? That all the atoms of matter in the universe could be crowded into the space now occupied by one? That the space occupied by these could become smaller and smaller, to infinity, without reducing *at all* the quantity of matter in the universe? We might have to say Yes to all of that, if it were certain that all our ideas about this are derived from sensation, and that reason had nothing to work on here except what is revealed by the senses. It often happens that two material substances *appear* to us to penetrate one another; and it is our reason which, on the basis of its own perceptions, concludes that those are misleading appearances and assures us of the universal and strict necessity of the contrary. The same power that perceives two particles to be •different also perceives them to be •impenetrable, because they can't be different without being impenetrable; it is self-evident that they can't occupy the same place •at the same time• without losing all difference •from one another•.

**(2)** Now let us consider **inertia**, i.e. the inactivity of matter. This too is a perception of reason rather than an idea conveyed to the mind by the senses. This property of matter is the basis for all our reasoning about it. To those who reject

it, or who insist that all our knowledge of matter and motion must come from experience, i.e. the information conveyed to the mind through the senses, I put a question concerning the three axioms (or laws of motion) on which Sir Isaac Newton bases his philosophy: are they unsupported by evidence and devoid of meaning?—What is it that tells us that every body will continue for ever in the state of rest or motion it is in unless something produces an alteration of that state? that every alteration of a body's motion must be proportional to the force exerted on it and in the same line of direction as that force? and that a body's action on another body is always equal and contrary to the other body's action on it? In other words, what gives us our ideas of resistance and inactivity? Not experience! [Price now says that untutored sense-experience would seem to suggest that Newton's three laws are *false*. He continues:] Ideas so •contradictory to sense cannot be •derived from it. So they must be ascribed to a higher origin, •namely, the understanding•.

And another point: suppose that Newton's laws were constantly illustrated by experience as well as by the perceptions of reason, the backed-by-experience version of them would have to be very different from the backed-by-reason version which is what they actually are. Even if experience and observation taught us always that the alteration of motion in a body is proportional to the force acting on it and is in the line of direction in which this force acts, the senses could only teach us this very imperfectly—they couldn't inform us of it with precision and exactness. They could only show us that what this law states is *nearly* the case, which is the same, strictly speaking, as its *not* being the case! The eye of sense is blunt. The conceptions of the imagination are rough and ready, falling infinitely short of the certainty, accuracy, universality, and clarity that belong to intellectual discernment.

(3) The idea of **substance**, similarly, is one to which our minds are necessarily carried, beyond what is suggested by mere sensation, which can show us nothing but accidents, sensible qualities, and the outsides of things. It is the understanding that discovers the general distinction between substance and accident [= 'between things and their properties'], •and there is no doubt that it gets this right•. There couldn't be a more *unavoidable* perception than that motion implies something that moves, extension implies something extended, and in general modes imply something modified.

[Although Price does not say so, the next paragraph was written with one eye on what Locke wrote in *Essay* II.xiv.3: 'There is a sequence of ideas constantly following one another in our mind. . . . Reflection on these appearances of various ideas one after another is what provides us with the idea of *succession*; and the distance between two any parts of that sequence, i.e. between the appearance of any two ideas in our minds, is what we call *duration*.' This makes *succession* basic and *duration* derivative from it; Price reverses that.]

(4) The idea of **duration** accompanies all our ideas; it is included in every notion we can form of reality and existence. What is suggested by the observation of the sequence of thoughts following one another in our minds, or the constant flux of external objects, is *succession*. This, like every other idea, presupposes the idea of *duration*; but it is as different from it as are the ideas of motion and shape. Rather than saying •as Locke did• that the idea of duration is derived from that of succession, I think it would have been better to say that reflecting on the succession of ideas in our minds is the basis for our estimate of *how much* duration has intervened between two events.

(5) Similar remarks can be made regarding •the idea of **space**. Like duration, this is included in every reflection we can make about our own existence or that of other

things; because it's self-evident that saying that something *is nowhere* is the same as saying that it *doesn't exist*. Like everything else that exists at all, we exist in •time and •place; so that as self-conscious and thinking beings we must have ideas of •them.

Another point worth making about space and duration is that we perceive intuitively [see note on page 6] their *necessary existence*. The notion of annihilation is the notion of removing a thing from space and duration; to suppose that space and duration might be annihilated is to suppose that they might be separated from themselves! In the same intuitive manner we perceive they can have no limits, and from this we get the idea of *infinity*.

**what Price wrote next:** The very notion of bounds implies them, and therefore cannot be applicable to them, unless they could be bounded by themselves.

**what he meant:** The notion of x's being limited in space (time) involves the notion of there being space (time) *outside* the limit—the space (time) that x is limited *by*. So the notion of space (time) itself being limited involves the ·absurd· notion of space (time) being limited *by* space (time) outside the limit. These perceptions are plainly the result of the understanding's attention to necessary truth; and the account of how we come by our ideas of infinity and necessity in time and space. . . . also applies to how we come by our ideas of any other self-evident reality—e.g. of the equality between the opposite angles of two lines crossing one another, or of the identity of any particular object while it continues to exist.

There are other objects [see note on page 4] that the understanding perceives just as evidently to be *contingent*, or whose existence it sees to be not necessary but only possible.

Thus, the understanding, by attending to different objects and observing what is or is not true of them, acquires the ideas of *necessity, infinity, contingency, possibility, and impossibility*.

(6) The next ideas I shall discuss are those of **power** and **causation**. Some of the ideas mentioned above imply them; but we should attend to them separately and with care. At first sight it may seem utterly obvious that one way in which they get into our mind is by our observing the various changes that happen in our environment, and our constant experience of the events that occur when external objects are made to interact in this or that specific manner. [Thus Locke, *Essay* II.xxi.1.] And yet I am quite convinced that these ideas can't possibly be given to us by this experience alone.

What we observe by our external senses is, strictly speaking, merely that one thing *follows* another,<sup>4</sup> or the constant *conjunction* of certain events. . . . That one thing is the *cause* of another, or *produces* it, we never see. And in countless instances where men commonly think they observe causation at work it *isn't* at work! Suppose that nothing ever did contribute through its own force to the production of any new event; suppose (that is) that the apparent causes of things were *never* their causes but *always* only their occasions or concomitants;. . . . we would still have the same ideas of cause, and effect, and power ·as we do have now·. Our certainty that *every new event requires some cause* doesn't depend on our experience any more than does any other intuitively known truth. The idea of every change includes within it the idea of its being an *effect*.

The necessity that everything that happens should have a cause is an essential principle, a primary perception of the

<sup>4</sup> Malebranche says various things to that effect; he is well known to have maintained that nothing in nature is ever the proper *cause* of anything else, only the *occasion*; according to him, God is the sole agent ·or cause· of all effects and events. Hume has even more strongly emphasized that all we perceive is events following (·not causing·) one another, though with a different purpose.

understanding. Nothing is more obviously absurd than the notion of

- a change that has been derived from nothing,
- a change for which there is no reason,
- an existence that began but was never produced,
- a body that has ceased moving but hasn't been stopped.
- a body that has begun to move but hasn't been moved.

If someone says he denies this, nothing can be done to convince him except referring him to common sense. If he can't find *there* the perception I have mentioned, there can be no further argument with him, because the subject doesn't admit of argument. ·Why doesn't it?· Because there isn't anything more clearly true than the proposition in question, so there's nothing we can bring forward to support it. Someone might say: 'We do indeed have such a perception, but it comes from some power other than the understanding, ·so that our having it isn't a reason to think it true·', but then I would demand to know why he doesn't say the same thing about *all* self-evident truth!

I have *not* said that we have no idea of power except from the understanding.

**what Price wrote next:** Activity and self-determination are as essential to spirit as the contrary are to matter;

**what he meant:** We are active; we get ourselves to move; and this is as essential to minds as it is essential to matter that it is passive and doesn't move unless something else moves it;

so our inward consciousness gives us the idea of the •particular sort of power implied in activity and self-determination. But the •universal source of the idea of

•power, as we conceive it to be necessary to the production of everything that happens,

and of

•our notions of influence, connection, aptitude, and dependence in general,

must be the understanding. Some active or passive powers, some capacities for making changes or for being changed, are an essential part of our ideas of all objects. (These powers differ according to the different natures of the objects and the different relations amongst them.) An item that •can't do anything, that •isn't fit to serve any purpose, and •has no kind of dependence or aptitude or power belonging to it, can't be anything real or substantial. If all things were wholly unconnected and loose, if no one event or object ever, in any circumstances, implied anything beyond itself, all the foundations of knowledge would be destroyed. Everyone agrees that things don't appear to us as loose and unconnected, and that in countless instances we can't help regarding them as connected and inferring one from another. Why shouldn't this be accounted for by a real connection between the things themselves? Can there be *anyone* who thinks that there's no real connection, perceivable by reason, between •having an honest mind and •acting justly, or between •certain collisions and •changes in how bodies move?

Indeed, the whole meaning of 'accounting for' [= 'explaining'] a fact implies that in the nature of objects and events there is something that involves a *connection* between them, or a *fitness* to influence one another in certain ways. Until we can discover this 'something' we are always aware that there's more to be known. For as long as we only see one thing constantly accompanying or following another, without perceiving the real dependence and connection (as with gravitation, and the sensations that accompany certain impressions on our bodily organs), we can't help being dissatisfied. Our state of mind about that is very different from the complete acceptance that we experience when we think about Newton's laws of motion or any other facts in

which we see the necessary connection and truth.

We always find that when we have adequate ideas of the natures and properties of any beings or objects, we at the same time perceive their powers and can predict, independently of experience, what they will produce in given circumstances and what will follow their interacting with one another in given ways. If we were thoroughly acquainted with the heart of a man, the nature of his temperament, and the structure of his mind, we wouldn't need *experience* to tell us what he will do or how far he is to be trusted. Similarly, if we knew the inward fabric and constitution [or, as we might say, the molecular structure] of the bodies surrounding us on which all their properties and powers depend, we would know in advance what the result would be of any experiments we could make with them. Just as from having a complete idea of the real essence of a circle we can deduce its various properties that depend on that essence. . . . And if we had perfect insight into the constitution of nature—the laws that govern it and the motions, texture, and relations of all the bodies that compose it—the whole chain of future events in it would be laid open to us. Experience and observation are useful only when we are ignorant of the nature of the object,

and can't in a more perfect, short, and certain way determine what the outcome will be of particular experiments, and what are the uses of particular objects.<sup>5</sup> *Instinct* is an even lower and more imperfect means of making up for the same lack of knowledge.

With regard to all the ideas I have been discussing, and particularly **(6)** causation, it is worth pointing out that even if it were as difficult to discover their true origin as it is to derive them from the sources commonly assigned to them by writers on these subjects, it would surely still be very unreasonable to conclude that we have no such ideas. And yet that's the very conclusion some have drawn! If then we do indeed have such ideas; and if they have a foundation in truth and are ideas of something that really exists, what difficulty can there be in allowing that they may be known to the understanding, the faculty whose object is truth? If we don't have any such ideas, or if they denote nothing real except the qualities of our own minds, I needn't say what an abyss of scepticism that will plunge us into.

Let me add, finally, that our *abstract* ideas seem most properly to belong to the understanding. They're undoubtedly essential to all its operations, because every act of

<sup>5</sup> The conviction produced by experience is based on the same principle that assures us that there must be a cause of every event and some explanation of whatever happens. The frequent repetition of a particular event, e.g. the falling of a heavy body to the earth, makes us expect that it will happen again in future trials: Because we see **intuitively** that because there is some reason or cause for this constancy of outcome it must be derived from a cause that operates regularly and constantly in given circumstances. On the same principle, if we observed a die being thrown very often and *always* falling with '6' uppermost, we would conclude that the same thing would happen with any future throws of this die. And the more frequently and uninterruptedly we knew this had happened, the stronger would be our expectation of its happening again, because the more evident it would be that either •the die was marked '6' on every side or •the thrower had some special skill or •there was something in the die's constitution that made it turn with '6' uppermost.—I have a suggestion—a surprising one, but I think it is true—about why some people have doubts and difficulties with this and some other points of the clearest nature. It is that when they say:

'It is not *reason* that informs us that there must be some explanation of everything that happens and some established causes of constant and uniform events, and that order and regularity must come from design'

what they mean is that these propositions can't be established by **deduction**. They are right about that, but only because the propositions are *self-evident*, •known by **intuition**•, so plain that there is nothing plainer from which they can be inferred!

judgment implies some abstract or universal idea. For them to be formed by the mind in the way they are generally said to be, it seems that the mind would have to have them already at the very time when it is supposed to be busy forming them. We are told, for example, that from any particular idea of a triangle we can form the ·abstract· general one; but doesn't the thought process required by this. . . . imply that the general idea is already in the mind? If it isn't, how can the mind know how to go to work, or what to think about?—Some have held that a universal idea isn't a special kind of idea, but rather an ordinary idea associated with a name that signifies a number of particular ideas resembling that one; but this can't be right, because unless we have a ·genuinely· universal idea we can't know *which* other ideas to allow into the group signified by the name, i.e. which particular objects had the resemblance necessary to bring them within the meaning of the name. Someone who reads a geometrical demonstration is aware that it relates to •something more than just the precise figure presented in the diagram. But if he doesn't know •*what* more, what use is the demonstration to him? How is his knowledge enlarged by it? How will he know afterwards what to apply it to?—It is true •that everything pictured in the imagination, and everything we observe by our senses, is particular; and •that while any general notions are present in the mind, the imagination is usually busy representing to itself some of the particulars that fall under them. But it would be strange to infer from *this* that the only ideas we have are particular ideas! That wouldn't be much better than inferring from the fact that

- things are so tightly associated in our minds with their names that we can't separate them from their names

that

- our only notion of any thing is an idea of its name.

Or inferring from the fact that

- whenever we think about the sun, we are apt to have an image of a white bright circle

that

- our only notion of the sun is the idea of a white bright circle.

[At this point Price has a long footnote, which is here raised into the main text:]

START OF REID'S FOOTNOTE

According to Cudworth, abstract ideas are implied in the cognitive power of the mind, which (he says) contains potentially within itself general notions of all things, notions that unfold and reveal themselves as proper circumstances occur—in much the way a future tree is potentially contained in a seed. I don't agree with those who condemn this as whimsical and extravagant, but I wouldn't like to have to defend it! . . .

Cudworth rejects as very absurd the opinion that universal ideas are formed out of particular ones by separating things' common properties from the ones that individuate them from one another; he says that it comes from a misunderstanding of Aristotle. As for the other opinion that

- universal ideas are only singular ideas tied to a common term, i.e. they are names without any meaning

—a view that used to be accepted by the appropriately named Nominalists [from Latin *nomen* = 'name'], and has recently been revived—he says that this is so ridiculously false that it doesn't deserve to be argued against. [Price now quotes a longish passage in which Cudworth starts from the premise that God can 'signify his will to men', who can 'signify their wants to God'. It would be an incredible coincidence if the ideas involved in such communications had one source for God and a different source for man. If we credit God with deriving his ideas from something other than himself, 'we

quietly fall into a kind of atheism'. So we have to think that God's mind generates its own ideas, which makes it reasonable to think that our ideas are made in our minds and don't owe anything to the world of matter. [Price now ends the footnote with another quotation from Cudworth:]

'The philosophers whose ideas of *being* and *knowledge* are derived from body and sensation have a short method to explain the nature of **truth**. It is an invented thing made by every man for himself, which comes and goes, i.e. is remembered and forgotten. In the ·metaphysical· order of things truth comes at the bottom, not only below objects that we see and feel but even below our sensations of them. . . . Other reasoners. . . . represent **truth** not as the lowest but as the highest of beings; they call it immutable, eternal, omnipresent—attributes which all indicate something more than human. . . . For my part, when I read the detail about sensation and reflection, and learn the main outlines of how my ideas are all generated, I seem to view the human soul as resembling a crucible in which truths are produced by a kind of logical chemistry.'

END OF THE FOOTNOTE

It is a fatal error that people run into when they confuse the understanding with the imagination, and deny reality and possibility to anything that the imagination can't represent, however clear and certain it is to the understanding. The powers of the imagination are very narrow; if the understanding were confined to the same limits, nothing could be known and the understanding itself would be annihilated.—It is utterly obvious that one of these ·faculties· often perceives where the other is blind, is surrounded with light where the other finds only darkness, and in countless cases knows things to exist of which the other can't form any idea. *Of course* the imagination can't represent to itself *matter without colour*; but that is how it is perceived by the under-

standing, which announces without doubt or hesitation that colour is not a property of matter. Points, lines and surfaces, as mathematicians consider them, are entirely intellectual objects—never picked up by the senses and inconceivable to the imagination. Does this imply that there are no such things? Are we to believe that there cannot be any particles of matter smaller than we can imagine to ourselves, or that there is no degree of equality except what can be judged by the eye? This has been maintained! And on the same principles we must go on to say that

the mind itself and its operations are just what they appear to everyone's reflection; it isn't possible for us to go wrong in our thinking about what we have formerly done or thought, or what we will do or think in the future.

What an unattractive philosophy it is that thus explodes all independent truth and reality, reduces knowledge to particular states of sense and imagination, making these the measures of all things!

Here is an example of the stock of knowledge and new ideas that the understanding can derive from one object of contemplation.

Let us suppose someone who is sensorily confronted by one cubic inch of matter. If he has no intellect, he will stick for ever with that individual sense-perceptible object, never getting to anything more than what it immediately presents to him. Now add intellect, and let us observe what follows.

First, there will appear the ideas of •thing, •possibility, and •actual existence. Because every perception is the perception *of* something, it implies some kind of reality distinct from and independent of itself. 'Might not the perception be a perception *of* itself?' Nothing could be more grossly absurd than that! If it were right, any examination might be identical with the thing being examined—the eye identical with visible



objects; memory with the fact remembered, desire with the object desired. And yet this absurdity seems to be the basis for a system of scepticism that has been lately taught to the world.

I needn't labour this. Every idea implies the possibility of the actual existence of its object; nothing being clearer than that there can't be any idea of an impossibility, a conception of what cannot exist. These are obviously true intuitions of the intellectual faculty, which is unavoidably led to then by every object it thinks about.

[In the third edition—20 years after the first—Price appended an end-note relating to what he has just said.]

·START OF END-NOTE·

Dr. Reid, in his very valuable work on the intellectual powers of man, disputes this assertion (4th Essay, chapter 3). His principal reasons seem to be **(a)** that we can understand a proposition that expresses what is impossible, and **(b)** that in mathematical demonstrations we are often directed to suppose what is impossible. **(b)** But supposing is not the same as conceiving. I can be directed to •suppose any absurdity, but it doesn't follow from this that I can •conceive any absurdity. A believer in transubstantiation may •suppose that Christ held his own body in his hand and gave it to his disciples; but if he claimed to have a clear and distinct •conception of this he would be making himself as ridiculous as if he were to say that he saw it happen.

**(a)** And a man can •understand what is meant by a proposition that expresses an impossibility—e.g. 'The whole of something is smaller than a part of it'. But he certainly doesn't have any real •conception of this. He may think he has a clear •idea of an object when in fact he doesn't, just as he may think that he has a clear •perception of an object when in fact he doesn't perceive it. But just as in the latter case

•he must believe in the existence of what he thinks he perceives,

so in the former case

•he must believe in the possibility of what he thinks he conceives.

I must emphasize that my topic here is *the conception of objects* and not *the understanding of propositions*. Because impossibilities are not realities, conceptions of them would be conceptions of nothing.

·END OF END-NOTE·

•Continuing with the account of what the understanding can extract from a cubic inch of matter: We may next observe that the *possibility* of the existence of matter implies the *actual* existence of space. Without space, matter could not be possible, nor could there be any idea of it. And our grasp of space's status as necessary and inseparable from the idea of matter is our grasp of the *necessary existence of space*. And once we have the idea of space, we perceive its infinity.—From the idea of matter we are in the same way informed of the *necessary existence of duration*. By further examining our supposed portion of matter we shall find that we can conceive, without contradiction, of one part of it as being in one place and another part in another place, and that consequently it is divisible. For the same reason it will appear that this division can be continued, and that an intelligent mind can penetrate so far beyond all the boundaries of imagination that it perceives that there certainly can be no end to this division—which is to say that matter is infinitely divisible.

[In the third edition Price appended an end-note confessing (not a change of view, but) a loss of confidence.]

·START OF END-NOTE·

This property of matter—·infinite divisibility·—convinces me that I don't know what it is, and that the common ideas of it are extremely inadequate. The Scholastic maxim *Every entity is one* seems to me indisputable. What could something be that was neither •one thing nor any •number of things?

Isn't it absurd to say that one thing was moved by another, which was moved by another, and so on backwards to infinity, without any first mover? And isn't it equally absurd to say that a particle of matter can be divided into other particles, which can be divided into others, and so on downwards to infinity, without ever coming to a particle that is properly *one*—meaning a particle that is indivisible·?

You might want to try this: 'There are atoms that have no pores, and therefore can't be divided except by the power of the Creator.' But such an atom would have parts, and it would be possible that one part should exist in one place and another part in another place; so that this 'atom' would really be a multitude of atoms, just as if its parts were actually separated. Whatever is really one can't be divided without being annihilated. This is true of the being that each person calls *himself*. No-one can conceive of *half of himself*.

Those are the difficulties that press my mind with respect to the nature of matter. But they have no effect on my belief in the existence of a material world. In this case, as in countless others, I feel my own ignorance, without being led to reject convictions that I am forced to accept without being able to explain them. ·Here is one of the other cases·: I know that my will moves my limbs. There is nothing more familiar to me—and nothing that I understand less!

·END OF END-NOTE·

From the same source—·our supposed piece of matter·—the understanding can further gain the ideas of •cause and effect, and •connection. Let it conceive of two of the separated parts

as moving in a direct line towards one another, and consider what would follow. Because it can't conceive them to pass through one another, the understanding will unavoidably conclude that there will be contact and impulse [= 'a collision'], and also (as necessarily connected with these) some change in the motions of the colliding bodies.—To avoid these conclusions one would have to suppose that two bodies can

- penetrate one another, or
- move towards one another without meeting and pushing, or
- push one another without altering how they move or having any other effect.

Someone who has no difficulty conceiving any of those—well, what criterion can he be using to judge concerning what is true or false? and why will he refuse his assent to *any* absurdity that can be put to him?

But not only would the mind [here = 'the understanding'] thus perceive causation and necessary connection, but ·it could also make predictions on that basis·. Given the direction and momentum of the moving bodies before the collision, it could foretell the precise change of direction and momentum that the collision would produce; and could go on from that to working out—*a priori* and with no possibility of error—all the laws and effects of •the collision of bodies, •the division and composition of motions, and •the resistance of fluids and centripetal forces, as they have been investigated by natural scientists.

And it is obvious that with this as a foundation the mind would gain the ideas of number and proportion, and lines and figures; and could proceed to arithmetic, geometry, and all the different branches of mathematics.—In short, from this single subject of enquiry—the cubic inch of matter that we started out with—the mind can learn not only the elements and principles but the main part of the whole body

of science.—Such is the fruitfulness of reason, and so great the injury it suffers by being kept within the limits of sense, imagination, or experience.<sup>6</sup>

When I consider these things I am amazed that people who are enquiring into the origin of our ideas overlook *the understanding*; although it isn't the temporally first of our idea-sources it is the most important source of them. It has indeed always been regarded as the source of •knowledge; but there has been too much neglect of the fact that it couldn't be a source of knowledge without also being a source of new ideas. The various kinds of •agreement and •disagreement between our ideas, which Locke says it is the understanding's job to discover and trace, are so many new simple ideas obtained by the understanding's discernment [Price's word]. Thus, when the understanding considers the two angles made by a straight line meeting another straight line, and perceives that they agree with two right angles, isn't this agreement simply **(i)** *equality*? And isn't the idea of **(ii)** this equality a new simple idea that the understanding has acquired, completely different from the ideas of the two angles, and denoting **(iii)** self-evident truth? [In that sentence, Price seems to move from **(i)** the idea of equality to **(ii)** the idea of the equality of those two angles and from that to **(iii)** the proposition that the two angles are equal.]—In much the same way in other cases. . . .

**how Price finished this sentence:** . . . knowledge and intu-

ition suppose somewhat perceived in their objects, denoting simple ideas to which themselves gave rise.

**what he meant:** . . . we know by intuition—i.e. by seeing it as self-evident—some truth about something, a truth involving an idea that the understanding comes to have *through* having this very intuition.

—This is true of our ideas of proportion, of our ideas of identity and diversity, existence, connection, cause and effect, power, possibility and impossibility; and—jumping ahead to something I shall discuss fully later on—our ideas of moral right and wrong. Proportion concerns quantity; right and wrong concern actions; and all the others concern everything. They are involved in the most considerable part of what we can want to know about things, and are the topics of most reasonings and treatises. [Reid has a long footnote here, which is raised into the main text.]

•START OF REID'S FOOTNOTE•

[The footnote quotes Socrates (in Greek) as accepting the general line Price has been taking here, including this:] 'For the perception of these things, a different organ or faculty is not appointed, but the soul itself in virtue of its own power observes these general states of all things.' . . . James Harris writes in his book *Hermes*: 'Notice the order of things according to our later metaphysicians. •First comes that huge body, the sensible world. •Then this world and its

<sup>6</sup> And so false is the scholastic maxim *There is nothing in the intellect that wasn't first in the senses*.—Something that is relevant to this, though not directly relevant to my purposes in this chapter, is worth notice. It is the case, mentioned by Locke, of the man had been born blind, gained his sight, and was then required to distinguish between a globe and cube just by looking at them. I agree that this man wouldn't be able •readily or immediately to say which was the globe and which the cube, but it seems certain that •with the help of a little reflection he could tell which was which. First, let us vary the example and suppose that the born-blind man is confronted with—instead of the •globe and cube—a •square and a rectangular parallelogram of unequal sides. To both senses, touch and sight, the sides of one would appear equal and of the other unequal. So why should it be hard for him to determine that what he saw with equal sides was the square, and with unequal the oblong? Could he possibly suspect that *sight* is so fallacious a sense that it represents the most unequal things as equal, or represents a great multitude of things as *one* and vice versa? In the same way he could distinguish between a square and a circle, and therefore between a globe and a cube; and in this and many other cases he could determine how something he •saw would •feel, doing this *before* having any experience of feeling the item in question. . . .

attributes beget sensible ideas. •Then a kind of lopping and pruning of sensible ideas creates intelligible ideas, both specific and general. Thus, if they admitted that the mind came into existence at the same time as the body, until the body gave the mind ideas and awakened its dormant powers, it could at best have been merely a sort of dead capacity; for it couldn't possibly have any innate ideas—i.e. ideas that it had when it first came into existence.—At another time we hear of bodies so exceedingly fine that their very fineness makes them capable of having sensation and knowledge, as if they had *shrunk into intellect* by their exquisite subtlety, which made them too delicate to be bodies any longer. But the intellectual scheme that never forgets •God regards every corporeal thing as coming from the primary mental •Cause. *That* is where it looks for the origin of intelligible ideas, even the ones that human beings have. Sensible objects may be God's chosen medium to *awaken* the dormant energies of man's understanding, but those energies themselves aren't contained in sense, any more than the explosion of a cannon is contained in the spark that set it off.'

•END OF REID'S FOOTNOTE•

In short. Just as bodily sight reveals visible objects to us, the understanding (the eye of the mind, and infinitely more penetrating than the bodily eye) reveals intelligible objects to us. And just as bodily vision is the inlet through which ideas enter the mind, so the understanding becomes the inlet of new ideas that the senses cannot provide. . . .

For several reasons, the classification of our ideas that I like best is the following.

**(1)** First, ideas that imply nothing real outside the mind, i.e. nothing real apart from the mind's own feelings and sensations.

**(2)** Secondly, ideas that denote something distinct from sensation, and imply real and mind-independent existence and truth.

Each of these classes can be further subdivided: The first class into **(1a)** ideas that denote the immediate effects of impressions on the bodily senses without presupposing any previous ideas, e.g. all tastes, smells, colours, and so on, and **(1b)** ideas that arise only when prompted by other ideas, e.g. the effects in us of experiencing or thinking about order, happiness, and the beauties of poetry, sculpture, painting, and so on.

The second class can be subdivided into **(2a)** ideas that denote real properties of external objects, and the actions and passions of the mind, and **(2b)** those that I have described as derived immediately from intelligence. **(2a)** From the information that reaches •it through the organs of the body, and from •its observation of the necessary accompaniments of certain sensations and impressions, •the mind perceives the shape, extension, motion, and other primary qualities of material substances. By contemplating itself, it perceives the properties of spiritual substances, volition, consciousness, memory, and so on. It is essential to each of these ideas that it has an invariable archetype that actually exists and that it is supposed to fit.<sup>7</sup> Hutcheson is right when he says that extension, shape, motion and so on are more properly •ideas accompanying the sensations of sight and touch than •sensations of sight and touch. I think it would be best *never* to give the name 'ideas' to sensations themselves, any more than we call volitions or desires 'ideas'; but to confine the word to the mind's *conception of* or *notice of* any object. According to that usage, then, an *idea* would always imply something distinct from itself, namely its *object*. [see the note

<sup>7</sup> H

on page 4], and the proper classification of our ideas would sort them according to their different objects—•those whose objects are matter and spirit and their qualities, •those whose objects are •the general contingent qualities of all things, and •those whose objects are necessary truths. . . .

In short. There are three senses in which the word 'idea' has been used: **(1)** It has been used to signify **sensation** itself, so that tastes, sounds and colours are often called 'ideas'. There is no justification for using the word in this way. **(2)** It is also used to signify **the mind's conception** or apprehension of any object. I regard this as the soundest and most proper sense. **(3)** It is also used to signify **the immediate object of the mind** in thinking. This third sense of 'idea' comes from the notion that when we think of any object there is something immediately present to the mind that it perceives and contemplates. But what is this? Shall we call it a representation or image of the object? This, I think, is improper language. Must we then deny the existence of an immediate object of the mind in thinking? When an abstract truth is contemplated, isn't the very object itself present to the mind? When millions of intellects contemplate the equality of every angle in a semicircle to a right angle, don't they all have the same object in view? Is this object nothing?

[Strictly, an 'archetype' is something from which *copies* are made, but Price here means only that each idea is *of* something other than itself, something that it *fits*, something that it is accurately *of*; he probably doesn't think that either 'x is y's archetype' or 'y fits x' means that y *resembles* x in some way. Why is the archetype 'invariable'? Because Price is thinking not of (say) *the idea of this ball that I hold in my hand* but rather of *the idea of sphericalness*, an unchanging universal property.] **(2b)** After the mind has been provided with •ideas of objects—from whatever causes—•those ideas themselves become objects for our intellectual faculty, and from this

there arises a new set of ideas that are the perceptions of this faculty. Until that happens we may be provided with many ideas but we don't *understand* anything. Whatever subjects of knowledge there may be in the mind, nothing is *known*.

[In the third edition Price appended an end-note relating to what he has just said.]

·START OF END-NOTE·

Notice that I have all along tried to avoid speaking of an idea as the mind's *image* of the object we are thinking of. It is difficult not to fall sometimes into language of this kind; but it can be misunderstood. The deeply reflective Reid has accused it of laying the foundation of all modern scepticism.

I am always upset when I find that my opinions differ from Reid's. According to Hume, •the immediate object of the mind in perception is •the perception itself—which annihilates all external existence. Reid, if I understand him, asserts. . . . that there is no such object, and thus seems to me to annihilate all perception! When we investigate the properties of triangles or circles, aren't there present to our minds at that time objects that don't depend on our minds? ·Of course there are, and· we call these objects 'ideas'. Because this word usually signifies the apprehension or conception of an object, it oughtn't to be used to signify the object itself; but the poverty of language obliges us to do this, so it must be excused and care must be taken not to be misled by it, as I think Hume and some other writers have been.

In such cases, I have said, we call the objects present to our minds 'ideas'. If ideas have no existence, and nothing is present to our minds when we contemplate these objects, doesn't it follow that we then don't contemplate anything? The same question arises about our perception of external objects. Since these objects are not themselves present ·to

our minds· when we perceive them, they must be perceived through ideas of them. And it doesn't follow from this that we can't be sure of the existence of external objects. All ideas imply the *possibility* of the existence of objects corresponding to them, and our belief in the *actual* existence of the objects of sense can be understood (as it is by Reid) as:

•impressions on our senses *forcing* belief ·on us· at the moment of the impression, in a manner that we can't explain.

And this goes through better •with the supposition of *ideas* than •without it. Why? Because scepticism seems to be less favoured by supposing that in sense-perception something distinct from the mind and independent of it really is perceived than by supposing that in sense-perception nothing is perceived. [Price concludes this end-note by saying that the unavoidable question 'In sense-perception, *what* is it that is present to our minds?' has to be answered in a way that brings God into the story, implying that God is present with us and that we depend on him] more closely and constantly and necessarily than we are apt to suspect or can easily believe.

·END OF END-NOTE·

Of all the kinds of ideas I have mentioned, the ones derived from the external senses are what non-human animals seem mainly to have, and perhaps they have no others. They think, and will, and remember; but aren't capable of attending reflexively to these ·operations· so as to obtain ideas *of* them. They can hear all the sounds in music, and see all the lines and colours in a picture; but they don't perceive harmony or beauty. So it seems that all the ideas based on •inward reflection, on •a previous assemblage and comparison of ideas, and on •intelligence, are to a large extent restricted to us humans.

Before we leave this topic it is important that I make this clear: The source of ideas that I have been emphasising—which I have variously referred to as 'understanding', 'reason', 'intellect' and 'the mind'—is different from the *power of reasoning*, and mustn't be confused with it. Reasoning is investigating certain relations between objects, ideas of which must already be in the mind; so it can't give rise to new ideas. No mind can be engaged in

•investigating it knows not what, or  
•trying to learn something about an object of which it has no conception.

What happens with regard to ideas such as those of proportion, identity, connection and so on is that •first we get these ideas from the view of objects to which they belong self-evidently, and •then we employ deduction or reasoning to track down proportions, identities etc. in other contexts where they can't be perceived immediately.

### **iii: The origin of our ideas of moral right and wrong**

[Re the use of 'simple' in this paragraph, see the note in footnote 2.]

Let us now return to our original question and apply the things I have been saying to our ideas of right and wrong in particular. It has to be grasped from the outset that our ideas of right and wrong are *simple* ideas; ·so they can't be acquired by attending to definitions of them, and· must be ascribed to some power of immediate perception in the human mind. If you doubt this, try to construct definitions of them that amount to more than merely producing synonymous expressions ·as in 'right = correct', for example·. The issue about the foundation of morals has involved a great deal of confusion, *most* of which has come from inattention to this matter. There can be no doubt that some actions are

*ultimately* approved, with no reason for the approval being givable; just as some ends are *ultimately* desired, with no reason for choosing them being givable. If this were not so, there would be an infinite sequence of reasons and ends, and therefore nothing could be approved or desired.

Taking it as granted that we have *some* power of immediately perceiving right and wrong, what I shall try to prove is that this power ·or faculty· is *the understanding*, which is what I said at the end of section i. The main obstacle to the acceptance of this has—I think and hope—been removed by what I said in section ii to show that the understanding is a power of immediate perception that gives rise to new original ideas. If *that* had been properly considered, I don't think there could have been many disputes about the source of our ideas of right and wrong.

But in order to present the case more explicitly and clearly (in the only way the nature of the question seems capable of) let me

(1) point out that it implies no absurdity, and obviously *could* be true. It is undeniable that many of our ideas are derived from our *intuition* of truth, i.e. our understanding's discernment of the natures of things. So this could be the source of our moral ideas. It is at least *possible* that right and wrong denote what we understand and know concerning certain objects, just like proportion and disproportion, following-from and inconsistency, contingency and necessity, and the other ideas I have mentioned. [Price speaks of what *ideas* 'denote' = 'name' or 'stand for', as well as (more correctly) of what *words* denote. The present version doesn't try to sort all that out.]—And no-one has said anything in support of the view that this is *not* how things stand. What about Hutcheson's objections and reasonings in his *Enquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*? All that they show is something that I have already asserted, which doesn't in the least affect the

present debate. That is, they show that the words 'right' and 'wrong', 'fit' and 'unfit', express simple and undeniable ideas. But Hutcheson hasn't said anything in support of his thesis that the power perceiving right and wrong etc. is really a •sense and not •reason, and that these ideas don't denote anything that is *true* of actions, anything about the *nature* of actions. He seems to have taken for granted that if virtue and vice are immediately perceived, they must be perceptions of an *implanted sense*. An amazingly hasty conclusion! For will anyone have the rashness to say that all powers of immediate perception must be arbitrary [see note on page 4] and implanted; or that simple ideas can't denote anything except the qualities and passions of the mind?—In short, whatever some writers have said to the contrary, it certainly has not yet been established that virtue is something ·that God has· *made for a purpose*, and is to be felt rather than understood. [We have just seen Price using 'vice', and starting on page 41 he will quite often use 'vicious'. For him and his contemporaries, these words cover *every* kind of moral wrongness. In our day, the noun is narrower than this in one way, and the adjective in another; try to keep these narrowings out of your mind.]

Just as •some propositions, when they are attended to, necessarily make all minds believe them; and just as •some ends, when their natures are perceived, immediately and necessarily make all beings desire them (I'll defend this later), so also it is very credible that •some actions, when their natures are observed, immediately and necessarily make all rational beings approve them.

I'm not interested in what follows from Hume's assertion that all our ideas are either impressions or copies of impressions, or from Locke's assertion that ideas are all derivable from sensation and reflection.—Hume's thesis

- is destitute of all proof,
- when applied in this and many other cases assumes

the point in question, and

- when pursued to its consequences ends in the destruction of all truth and the subversion of our intellectual faculties.

—As for Locke's thesis: it needs *much* more explanation if it is to be consistent with any tolerable account of the origin of our moral ideas. To be convinced that all our ideas are *not* derivable from sensation and reflection (unless this is taken in a very broad and loose sense), all you need do is to look at how Locke derives our moral ideas 'from sensation and reflection'. He places the moral ideas among our ideas of relations, and represents rightness as signifying the conformity of actions to some rules or laws, which (he says) may be

- the will of God,
- the decrees of the magistrate, or
- the fashion of the country.

[For Price and his contemporaries, 'the magistrate' stood for whoever makes the laws of the land (and sometimes also whoever enforces them).] It follows from this that it is an absurdity •to apply 'right' to rules and laws themselves, •to suppose that the divine will is directed by •considerations of •rightness, or •to consider rightness as *being* a rule and law. There can be no doubt that this great man would have detested these consequences; and indeed it is clear enough that he was enormously tangled in his notions on this as well as some other subjects. But

(2) I know of no better way of settling this point—i.e. of satisfying everyone that rightness etc. are objective properties of actions • than by challenging those who doubt it to bring common sense to bear on the issue, and to consider the nature of their own perceptions.—Does it make sense to suppose that a person might perceive an external object and not know whether he was seeing it or feeling it? . . . There's no possibility of doubting in a case like that; it doesn't seem

any harder to work out the answer in the present case.

Suppose that this question were raised:

What *is* the perception that we have of number, diversity, causation or proportion? Do our ideas of them signify truth and reality perceived by the understanding, or impressions made on our minds by the objects to which we ascribe them?

To answer this question, wouldn't it be sufficient to appeal to every man's consciousness?—*Obviously* the answer would be that *of course* judgments we make involving any of these concepts are judgments about what is objectively the case out there in the world, not mere reports on the impressions that things have made on our minds. Yet these perceptions seem to me to have no better claim to be called 'perceptions of the understanding' than do •perceptions of •right and wrong.

It's true that our perceptions of virtue and vice are usually accompanied by impressions of pleasure or pain, satisfaction or disgust. But these are only effects and accompaniments, not the perceptions themselves. Confusing •perceptions of right and wrong with •these accompaniments would be as bad as confusing •a theorem in geometry with •the pleasure the geometer had when he discovered it! It may be that some emotion or other accompanies all our perceptions, but this is most notably true of our perceptions of right and wrong. And this has led to the mistake of thinking that they signify nothing but impressions; an error that some have extended to all objects of knowledge, thus being led into an extravagant and monstrous scepticism. I shall say more about this in the next chapter.

Returning now to my topic: compare •the ideas arising from your powers of sensation with •the ideas arising from your intuition of the natures of things, and ask yourself: Which of these is more like your ideas of right and wrong? We can safely let the answer to that question settle the debate.



It is scarcely conceivable that anyone who impartially attends to the nature of his own perceptions will decide that when he thinks *Gratitude is right* or *Benevolence is right* he isn't perceiving any truth about gratitude or benevolence, isn't *understanding* anything, but is merely receiving an impression from a sense! If someone were able to question whether his idea of equality was gained from sense or intelligence, he could soon be convinced by asking himself this: 'Aren't I sure that •certain lines or figures are *really* equal, and that •their equality must be perceived by all minds as soon as the objects themselves are perceived?'—In this same way we can satisfy ourselves concerning the origin of the idea of *right*: For don't we have a similar awareness that we discern rightness, as well as equality, *in* certain objects? What possible grounds could we have for assigning rightness to sense and equality to reason? Wouldn't a being who had intelligence but no senses, and who had happiness within his reach, approve of getting it for himself? Wouldn't he think this *right*—and wouldn't it *be* right? . . .

It seems utterly certain that every being must desire happiness for himself. Given that a being's nature is such that he *desires* happiness and is averse to misery, can he have absolutely no *approval* of actions that produce one or prevent the other? Is there nothing that any understanding can perceive to be wrong in a creature's bringing calamities and ruin upon himself or others? Is there nothing truly *wrong* in the absolute and eternal misery of an innocent being?—'It *appears* wrong to us.'—And what reason can you have for doubting that it *is* as it *appears*?—Suppose that a being, having been soothed with hopes of bliss and his expectations raised by encouragements and promises, found himself for no reason plunged into irretrievable torments—wouldn't he justly complain? Wouldn't the idea of *wrong* arise in his mind without his having any •moral• sense to provide

it?—Can goodness, gratitude, and veracity appear to any mind under the same characters, with cruelty, ingratitude, and treachery? [That sentence is verbatim Price.]—Darkness may as soon appear to be light!

One might argue further from the fact that everyone naturally takes it that our ideas of right and wrong belong to the understanding, and denote qualities that actions actually have; but this line of argument wouldn't be useful because it will be easy to reply that •everyone has a similar opinion about the sensible qualities of bodies, and that men *very* commonly mistake their own sensations for the properties of the objects producing them, or apply to the object itself something that they find always accompanying it whenever it is observed. [Price writes here as though it were an uncontroversially soundly established fact that material things don't have colours etc., and that statements purporting to attribute such qualities to them ought to be replaced by statements about observers' sensory states.] Let it therefore be observed,

**(3)** that if right and wrong denote effects of sensation, it is utterly absurd to suppose them to be applicable to actions. That is,

the ideas of •right and wrong must be incompatible with the idea of •action,

just as

the idea of •pleasure is incompatible with the idea of •such-and-such a shape, and  
the idea of •pain is incompatible with the idea of being-hit-by-a-rock.

—All sensations are states of consciousness, or feelings of a sentient being, which must be of a totally different nature from the particular causes that produce them. A 'coloured body' if we speak accurately is absurd in the same way as a 'square sound'. We don't need *experiments* to prove that heat, cold, colours, tastes and so on are not real qualities

of bodies; because the *idea* of matter is incompatible with the *ideas* of any of these qualities.<sup>8</sup>—But is there any such incompatibility between *action* and *right*? Or any such absurdity in affirming of an action that it is right?—Are those two ideas as different from one another as the idea of a sensation is from the idea of its cause?

On the contrary! The more we enquire, the more indisputable I think it will appear to be that when we say of some actions that they are right and of others that they are wrong, ·so far from being guilty of absurdity or self-contradiction· we are expressing a necessary truth. Some of the most careful enquirers think in this way, and find themselves compelled to believe that right/wrong is a real distinction that applies to the natures of actions. Can it be so difficult to distinguish the ideas of sensibility from ·those of· reason? to distinguish the passions of the mind from the intuitions of truth? Can we become *fond of* a theory of morals according to which our perceptions of moral good and evil in actions and conduct are all vision and fancy? Can't *everyone* see that 'right' and 'wrong' are absolutely unintelligible and devoid of sense and meaning when they are supposed to signify nothing true of actions, no essential inherent difference between one action and another? . . .

(4) Finally, think about this: All actions undoubtedly have a nature- i.e. some character certainly belongs to them and there's something to be truly affirmed of them. This might be that some of them are right, others wrong. But if this is not allowed—if no actions are in themselves either right

or wrong, or anything of a moral and obligatory nature that could be an object to the understanding—what follows is this:

Actions in themselves are all indifferent [= 'neither morally required nor morally forbidden']. That's what is *essentially* true of them, and it is what they must be perceived to be by all understandings that are working properly.

But aren't we conscious that we perceive the contrary of this? And haven't we as much reason to believe the contrary as to put any trust at all in our own discernment [= 'our ability to make distinctions and see logical truths']?

Here is another way of putting it. Everything has a nature or essence from which such- and-such truths about it necessarily follow, which it is the understanding's role to perceive. Nothing whatever can be exempted from the understanding's inspection and judgment; it is the natural and ultimate judge of every thought, sentiment, and subject—so that its domain includes •actions, •purposes and •outcomes.—What is its judgment about •these?—One would think it impossible for anyone to reply confidently and cheerfully that his judgment—i.e. the judgment of his understanding—is that •they are all *essentially indifferent*, and that no one thing is fitter to be done than any other. This is very obviously not a judgment that *we* make; so if it is correct, our strong inclination to think otherwise is a flaw in our characters as rational creatures. Shouldn't we then work to suppress this inclination in ourselves, and to sweep

<sup>8</sup> [In a footnote Price remarks that most of the facts that have been adduced as evidence that colours, smells etc. are not really in bodies are useless for that purpose, because if they were valid they would equally prove that shapes and sizes etc. are not really in bodies either. He then adds a point that has nothing to do with his present topic but (he says) he can't help bringing it in. It is a side-swipe at materialist theories of mind. When everyone agrees that sensible qualities aren't inherent in matter; it's strange (Price says) that some philosophers refuse to take the same line about thought and consciousness. He continues:] Is the notion of *conscious, thinking, reasonable matter* less absurd than that of *white matter* or *red matter*? . . . Is it less plain that shape, solidity, magnitude, motion, and juxtaposition of parts are not and cannot be desire, volition, and judgment than it is that they cannot be cold or sour or that any one thing is not and cannot be another?

out from our natures all the delusive ideas of morality, worth, and virtue? If the ruin of the world should follow—what of it? There would be nothing really wrong in this conduct.

A rational agent who •makes no moral judgments, who •can't perceive differences amongst actions in respect of their fitness and unfitness to be performed, and who •acts from blind *drives* without any *beliefs* concerning what he does, is unimaginable! And we'll find that however hard we try we *can't* •genuinely persuade ourselves that reason can have no role in judging and directing our conduct, or •exclude from our minds all notions of right and wrong in actions.

What deserves special notice here is this. If all actions and all dispositions of beings are in themselves indifferent, this must be known by God's all-perfect understanding; so *he* can't approve or disapprove of any of his own actions, or of any actions by his creatures. He must regard as completely morally neutral the end he pursues and his way of treating his creatures. What foundation, then, is left for his moral perfections? How can we think of God as pursuing universal happiness if we think that there's nothing *in* the nature of universal happiness for the choice of any being to focus on? Aren't we lessening his perfect character if we suppose him to be guided by mere unthinking inclination, with no direction from reason and no moral approval? . . .

From the arguments that I have been presenting we can draw the important conclusion that **Morality is eternal and immutable**. 'Right' and 'wrong', we find, denote what actions *are*. Now, whatever a thing *is*, it is by nature and necessity, not by will or decree or power. Whatever a triangle or circle is, *that's* what it is unchangeably and eternally. It doesn't depend on anyone's will or power whether •the three angles of a triangle shall be equal to two right angles, whether •the circumference of a circle shall be incommensurable with its diameter, or whether •matter shall be divisible, movable,

passive, and inert. Every object of the understanding has an indivisible and invariable essence, which is the source of its properties and countless truths about it. Omnipotence doesn't consist in a power to alter things' *natures* and to destroy necessary truth (for this is contradictory, and would imply the destruction of all wisdom and knowledge). Rather, omnipotence consists in an absolute command over all particular external existences—a power to create or destroy them or produce any possible changes among them.—Because the natures of things are immutable [= 'unchangeable' or, sometimes, 'unchanging'], whatever we suppose the natures of actions to be they must be *immutably*. If they are indifferent, this indifference is itself immutable, and there isn't and can't be any one thing that we *really* ought to do rather than doing something else. This also holds for right and wrong, and for moral good and evil, as far as they express real characters of actions. They must immutably and necessarily belong to the actions of which they are truly affirmed.

Thus, no *will* can make good and obligatory anything that wasn't so already and hadn't been so from eternity; nor can any will make right any action that isn't right in itself. What I mean by an 'action' is not

- the mere external effect produced, .i.e. the mere physical movement, but rather
- the ultimate principle<sub>c</sub> of conduct, i.e. the decision of a thinking being considered as arising from the perception of some motives and reasons and intended for some end.

According to this sense of the word 'action', whenever the principle<sub>c</sub> from which we act is different the *action* is different, even if the external effects that are produced are the same. If we attend to this, the meaning and truth of what I have just said will be easily seen.—Take the case of any action the performance of which is indifferent—i.e.

something that the agent's circumstances don't make better or fitter to be done than to be omitted. Isn't it clear that *if nothing in the situation changes* it's impossible for any will or power to make acting obligatory, just as it's impossible for any will or power to make two equal things unequal without producing any change in either of them? It's true that the doing of some •indifferent thing may become •obligatory because of a command from a being who has rightful authority over us; but it's obvious that in this case the command produces a change in the agent's circumstances, so that the action that it makes obligatory is not the action that previously was indifferent. The external effect—i.e. the physical movement—is indeed the same; but it's perfectly clear that actions that are the same in *this* sense, involving the very same ·physical· movements, may from the moral point of view be totally different because of differences in the ends aimed at by them and the principles of morality that apply to them.

When an action that would otherwise have been indifferent becomes obligatory through someone's promising to perform it, don't think that the promiser's will—or his breath!—alters the nature of things by taking something indifferent and making it *not* indifferent. In fact, the action that *was* indifferent before the promise is still indifferent; to suppose that after the promise that same action becomes obligatory involves a contradiction. All that the promise does is to alter the connection of a particular effect, or to cause that to be an instance of right conduct that was not so before. [That sentence is verbatim Price.] *Any* effect that we might produce can in this way fall under different principles of morality, coming to be connected sometimes with happiness and sometimes with misery, and thus coming to stand in different relations to the eternal rules of duty. [Notice that Price speaks here of 'effects that we might produce': he is saying that a given

physical performance might change its moral status, but only through a change in what *action* it expresses or involves or is 'produced' by. There is no question of changing the moral status of a single *action*.]

The position I have been taking is sometimes objected to on the grounds that something's moral status could be altered by positive laws [see note on page 5] or by promises; but now we can see that this objection has no weight. It turns out that when an obligation to a particular indifferent action arises from God's command or from positive laws, this doesn't show that obligation is the creature of will, i.e. that something that was indifferent has had its nature changed. The item that is obligatory after the divine command is obedience to God's will and just authority; and *that* was obligatory before the command—indeed, obligatory from eternity. [Price goes on to say that a command or a law couldn't make any moral difference unless there were already an obligation to obey *it*. He concludes:] It is *always* truth and reason that oblige, and not mere will. It is so far from being possible that any will or laws should create right, that they can't have any effect except in virtue of natural and antecedent right. . . .

One last point before I bring this chapter to a close: The opinion that our ideas of morality are derived from the senses is far from being entirely modern. Some ancient philosophers (notably Protagoras and his followers) had a similar view; but they extended it much further, denying that there is absolute and immutable truth in *any* of the sciences, and asserting everything to be relative to perception. It does indeed seem to be a fairly natural transition, from •denying absolute moral truth to •denying all truth; from •making right and wrong, just and unjust, dependent on perception to •asserting the same of everything that we ordinarily count as objects of the understanding. If someone rejects the reality of rightness in beneficence, and of wrongness in producing needless misery,

why shouldn't the same steps lead him to deny the certainty of other self-evident principles? . . . If he distrusts his reason in one case, why shouldn't he also distrust it in the other? If he relates moral perceptions to a *sense*, why shouldn't he join Protagoras in basing all knowledge on sense?—The consequences of

(1) making **all the principles of knowledge** arbitrary and contrived ·by God·, supposing that all we perceive of the natures and relations of things really denote sensory states of our minds,

can't be much worse than the consequences of

(2) making **morality** arbitrary and contrived ·by God·, supposing that the objects of our moral discernment are really states of our minds.

Where (1) overthrows all truth, (2) overthrows the most important and interesting part of truth. Where (1) destroys the necessary wisdom and intelligence of God (because the very idea of a *mind* and of *knowledge* is impossible if there is nothing permanent in the nature of things, nothing necessarily true, and therefore nothing to be known), (2) just as thoroughly destroys his moral perfections.<sup>9</sup>

One argument that Protagoras apparently made great use of in maintaining his opinions was that •colours, tastes, sounds and the other sensible qualities of bodies exist only

when they are perceived, and therefore •colours etc. are not qualities inherent in bodies but merely constantly changing sensations produced by the action of the perceived object on the sense-organ; from which he inferred that •a single object often appears to different people to have different qualities, and that •no two people have exactly the same ideas of any one sensible quality of any object. This thesis is not very consistent [Price's phrase] with another of Protagoras's views, namely that consciousness and understanding really come down to mere matter and motion; ·but he did nevertheless hold both theses, and from them· he concluded that all things are in a perpetual flux, and that nothing is true or false. . . . in itself, but only relative to the perceiving mind. Several passages in Plato's *Theætetus* indicate that Protagoras applied this ·line of thought· particularly to moral good and evil. . . . If you want a fuller discussion of this matter, see that Dialogue of Plato's, or Cudworth's *Treatise of Immutable and Eternal Morality*.

Such is the agreement, in this instance, between the opinions of modern times and those of Socrates' time! That is what tends to come from accepting the account of •morality that I have opposed; it is astonishing how far some who have accepted it have extended it to our •other perceptions, and have revived or even exceeded the wildest doctrines of

<sup>9</sup> Suppose someone conducts an enquiry like my present one, into what necessity is being referred to when we say 'It is necessary there should be a cause of whatever begins to exist'. He asks:

- 'When we say this, are we only expressing a feeling of sense or some state of our own thoughts, and not a judgment of the understanding?' and
- 'Is it indeed true that there is no such necessity in the natures of things?'

—If these questions are answered in the affirmative, there is an end of all knowledge, and we are plunged into the abyss of atheism.—Modern scepticism has not stuck at this; and it has the considerable excuse that in taking this line it has merely extended further what some writers (decent people!) have defended with respect to moral rectitude.—But for as long as men retain common sense, such opinions can't possibly gain ground. •The faculty by which we distinguish self-evident truths from obvious contradiction may be called into question by the refinements and subtleties of very clever men, but •it can't ever lose its authority—no real and lasting conviction could be produced against it.

ancient scepticism. They have

- represented as mere qualities of our minds the primary as well as the secondary qualities of matter, cause, effect, connection, extension, duration, identity, and almost everything about which there can be knowledge;
- confused ideas with the objects of ideas;
- maintained that *existing* and *being perceived* are universally the same; and
- asserted the impossibility of everything except impressions.

According to them there is neither matter, nor morality, nor God, nor any kind of external existence left. All our discoveries and boasted knowledge vanish, and the whole universe is reduced to a figment of the imagination. Every sentiment of every being is as right as every other. Because nothing is present to our minds besides •our own ideas, we can't have any conception of anything distinct from •them; no beings but ourselves;<sup>10</sup>

no distinction between past and future time; no possibility of remembering wrongly or foreseeing wrongly. For these sceptical philosophers the wisest man is the one who has the most fertile imagination, the one whose mind is stored with the greatest number of notions. Do his notions conform to the truth of things? That question (they say) cannot

even be *raised*. . . . It is high time to leave these sceptics to themselves.

[In the third edition Price appended an end-note relating to what he has just said.]

·START OF END-NOTE·

The point that I try to prove in chapter 1 section iii seems to me, when I look back over it, to be so obvious that I'm afraid I shall be thought to have trifled in this section, wasting my time and attention. It is indeed a reproach to human reason that there should be any occasion for *showing* that when we say of certain actions that they are right (wrong) we express truth and not merely an impression of pleasure (pain),

After the publication of the first two editions of the present work, Adam Smith (the author of the valuable work on the wealth of nations, and a writer above any praise from me) published his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the chief purpose of which is to prove that our perceptions of moral distinctions have the same sources in our natures as *sympathy* does, i.e. that moral approval and disapproval are a species of fellow-feeling with moral agents, by which we are made to enter into their views and emotions and to share in their pleasures and pains. As for the ·general· thesis that our basic notions of moral good and evil are derived from sensation and not from reason, i.e. that they are feelings of some sort and not perceptions of the intellectual faculty,

<sup>10</sup> And not ourselves either! Why? Because (according to these philosophers) existing is the same as being perceived; so perceptions themselves can't exist unless there can be perceptions of perceptions ad infinitum. And there is another reason also. According to this system, the only idea of what we call 'ourselves' is the contradictory and deformed idea of a series of successive and separable perceptions, none of which last through time—i.e. none of which *exist*—and all this without any substance that perceives.—And there is another point: Although this scheme takes away the distinction between past and future, and doesn't allow for anything really existing independently of perception, it also depends on—is based on—the contrary of both of those! It supposes that there *have* been past impressions of which all ideas are copies; and that certain objects *have* been observed as conjoined in past instances, which has given the imagination the habit of moving from one of them to the other—which is what these philosophers say that reasoning consists in. I wouldn't have troubled you with a mention of these extravagances if it weren't for the fact that some of them have been started •by Berkeley, who has followed his principles through to a system of scepticism that clearly includes them all; and •by another highly talented writer, Hume.

Smith says that he thinks this has been so abundantly proved by Hutcheson as to make it amazing that there is still any controversy about it.

This opinion, delivered in this way by such an able writer, would influence me more than it does if it weren't for the contrary opinion of another equally able writer, Thomas Reid. I get particular satisfaction from the fact that my views agree

with Reid's on all the most important points. At the end of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, he declares an intention to make the active and moral powers of man the subject of a future publication; and all enquirers after truth must hope that nothing will prevent him from doing that.

·END OF END-NOTE·

## Chapter 2

### Our ideas of the beauty and ugliness of actions

Having considered our ideas of •right and wrong; I come now to consider our ideas •of beauty and its contrary. [Price calls its contrary 'deformity', which in this version is replaced by 'ugliness', a word that Price doesn't use.] Of the three kinds of sentiment or perception regarding actions that I listed at the start of chapter 1, this is the second. I needn't say much to show that it is different from the first of the three. We are plainly conscious of more than the bare discernment of right and wrong, i.e. the cool judgment of reason concerning the natures of actions. We often say of an action not only that it is right but that it is 'amiable'; and of another action not only that it is wrong but that it is 'odious' and 'shocking'. [Current English has no one word expressing what Price means by 'amiable'. To get the general idea, think of 'That was amiable' as short-hand for something like 'What a lovely thing to do!'] Everyone must see that these words express the delight—or in the other case the horror and detestation—that *we feel*, and consequently signify not •any real qualities or characteristics of actions but rather •the particular pleasure

or pain caused in us when we consider the actions.

What is the true account of these perceptions? Mustn't they arise entirely from an arbitrary [see note on page 4] structure of our minds such that when we observe certain objects we experience certain sensations and feelings? And if that's so, don't we *now* have to bring in the notion of a •moral• sense? Can perceptions be connected with particular episodes of pleasure and pain in the perceiving mind in any way except through implanted principles<sub>c</sub>?

I answer that there *can* be such a connection, and that in many cases there *is* one, especially in this present case •of perceptions of moral beauty and ugliness•.

It isn't possible for us to discover why or how the impressions made by external objects on our bodily organs produce the sensations that always come with them. The same is true of the sensations and feelings produced by the objects of many of our internal senses. In such instances we can't conceive of any connection between the effects in us and

their apparent causes; and the only explanation we can give is: 'That is how we are built; God saw fit to relate particular objects to our faculties in those ways rather than in some others.' But in many cases we *don't* have this need to bring in God's choices. Some objects have a *natural* aptitude to please or displease our minds. The situation is the same with regard to the mental world as it is with the world of bodies. With regard to the latter, although

- there are events that we can't explain, and countless instances where we know that x caused y though we don't know anything about *how* because we don't know enough about the inward structure and constitution of x and y,
- there are also causes that operate in a manner that we do understand, and events between which we discern a necessary connection.

So one possible explanation of the sentiments we are now examining is: 'Certain actions have natures such that when they are perceived they *must* result certain emotions and feelings.'

It seems to me beyond question that some objects have a natural aptitude to please or offend; there is a *necessary* congruity or incongruity between these objects and the contemplating mind.—What are we to say of *supreme and complete excellence*? Here are three accounts:

- (1) When we call something 'supremely and completely excellent' all we mean is that it causes in us a particular kind of sensation.
- (2) Supreme and complete excellence is real and objective, and instances of it can it be contemplated without emotion. For the 'supremely and completely excellent' character of God to appear amiable to us, we have to have a special *sense*, because pure and abstract reason is indifferent to it.

(3) All that is needed for us to love and admire God's character is *knowing* it. The more it is known, and the better it is understood, the more it delights.

·It seems clear that (3) is by far the most plausible of these. Consider the example of a being who •has reason, •knows what order and happiness are, and •surveys a universe where perfect order prevails: to get pleasure from this prospect, I don't think he'll need any arbitrary mental structures or special moral senses! Similarly with his being offended by the prospect of universal confusion and misery.

Here's another example: your own happiness and misery are undeniably objects that you can't contemplate with indifference! More about this in chapter 3.

What is true in these and other instances is especially clearly true in our present case. Of all the cases of correspondences and connections among things, all the cases where one event has a tendency to produce another, none is plainer than the fact that virtue is *naturally* adapted to please every observing mind, and vice the contrary.—I can't perceive an action to be right without approving it; and I can't approve it without being conscious of some degree of satisfaction. I can't perceive an action to be wrong without disapproving it; and I can't disapprove it without being displeased by it. So right actions *as such* must be welcome to us and wrong ones unwelcome to us. [In that sentence and a few others later on, 'welcome' replaces Price's 'grateful', used in a now obsolete sense.] Right actions *must* appear amiable, and wrong ones *must* appear unamiable and base.—Goodness, faithfulness, justice, and gratitude *cannot* appear to *any* mind in the same way that cruelty, treachery, injustice and ingratitude do. To all who perceive and compare these 'two kinds of actions' they must have opposite effects: the first group must be liked, the second disliked; the first must be loved, the second hated. And it isn't *possible* that these sentiments should be reversed.



To behold virtue is to admire it. To behold it in its intrinsic and complete importance, dignity, and excellence is to have supreme affection for it. On the other side: to perceive vice is the very same as to blame and condemn it. To perceive it in its naked form and malignity is to dread and detest it above all things.

Self-approval and self-reproach are the chief sources of private happiness and misery. They are connected with—and entirely dependent on—awareness of practising or not practising virtue. Self-approval can't be separated from the memory of having done well, and self-condemnation is inseparable from the memory of having done wrong. For a being who is obliged to be perpetually reflecting on himself, nothing can matter more than to be at peace with himself and to be able to bear the survey of his past actions. So virtue and vice are, from the natures of things, the immediate and principal and most constant and intimate causes of private happiness and misery.

It should be remembered here that the effects produced by considering virtue and vice must be different in different beings, and different even in the same being in different circumstances. The pleasure received from virtuous actions, (that is the sense of beauty in them) must be varied by countless causes, both in the circumstances of the actions and in the understandings and conditions of the perceiver. •Pain or sickness, •the influence of implanted biases and propensities, •many different conditions of the temperament, and •associated ideas can lessen or prevent effects that would otherwise follow the perception of moral good and evil. But the *essential* tendencies don't alter; morally good actions must always be acceptable to every healthy rational mind, and can't ever of themselves offend; and morally evil actions must always be disagreeable, and can't ever of themselves please.—Of course a single object of moral discernment (e.g.

an action or a person's character), however it is naturally disposed to affect a percipient, will affect different reasonable people differently because of differences in their frames of mind or the clarity of their perceptions. This is just a special case the very general fact that the effects produced by any cause depend on the particular circumstances in which it operates, and must differ as these differ.

These observations seem to lead to an idea of *God's happiness* that may deserve to be just mentioned. If the foundations of happiness were something that someone has constructed for a purpose, it would be impossible to conceive how the Being who is himself the cause of all things and thus the maker of all constructions, and who can't draw anything from any source outside himself, could be happy. But I have shown that some objects of contemplation *naturally* produce delight, and some perfections or qualities *imply* blessedness. A being who has reason is capable of greater happiness than a being who only has senses, because he has in himself the sources of greater enjoyment; and the more wisdom and reason a being has, the higher is the bliss he is capable of. So there is in the natures of things a stable and permanent foundation for happiness. And God's happiness may result necessarily and wholly from what he *is*—from his having in himself all truth, all good, all perfection, all that blesses.—But in discussing this topic we are in over our heads; I suspect that we are falling into some gross misconceptions when we think of God as a happy being.

I return now to my main topic. The points I have made here won't account for *all* our feelings relating to virtue and vice. The lowest levels of reason are sufficient to reveal moral distinctions in general, because these distinctions are •self-evident, and are •included in the ideas of certain actions and characters, so that they must appear to anyone who is

capable of thinking about actions in any way at all. But how completely they appear to someone, and how accurately and strongly he discerns them, and thus how much influence they have on him, must be in proportion to •the strength and improvement of his rational faculties and •his acquaintance with truth and the natures of things. And *our* intellectual faculties are in their infancy!

That is why men need to have instinctive determinations as aids to the rational principle<sub>c</sub>, i.e. as aids to the intellectual discernment of right and wrong.—The dictates of mere reason are slow and deliberate, so that on their own they would be much too weak. The condition in which we are placed makes it necessary for us to have many urgent passions, and these inevitably interfere with our sentiments of rightness, thereby exposing us to •moral• danger. We can't be defended against this by unaided reason, because our reason is so imperfect. Our maker has, therefore, wisely provided remedies for reason's imperfections by giving us a constitution in which *balance* can be preserved, by tying our •intellectual perceptions sensations to •instincts that give them greater weight and force. [In Price's day, perhaps more than now, 'imperfect' could mean 'incomplete' or 'not yet fully developed'; and so it does here. When Price says that human reason is •imperfect, •in its infancy, and •slow, he isn't alleging any *positive defect*.]

So here is the situation in a nutshell: When we contemplate the actions of moral agents, we have both a perception of the understanding and a feeling of the heart. And the feeling depends on two causes: partly on •how *we* are constituted, but principally on •the essential congruity or incongruity between moral ideas and our intellectual faculties. [The 'principally. . .' phrase in that is verbatim Price.]

It may be hard to determine exactly where the line falls between these two sources of our mental feelings, or to say how far the effects of one are blended with those of the other.

There's no doubt that we would have felt and acted differently from how we now do if the decisions of •our• reason had been left entirely without support; and it isn't easy to imagine *how* pernicious to us this would have turned out to be. On my theory it can't be doubted that both the causes I have mentioned are at work in us; and the great question in morality is not 'Do we owe a lot to implanted senses and determinations?' but 'Do we owe everything to them?'

When Hutcheson in his *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* tried to derive all our ideas of virtue from an implanted sense, this was probably because he didn't pay proper attention to the distinction I have been insisting on

between *honestum* and *pulchrum* [Latin],  
between 'right' and 'morally beautiful',  
between the moral discernment of the mind and the sensations that come with it.

He always describes moral good and evil in terms of the effects accompanying the perception of them. The rightness of an action is, for him, the same as its welcomeness to the observer; and wrongness the same as its unwelcomeness. But it is utterly evident that •right is as different from pleasure, and •wrong as different from pain, as

- a cause is different from its effect,
- what is understood is different from what is felt, and
- a proposition's absolute truth is different from its agreeableness to the mind.

—It can't be denied that **(a)** some degree of pleasure is inseparable from the observation of virtuous actions. But to infer from this that **(b)** the discernment of virtue is *nothing but* the reception of this pleasure is just as unreasonable to infer—as some have done—from the premise that **(a)** whenever solidity, extension, and shape are perceived they are accompanied by some sensations of sight or touch, without which those

qualities can't be conceived by the imagination, the conclusion that **(b)** those qualities are *nothing but* particular kinds of sensation.

An able writer on these subjects [John Balguy] tells us that after some doubts he finally became convinced that all beauty, whether natural or moral, is a species of absolute truth because it results from or consists in the necessary relations and matchings of ideas. It is not easy to say what this means. I'll come to natural beauty shortly. As for moral beauty, one would think that the meaning of the phrase 'moral beauty' must involve its standing for a *real quality* of certain actions. But the word 'beauty' seems always to refer to the getting of pleasure; so the beauty of an action or character must signify its. . . . being apt to please us when we perceive it; and it is wrong to think that an object's beauty consists in anything more *in the action* that just *this aptness*, as distinct from the objective goodness or rectitude on which the beauty depends. . . .

It may be worthwhile to point out that in everyday speech the adjectives 'beautiful' and 'amiable' are applied only to actions and characters that please us *highly* because of the especially high degree of moral worth and virtue that we find in them. All virtuous actions must be pleasing to an intelligent observer; but they don't all give enough pleasure to be entitled to those descriptions.—Later on I'll discuss in detail the nature and origin of our ideas of the different degrees of virtue and vice in actions.

These remarks, slightly modified, also apply to natural beauty. The general source of natural beauty, according to Hutcheson, is •*uniformity amidst variety*. Why is •this pleasing? I think it's because •it is adapted by its nature to please.—There seems to be no more call for an implanted *sense* for natural beauty than there is for moral beauty.—I have shown that some things are *necessarily* satisfactory to

our thoughts and carry in themselves a power to give pleasure when observed or thought about. In many particular cases this pleasure is lost. Sometimes, indeed, the influence of counteracting causes can make regular and harmonious forms downright offensive; but they *can't* offend as such, i.e. can't offend-because-they-are-regular-and-harmonious. The pain never comes from *them*, but only from some malady in the mind or some disagreeable idea associated with them.

The following notable facts probably contribute greatly to the satisfaction that our minds get from things that are regular, and to our preference for such things. **(1)** Regular things are more easily viewed and comprehended by our minds. Everyone knows how much harder it is to retain in the memory a multitude of things that are unconnected and lie in confusion than it is to remember a multitude of things laid out according to a rule and plan. It is *order* that unites the parts of a complicated object so that we can take it in all at once, clearly and with satisfaction; whereas if it lacked order it would be not one object but a crowd of them, and our conceptions of it would be broken and confused between many different parts that had no correspondence to one another and would require a separate idea for each. Regularity enables us to measure and fix variety; it enables our mind to (so to speak) conquer infinity itself. To see the soundness of these points, think about abstract truths and the general laws of nature; or contrast a thousand equal lines •arranged as a regular polygon with the same lines •all jumbled together.

**(2)** Order and symmetry give objects their stability and strength, fitting them to be useful for good purposes. What strength would an army have without order? What does the health of animal bodies depend on but the due order and adjustments of their various parts? What happiness could there be in the world if it were a chaos?

(3) Regularity and order are evidence of skill and design. Regular and orderly objects bear the stamp of intelligence, and this may be one of the principal causes of their agreeableness to us.

Confusion is nothing but the negation of regularity and order, and it isn't positively displeasing except •where we expected order or •where the confusion seems to come from weakness and lack of skill.

You don't need me to tell you that brutes [= 'non-human animals'] are incapable of the pleasures of beauty because those beauties come from comparing objects and noticing analogy, design, and proportion among them, which the faculties of brutes aren't capable of.

It has been said that what pleases us in beautiful objects it is just variety, and that the uniformity is only needed to make the variety clearly perceivable by the mind. One might as well say that what pleases us is just uniformity, and that variety is only needed for the uniformity to be exhibited and displayed in a higher degree!

I have called attention to the opinion [of John Balguy] that natural beauty is a real quality of objects.—It seems impossible conceive the objects themselves to have anything more than

- a particular order of parts—a particular structure—and
- the powers arising from that structure, powers that include certain relationships to our perceptive faculties.

If we call *this* 'beauty' then beauty is indeed a non-relational inherent quality of certain objects—one that exists whether

or not any mind discerns it. But surely order and regularity aren't beauty—they are *causes of* beauty.

It may be worth your while to think about how far my account of the pleasures received from contemplating moral good and natural beauty can be applied also to the pleasures received from many other sources—the approval of our fellow-creatures, the greatness of objects, the discovery of truth and increase of knowledge.

I will only add that in such enquiries as these we are forced to consider the nature and origin of our notions of perfection and excellence.

There are people who think that actions and characters don't really, objectively, differ from one another in excellence and worth. How will they account for our preferences for some actions and characters over others?<sup>11</sup>

Probably by bringing in the notion of a *sense* and of sense-deception. Their account will go like this:

We do have ideas of different degrees of perfection in different objects, but those are all an illusion. To the eye of right reason, the entire range of existence is in this respect entirely on a level. The very notion of intrinsic excellence and . . . of different degrees of objective perfection and imperfection implies an impossibility—it is self-contradictory.

—How *could* anyone accept such an opinion? When we conceive of a thinking being as having a more *noble and perfect* nature than a clod of earth, are we *wrong*? Is it because of an implanted power or *sense* that we distinguish thinking beings as higher than clods of earth? And is that

<sup>11</sup> We have the ideas of greater decency and dignity in some pleasures than in others—e.g. in the pleasures of the imagination or the understanding as against those of the bodily senses. Hutcheson, after remarking on this, seems unsure how to explain it. Perhaps it should be attributed to a general view that the former pleasures are *innocent*, in which case (he says) our preference for the mental pleasures over the bodily ones is a deliverance of the *moral sense*. But he allows that these distinctions between higher and lower pleasures come from perceptions of a different sort—perceptions that should be regarded as forming their own special class of sensations.

why we esteem God's nature as infinitely surpassing all other natures in *excellence and dignity*? The truth is this: The ideas of *excellence* and *dignity*, like the others discussed in chapter 1, are ideas of the understanding. They are derived from the understanding's knowledge of the comparative essences of things; and they arise necessarily in our minds when we consider certain objects and qualities, because they denote not what *we feel*, but what such objects and qualities *are*.

Nature contains an infinite variety of existences and objects, and we can't think about them as being different from one another without conceiving of them as having various degrees of *perfection*. It isn't *possible* to contemplate and compare

living things with dead matter,  
reason with brute-animal,  
happiness with misery,  
virtue with vice,

knowledge with ignorance,  
power with weakness, or  
God with inferior beings

without acquiring the ideas of *better* and *worse*, *perfect* and *imperfect*, *noble* and *ignoble*, *excellent* and *base*.—One step up from •nothing is •unformed matter; the next step takes us to •vegetative life, and a step up from there takes us to •sentient animal life, and from there we move up to •happy and active intelligence, of which there are countless different degrees and different orders and classes of beings, rising without end, above one another. Every step our thoughts take up this scale conveys the notion of a higher excellence and worth, until at last we arrive at uncreated and complete excellence. If this is not *intellectual* perception, but *sensation* merely, then it could be that our ideas of nature have it backwards, so that the dust under our feet has the supreme excellence that we now attribute to God! . . .

## Chapter 3

### The origin of our desires and affections

Of the three topics listed at the start of chapter 1, there remains only the third to be discussed, our perception of good and ill *desert*. But before I come to that, I want to present to you something else that is closely connected with the topic I have just finished with; my plan for this book requires me to deal with it somewhere. It is the question of the origin of our affections in general, and especially of self-love and benevolence. ['benevolence' from Latin *bene* = 'well' and *volo* = 'want'; contrasted with 'beneficence', which comes from *bene* and *facio* = 'do'.]

Each of our affections has its particular end [= 'purpose' or 'aim']. •Self-love leads us to desire and pursue ·our own· private happiness; •benevolence leads us to desire and pursue public happiness; •ambition is the love of fame and distinction; and •curiosity is the love of what is new and uncommon. The objects of these and all our other affections are desired for their own sakes, and ·those desires· constitute so many distinct principles<sub>c</sub> of action. Something that is wanted not for itself but only as a means to something else can't properly be called the object of an affection. If it were true—as some say it is—that we want things only as means to our own good, then would really desire nothing but our own good, and would have only one affection—self-love.

Just as some writers have **(i)** ascribed all moral approval and disapproval, and our ideas of beauty and ugliness, to an *internal sense*, meaning by this not an inward power of perception but an implanted power that is different from reason, so also some writers have **(ii)** ascribed all our desires and affections to *instinct*, taking an instinct to be not merely an immediate desire for something but an implanted drive that

causes such a desire.—I have already extensively examined **(i)**. Now I turn to **(ii)**.

Is all desire to be considered as wholly instinctive? If we are at all concerned for our own good or for the good of others, is this purely the result of an in-born bias given our natures—a bias that they could have lacked or even have had in the reverse direction?

Insofar as this relates to ·our own· private good, we can unhesitatingly answer No. The desire for our own of happiness certainly does not arise from instinct. What does explain it, fully and adequately, is the nature of happiness. It is impossible that creatures capable of both pleasant and painful sensations should fail to love and choose one and dislike and avoid the other. The supposition that a being who knows what happiness and misery are has no preference between them is plainly self-contradictory. Pain is not a *possible* object of desire; happiness is not a *possible* object of aversion. No power whatsoever can cause a creature in the agonies of torture and misery to be pleased with his state, to like it for itself, to want to remain in it. Nor can any power cause a creature rejoicing in bliss to dislike his state or be *afraid* that it will continue. For such things to be the case, pain would have to be agreeable and pleasure disagreeable—i.e. pain would have to be pleasure, and pleasure to be pain.

From this I infer that it is by no means a generally absurd method of explaining our affections to derive them from the natures of things and of ·sentient· beings. There's no doubt that that's the way to account for one of the most important and active of all our affections: for any being to prefer and desire ·his own· private happiness, all that is needed is for

him to *know what it is*.—And mightn't this be true also of public happiness? Given that self-love is essential to sentient beings, mightn't benevolence be essential to thinking beings?

But to go into this in a little more detail: Let us return to the case of the being [page 30] who has reason and nothing else. It is evident that although he is stipulated as having no implanted biases he wouldn't lack all principles<sub>c</sub> of action and all inclinations. I have shown that he would perceive *virtue*, and would have affection for it in proportion to the degree of his knowledge. The nature of happiness also would draw him to choose and desire it for himself. And is it credible that, at the same time, he would be necessarily indifferent about it for others? Can it be supposed that something in happiness would make him seek it for himself, while nothing in happiness would draw him to approve of it for others? Wouldn't this imply that the nature of things—and especially the nature of happiness—was inconsistent? Wouldn't he be able to see that •the happiness of others is as important to them as his happiness is to him, and •that it is in itself equally valuable and desirable, whoever has it?

Let us ask again: wouldn't this being assent to the proposition that *Happiness is better than misery*?—Someone has demanded a definition of the word 'better' as used here. It would be equally reasonable to ask for a definition of the word 'greater' as used in the proposition that *The whole is greater than a part*. Both denote simple ideas, and both •are being used to express *truth*. One expresses what happiness is, compared with misery; the other expresses what the whole is, compared with a part. And a mind that thought happiness not to be better than misery would making as gross a mistake as a mind that believed the whole not to be greater than a part. So it can't reasonably doubted that such a being, on comparing happiness with misery, couldn't help •preferring one to the other •for himself• and •choosing one

rather than the other for his fellow-beings, any more than he could help •perceiving the difference between them.

If the idea that the word 'better' stands for in the proposition 'Happiness is better than misery' really does mean something about •the deliverances of• a sense rather than being about something true—if in the judgment of right reason there's nothing objectively good about happiness or bad about misery—then this must be something that God perfectly understands. In that case, he can't have a preference for one over the other; there's nothing *in happiness* to engage or justify his choice of it. In that case, what account [here = 'explanation'] can we give of God's *goodness*?—Some will say 'The same account that is to be given of his existence, namely none at all'. But there *is* an account to be given of God's existence; it is the account that is to be given of all necessary truth. And this account is fully applicable to God's benevolence as well, given what I have said about its origin. [Price emphasizes his point that if for us moral concepts come from 'an implanted and factitious principle<sub>c</sub>'—i.e. if they result from something that was designed and constructed (by God) and then implanted in us—then such concepts can't have any role in God's own thinking; and that makes it seem odd to think of God as good. How can we conceive God as good is we can't think of him as agreeing with us about this?]. . . .

The philosophers I am opposing here accept that in our inward sentiments we are *caused* [Price: 'determined'] to distinguish public happiness from public misery, and to see one of them as preferable to the other. But they say that this is because of our constitution; it arises from **(i)** senses and instincts that we have been given, and not from **(ii)** the nature of happiness and misery.—What reason have they for saying this? The preference in question *could* come from **(ii)**—the instance of self-love *demonstrates* this [i.e. is a rigorously logically

knock-down proof of it].—I challenge my opponents to produce anything that is as helpful to their thesis that the explanation lies in **(i)**!

We can account for some of our other affections in the same way as I have explained self-love and benevolence. But these others are of less importance than those two, and my present project doesn't require me to tackle them. So I shall touch on only two of the others, the love of fame and the love of knowledge.

[This next paragraph was drastically compressed by Price. Here is its content: Consider the following happenings:

- (1)** We see that certain actions and dispositions of ours or of others are right.
- (2)** We approve of those actions and dispositions.
- (3)** We approve of the state of being known and thought about in certain ways.
- (4)** We want and try to get ourselves into that state.

Now, unaided intellect is enough for **(1)**—that has been the principal thesis of this book up to here, defended at length in chapter 1. In the present chapter I have been arguing that **(1)** is enough for **(2)**, and from that it follows that **(1)** is enough for **(3)**, which is only a special case of **(2)**. Putting all that together: unaided intellect is sufficient for the approval of fame and honour; and it follows *almost* as obviously that it is sufficient also for **(4)**—that's merely the move from finding fame and honour **desirable** to **desiring** fame and honour. Thus, the love of fame and honour doesn't have to be explained in terms of an implanted instinct.]

Can a reasonable being be indifferent about his own approval? Clearly not! And if he cares about being approved of by himself, why should we think him necessarily indifferent about having the approval of others? Is there nothing in the good opinion and esteem of his fellow-beings that can incline him to choose them rather than their contempt and

aversion?

The desire for knowledge also, and the preference for truth, must arise in every intelligent mind. Truth is the proper object of mind, as light is of the eye, or harmony of the ear. The mind is by its nature fitted to truth, and its existence depends on this, because there's no possible idea of *mind* or *understanding* without something to be understood. Truth and knowledge are of infinite extent, and it's inconceivable that the understanding should be indifferent to them, should lack an inclination to search into them, should get no satisfaction from its progress in the discovery of them, or should be capable of being contented with error, darkness, and ignorance when it sees before it the prospect of limitless scope for improvement and endless acquisition of knowledge.

Why do reasonable beings love truth, knowledge, and honour? The answer to that is the same as the answer to the question: Why do reasonable beings love and desire happiness?

I could continue in this way to give detailed explanations of the causes and grounds of the various sentiments of veneration, awe, love, wonder, esteem and so on that are produced in us by the contemplation of certain objects [see note on 'object' high on page 4]. Just as some objects are adapted to please, and as others necessarily excite desire, so almost every different object has a different effect on our minds according to its particular nature and qualities. And these emotions or impressions are almost as various as their objects. Why should we hesitate to say that there's a *necessary* correspondence between them and their respective objects?—The thesis we are up against here is this:

If it weren't for features of our minds that God *chose* to give them, our feelings would be neutral, indifferent, with respect to all objects and qualities—we wouldn't



like (dislike) or be drawn to (away from) any objects at all.

This *can't* be true! Anyone who asserts it is denying all real connection between causes and effects.

But it mustn't be forgotten that the sentiments and tendencies of our intelligent nature are to a large extent mingled with the effects of our arbitrary constitution. I said this before, and need to remind you of it now. Rational and dispassionate benevolence would, in us, be a principle<sub>c</sub> much too weak and utterly insufficient to meet our needs in the present world; what produces sufficient benevolence in us is the addition to •the rational principle<sub>c</sub> of •certain *feelings* that come from the arbitrary [= contingent] part of our nature. And the same is true of our other rational principles<sub>c</sub> and desires.

This may give us a good basis for distinguishing affections from passions. We attribute 'affections' to *all* reasonable beings. In the best meaning to give the word, 'affections' signify the desires that are founded in and essential to the reasonable nature itself—e.g. self-love, benevolence, and the love of truth.—When an affection is strengthened by an instinctive determination, the result is a *passion* properly so-called.—The tendencies within us that are merely instinctive, such as hunger, thirst and so on are usually called 'appetites' or 'passions'—interchangeably—but seldom or never 'affections'. [See note on page 4.]

I can't help pausing here to say a little about an opinion that I have already referred to, namely the view that *there is no ultimate object of desire except private good*. This opinion has arisen from inattention to how •desire differs from •the pleasure implied in the gratification of desire. The pleasure comes after the desire, and is founded in it. The situation is *not* that

we desire an object—fame, knowledge, the welfare of a friend, or whatever—because we foresee that when obtained it will give us pleasure.

Rather, it is the reverse of that:

obtaining the object gives us pleasure because we previously desired it or had an affection carrying us to it and resting in it.

If there were no such affections, the very foundations of happiness would be destroyed. It is inconceivable that we should get pleasure from obtaining something that we don't desire, i.e. that something we are perfectly indifferent to—something that isn't aimed at by any affection that we have—should give us any kind of gratification when we have it.

[Price adds that if there were nothing to desiring x except believing that having x would give us pleasure, it would be hard for us to know what to desire, because we wouldn't know in advance what would give us pleasure.]

To be further convinced, consider this: If you desire something, while also thinking that you would enjoy the same pleasure if you didn't get it, would that make you indifferent to it, •wiping out your desire•? . . . Would you lose all curiosity, and be indifferent whether you stirred a step to gratify it, if you were sure that you would get equal sensations of pleasure by staying where you are? If you believed that the prosperity of your nearest kindred, your friends or your country wouldn't bring you any more happiness than would their misery, would you lose all love for them and all desire for their good?—Wouldn't you choose to enjoy the same quantity of pleasure •with virtue rather than •without it?—An unbiased mind must scornfully reject such questions. If you put such questions to yourself you will easily find that all your affections and appetites (except

for self-love itself) are in their nature disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested'], and that although •they are in yourself and •carrying them out will bring gratification to yourself, their direct tendency is always to •something other than private pleasure, i.e. pleasure for yourself, and they don't lead you to look any further than •that. 'In following the impulses of •our affections and appetites, we aim at nothing but our own interest'—that is *so far* from being true that we continually feel •them drawing us aside from what we know to be our interests, and can observe men every day carried by •them to actions and pursuits that they admit are ruinous to them.

But to return from this digression: Some of our passions and appetites are subordinate to self-love, and have been given to us for the preservation and welfare of individuals. Others are subordinate to benevolence, and were given in order to secure and promote the happiness of our species. There is a need for the benevolent ones only because of our deficiencies and weaknesses. If we possessed reason in a higher degree, it alone would achieve everything that the benevolent passions do.—For example, there would be no need for parental affection if all parents were •well enough acquainted with the *reasons* for undertaking the guidance and support of those whom nature has placed under their care, and were •virtuous enough to be always determined by those reasons. The same holds for all the other implanted principles<sub>c</sub>: it's clear that each of them would be made superfluous by a certain degree of knowledge and goodness.

Those of us who see this, and can regard the fit between •appetite and nature's design only as something needed to make up for the imperfections of •reason, ought to work to improve our reason, to extend its influence as much as possible, to learn increasingly to substitute it for appetite, and to diminish continually the occasion for instinctive principles<sub>c</sub> in ourselves.—All the lower animals, and men

themselves during their first years, have no guide except instinct. The longer men live and the wiser and better they grow, the more disengaged they are from instinct; and there may be countless orders of superior beings who are absolutely above it and are influenced and guided solely by reason.

Considering the present weak and imperfect state of human reason, we cannot sufficiently admire God's wisdom and goodness in providing us with particular instinctive determinations as a security against the dangers that could come from our reason's imperfection. When men don't have the wisdom that would lead them to eat regularly the food needed for their support, given the mere knowledge that this should be done at certain intervals, it is *kind* •of God• to remind them of this and urge them to do it through the solicitations of hunger! Given that men would probably not be sufficiently drawn to the relief of the miserable without the sympathies and impulses of compassion, it is *proper* that these should be given to them! And given that if left to mere reason men wouldn't attend to the care of their offspring, it is *wise* •of God• to bind them to their children by parental fondness, not letting them neglect their children without doing violence to themselves! . . .

So the wisdom and benevolence of our maker appear *clearly* in the way we are built.—It is true that these very principles<sub>c</sub> that are needed for the preservation and happiness of our species often turn out to be the causes of many grievous evils. But they are plainly *intended* for good: those evils are the •accidental and not the •proper consequences of them. They come from the unnatural misuse and corruption of the principles<sub>c</sub> in question, and happen entirely through our own fault; they are contrary to what appears to be the constitution of our nature and the will of our Maker. It is impossible to produce a single case in which the *basic*

direction of nature is towards evil or towards anything that isn't best on the whole.

I'm not interested in determining precisely, in all cases, which elements of our natures are instinctive and which

are not. It is enough to show that the most important of our desires and affections have a higher and less precarious basis than instinctive appetites.

## Chapter 4

### Our ideas of good and ill desert

[Just to get the terminology clear: We have three words:

'desert'—pronounced *desert*—a wild and empty place.

'desert'—pronounced *desert*—deservingness (noun), 'abandon' (verb).

'dessert'—pronounced *desert*—the sweet course to end a meal.

Price's topic is the middle one (noun): questions about someone's *deserving* praise or reward etc.—or *deserving* blame or punishment etc.—for something he did. You'll see right away that he means the words 'worthy' and 'unworthy' (actually, he says 'worthy... and the contrary') to convey the ideas of good or ill desert.]

There is no need for me to argue that the ideas of good and ill desert necessarily arise in us when we consider certain actions and characters, or that we conceive virtue as always *worthy* and vice as *unworthy*. These ideas are plainly special cases of the ideas of *right* and *wrong*. But there's a difference between them that may be worth mentioning. When used strictly the adjectives 'right' and 'wrong' are applicable only to •actions, whereas good and ill desert belong rather to the •agent. It is only the agent who is capable of happiness or misery, so it is only he who can properly be said to 'deserve' these.

I don't expect much difficulty in explaining these ideas. They take cases where virtue has been practised or neglected, and they concern the treatment due to beings in consequence of this. They signify the propriety that there is in making virtuous agents happy, and in upsetting the vicious [re 'vicious' see note on page 21]. When we say of a man that he 'deserves well', we mean that •his character is such that we approve of showing him favour, or that •it is right he should be happier than he would have been if he'd had a contrary character. We can't help loving a virtuous agent and wanting him to be happy—more than we want this for other people. Reason tells us at once that his virtue ought to make things better for him.—And on the other side we can't help hating and condemning a vicious being. Our concern for his happiness is diminished, and we find it utterly self-evidently that it is improper that he should prosper in his wickedness, or that he should be as happy as are people with worthy characters or as he himself would have been if he had been virtuous.

Different characters require different treatments: virtue provides a reason for making the agent happy, and vice a reason for withdrawing favour from the agent and for

punishing him.—This seems to be very intelligible, but let us not misunderstand the reason for it. It is *not* the case that the sentiments I am discussing are based wholly on the fact that virtue tends to produce happiness in the world while vice tends to produce misery.—On the contrary, our approval for making the virtuous happy and discouraging the vicious is *immediate*, and doesn't have to involve any thought about consequences. [(i) The consequences of virtue and vice? or (ii) the consequences of rewarding virtue and punishing vice? Price has introduced his present topic explicitly in terms of (i), but from here on he wavers between (i) and (ii).] If a virtuous person and a vicious one were somehow cut off from being noticed by anyone else, or if they were the only beings in the universe, we would still approve of different treatments of them. It would appear to us wrong that the good being should be less happy, or a greater sufferer, than his evil fellow being.

Suppose you had a particular benefit that you could bring to either one of two people who differed only in that one was virtuous and the other vicious, what reason could you have to hesitate? Wouldn't you *immediately* decide in favour of the virtuous character? 'It wouldn't matter which of the competitors was preferred if there were no other beings in the world, or if all memory of the giving of the benefit were to be immediately obliterated'—could anyone say *that*? Everyone would think that the virtuous person is worthy of the benefit, and the other unworthy—i.e. their respective characters are such that it is *right* for the benefit to go to one rather than to the other. What makes it right? Not the effects of the two characters (which in many such cases we don't take time to consider); rather, is it *immediately* and *ultimately* right, for the same reason that beneficence is right, and quite generally the reason that objects and relations are what they are.

So the moral worth or *merit* of an agent is his virtue considered as •implying that good should come to him in preference to others, and as •inclining all observers to esteem and love him and try to bring him happiness.

—Virtue *naturally and of itself* recommends a person for favour and happiness, and makes the virtuous person a proper object of encouragement and reward. . . .

I don't deny that one important reason for the rightness of favouring virtue and disfavoured vice is the obvious tendency that this has to prevent misery and to preserve order and happiness in the world. All I'm saying is that that's not the *only* thing that makes such a ·reward/punishment· procedure right, and that even apart from any consideration of public interest it would still be right to distinguish how the virtuous are treated from how the vicious are treated. . . . Imagine this:

A race of reasonable beings are made to pass through a particular stage of existence and are then annihilated. While they existed, differences in their ·moral· characters didn't bring any difference in how they were treated. Virtue was not favoured, or vice punished; happiness and misery were distributed randomly, the guilty often prospered and flourished, the good were often afflicted and distressed. . . . The most wicked were generally the least sufferers, and the most upright the least happy; though over-all there was more happiness than unhappiness. And there was no connection between these beings and the rest of the universe.

Will anyone say that there was *nothing wrong* in this total state of affairs?—It will be said ·by those who insist that the reward/punishment procedure is justified only by its consequences·—indeed it's the only thing they *can* say—that

the described state of affairs can't be approved because there would have been more happiness among those beings if their different life-outcomes had been ordered in accordance with the rules of distributive justice. 'Perhaps there would', but is this so blazingly obvious that everyone's disapproval must be always immediately determined by it? 'It could have produced more happiness than it did'—is that the *only* thing that can be wrong with a social arrangement? 'I say that it is not'. To an unbiased mind one state of affairs *x* will give more satisfaction than another state of affairs *y* if they involve the same total amount of happiness but in *x* the happiness is distributed with a regard for the moral characters of the individual people while in *y* it isn't.

Take the case of a single, solitary evil being: it may be that the only thing that could justify putting him into a state of absolute misery would be that this would tend to reform him. But why do we approve of doing things to bring about his reformation? *Don't* say 'It is because his reformation would make him happier', or anyway don't say that that's the whole reason. If it were, there would no moral difference between

- the case where he is made happy as a result of being punished and thus reformed

and

- the case where he is made happy by being given such an extraordinary supply of advantages that it outweighed any sufferings that inevitably followed from his vices.

Can we equally approve these opposite methods of treating such a being? Supposing the same quantity of happiness is enjoyed, does it make no moral difference whether a being enjoys it in a course of wickedness, or of virtue?—Someone who disagrees with the line I am taking here might reject that last example by claiming that *there's no possible way*

*for a being to escape the hurtful effects of his vices or lose the beneficial effects of his virtue.* That is extravagant, and we see enough in the present world to convince us that it is false!

[Price now has a paragraph referring to all the •questions that arise about guilt and innocence, and propriety of punishment or reward, in particular cases. He says that he has no general answers to •these, and that he doesn't need to because •they don't touch his central thesis about the moral basis for rewards and punishments.]

This perception of good and ill *desert* is the source of •the passion of resentment, •the hopes that unavoidably spring up in every virtuous mind, and the •terrors and anticipations of punishment that accompany a consciousness of guilt.

Let me add that there's no perception of our minds that is more fitting for us to attend to than this one •about reward/punishment. . . . To have this perception is to see that, according to just order and equity, sin is the forfeiture of our expectations of good, and virtue is the ground of the highest hope.—Considered merely as a principle<sub>c</sub> in the natures that God has given us, i.e. a determination that is built into our constitution, it carries with it a declaration by the Author of our minds, telling us how he will deal with us and what the exercise of his goodness to us depends on. [The next sentence contains 'evidentness', which will recur on page 49 and several places after that. It replaces Price's 'evidence', which he and his contemporaries used in two ways: **(i)** in talk about the evidence *for P* or evidence *that P*; **(ii)** in talk about the 'evidence' *of P*, the 'evidence' that P itself—or an argument for P—*has*. We still have sense **(i)**, but **(ii)** has almost disappeared. (It lingers on only in the phrase 'self-evidence': to speak of P's self-evidence is to speak of its being *evident* taken on its own, not to speak of its constituting *evidence for its own truth*.) Throughout this version, 'evidence' in sense **(ii)** will be replaced by 'evidentness'.]—But considered as a necessary

perception of reason, it proves—with the evidentness of a demonstration—what supreme reason will do, what laws and rules it observes in carrying on the happiness of the universe, and that what it aims at is not simply happiness but *happiness enjoyed with virtue*. [A footnote here quotes from Butler's *Analogy of Religion* a passage agreeing with what Price is saying.]

Before moving to the next chapter, I can't help asking you once more to reflect on the *reverse of nature* that could have occurred if the opinion about the foundation of morals that I have opposed were true. Try to conceive of the world, and of all our ideas of good, of morality, of perfection, and of God, as turned upside down—with the principal things we think about being not •what they now seem to be but •as perceived in terms of entirely contrary notions by all intelligent beings:

- what is now approved and esteemed instead being disapproved and hated,

- what is now seen as fit, worthy, lovable and excellent instead seeming evil and base,
- cruelty, impiety, ingratitude and treachery seen as virtue and beneficence,
- piety, gratitude and faithfulness seen as wickedness,
- the aversion we feel for cruelty etc. being produced by piety etc.,
- respect and love aroused by harmful behaviour,
- contempt and resentment aroused by acts of kindness,
- misery prevailing throughout the world as happiness now does, and chosen and pursued with the same universal approval and ardor,
- virtue conceived as having demerit, and vice as deserving of reward.

—Can these things be? Does nothing in any of them conflict with the natures of things?

## Chapter 5

### How morality connects with God's nature.

#### The reliability of our faculties. The grounds of belief

1. I have contended that morality is necessary and immutable. There's an objection to this that some writers have thought to have considerable weight, and it should be examined. It could be expressed thus:

'Your thesis about the nature of morality sets up something distinct from God, something that is independent of him, and equally eternal and necessary.'

It's easy to see that this difficulty doesn't bear on morality any more than it bears on all truth. If this point forces us to •give up the unalterable natures of right and wrong and •make them dependent on the Divine will, then it also forces us to •give up all necessary truth and •assert that contradictions may be true. [The occurrences of 'truth' and 'necessary truth' in this version exactly follow Price's.]

What I have tried to show is that morality is a branch of necessary truth, and that it has the same foundation as it, ·i.e. as every other necessary truth·. If this is accepted, the main point I contend for is granted, and I shall be content to let truth and morality stand or fall together. Still, an adequate treatment of the source of morality requires that this latest difficulty be thought about; it's one that naturally occurs to people in all enquiries of this sort.

Notice first that there is certainly *something* that we must allow to be independent of the will of God. ·In fact there are several things·: this will itself, God's own existence, his eternity and immensity, the difference between power and impotence, wisdom and folly, truth and falsehood, existence and non-existence.

No-one would assert anything as extravagant as that *these* depend on God's will, because that would imply that he is a changeable and unstable being, making it impossible for us to form any consistent ideas of his existence and attributes. But if all truth were a creature of ·God's· will, then these would have to be so too, ·and that is a proof that all truth is *not* a creature of God's will·.—There is another view of this notion, which shows that it overthrows the Divine attributes and existence, because. . .

. . . Mind presupposes truth, and intelligence presupposes something intelligible. Wisdom presupposes things one can be wise about, and knowledge presupposes things that can be known.—An eternal and necessary mind presupposes eternal and necessary truth, and infinite knowledge presupposes an infinity of things that are knowable. So if there were no infinity of knowable things, and no truths that are eternal, necessary, and independent, there could be no infinite, necessary, independent mind or intelligence, because there would be nothing to be certainly and eternally known. Just as, if there were nothing *possible*, there could be no *power*;

and if there were no necessary *infinity* of possibles, there could be no necessary and *infinite* power; because power presupposes objects, and eternal, necessary, infinite power presupposes an infinity of eternal and necessary *possibles*.

In the same way it can be said that if there were no moral distinctions, God couldn't have any moral attributes. If there were nothing eternally and unalterably right or wrong, nothing could be meant by talk of God's eternal, unalterable rectitude or holiness.—It is obvious, then, that annihilating **(i)** truth, possibility, or moral differences is annihilating **(ii)** all mind, all power, all goodness; and that so far as we make **(i)** unstable, dependent, or limited, to that extent we make **(ii)** unstable etc. also.

Hence we see clearly that to conceive of •truth as depending on God's will is to conceive of •his intelligence and knowledge as depending on his will. Can anyone think that *this* is as reasonable as the rival view that God's will is dependent on and regulated by his understanding?—What can be more preposterous than to make the Deity consist of nothing but •will, and to raise •this up in honour over the ruins of all his attributes?

You may want object as follows:

'Those remarks don't remove the difficulty; they *strengthen* it. They still leave us having to conceive of certain objects, distinct from Deity, that are necessary and independent and the basis for his existence and attributes. . . .'

I answer that we ought to distinguish God's *will* from his *nature*. Things that are independent of his will aren't on that account independent of his nature. To conceive truth etc. as independent of God's nature would indeed involve us inconsistency; *any* thoughts we have involving necessity and infinity involve acknowledging the eternal nature of God.

I think we'll be more willing to accept this when we have attentively considered what abstract truth and possibility *are*. Our thoughts are here lost in a bottomless abyss where we find room to push deeper and deeper and the very notion of reaching a point beyond which there is nothing further implies a contradiction. There is a genuine infinity of ideal objects and truths that *could* be known; and of . . . worlds that *could* exist although they are wholly inconceivable by finite minds. We can't *think away* this infinity of truth and possibility; try as we may, it always returns on us. Every thought and every idea of every mind, every kind of agency and power, and every degree of intellectual improvement and pre-eminence amongst all reasonable beings, imply its necessary and unchangeable existence.—This has to be the uncreated, infinite •reason and power of God, from which all other reason and power are derived, offering •themselves to our minds and forcing us to see and acknowledge •them. . . . —There is nothing so intimate with us, so united with our natures, as God. We find that he is included in all our conceptions, and necessary to all the operations of our minds. He couldn't be necessarily existent if this weren't true of him, because the idea of •necessary existence implies that •it is fundamental to all other existence and presupposed in every notion we can form of anything. . . .

It is worth observing that this gives us a kind of intuition of the •unity of God. Infinite, abstract truth is essentially •one. It is just as clear that there is only one infinite truth as that there is only one space and one time. When we have fixed our thoughts on infinite truth, and try to imagine a *another* infinity of it, we find ourselves trying absurdly to imagine another infinity of *the same* truth. So it is self-evident that there can only be one infinite mind. Infinite truth implies the existence of

**Price's phrase:** one infinite essence as its substratum, **probably meaning:** one total-state-of-affairs that it is the truth *about*, and only one. If there were more, they wouldn't be necessary.—Particular truths that are contemplated at the same time by many different minds aren't *different*, any more than the present moment of time is different in one place from what it is in another, or than the sun is different because it is viewed at the same time by many eyes.

Bear in mind that necessary truth includes •the comparative natures of happiness and misery, •the rightness of producing the one and the wrongness of producing the other, and quite generally •moral truth, moral fitness and excellence, and all that is best to be done in all cases, and with respect to all the variety of actual or possible beings and worlds.—This is the necessary *goodness* of God's nature.—It demonstrates that absolute rectitude is included in the God's intellect, and that eternal, infinite power and reason are essentially combined with—and *imply*—complete moral excellence, and especially perfect and boundless benevolence. It shows us that whenever we go against truth and right, we immediately insult God who *is* truth and right, and that whenever we conduct ourselves in ways that conform to truth and right, we pay immediate homage to him.

All this makes it clear that no-one has reason to be offended when morality is represented as eternal and immutable, because it turns out that this is only saying that God himself is eternal and immutable, and making his nature the high and sacred original [Price's word] of virtue, and the sole fountain of all that is true and good and perfect.

[After mentioning two writers who have argued in the same way as himself, Price adds:] There is perhaps no subject where more must be trusted to each person's own reflection, where the deficiencies of language make themselves



more felt, or on which it is more difficult to write so as to be entirely understood. . . .

**2.** This is the place to discuss another difficulty that has been raised—one that concerns morality. It can be expressed in three questions:

- Doesn't the truth of all our knowledge presuppose that our faculties are properly constituted?

- Isn't it possible that they have been so constituted that they inevitably deceive us in everything we get from them?

- How can we know that this isn't actually the case?<sup>12</sup>

You may imagine that these questions present difficulties that *can't* be overcome, and that they tie us down to universal and incurable scepticism. We can't test the truth of our faculties (you may say) except by these very suspected faculties themselves, and testing them in *that* way would be pointless, achieving nothing but to lead us back to our starting-point.—You could take this further: it is not only •us but •all thinking creatures who are thus reduced to a state of everlasting scepticism. And even further: it must be *impossible for God to make* any creature who could satisfy himself about anything—who could even be sure of his own existence! What satisfaction can *any* creature obtain except through the intervention of his faculties? and how can he know that they aren't deceivers?—These are very strange consequences, but let us consider the following two points.

**(1)** If we *do* have this difficulty, we are informed of it by our faculties; so if we don't know that they should be trusted we don't know that this difficulty is real!—A little later on I shall show that it is a contradiction to suppose that our faculties can teach us to suspect all their deliverances.

**(2)** Our natures are such that we *can't* believe something

if we see (or think we see) evidence against it. So if we are confronted by anything that appears to be evidence against the proposition that our faculties are so built that they always deceive us, we are obliged to reject this proposition. Evidence must produce •conviction proportioned to how strong the evidence is thought to be, and •conviction is inconsistent with suspicion. 'In our present case no evidence should be given any weight, because all our evidence comes through our suspected faculties'—that claim is just *empty*, because we can never suspect or doubt *without* reason, let alone *against* reason. Doubting presupposes evidence, so there can't be any such thing as doubting whether evidence itself is to be given weight. A man who doubts the veracity [= 'truthfulness'] of his faculties must do this on their own authority—i.e. at the very time and in the very act of suspecting them he must trust them! It is obviously self-destructive to •try to prove by reason that reason shouldn't be trusted, or to •assert that we have reason for thinking that there is no such thing as reason; and it is certainly no less self-destructive to claim that we have reason to *doubt* whether •reason is to be trusted or (the same thing) whether •our faculties are to be trusted. When it is acknowledged there is no reason for doubt, it will be ridiculous to claim to doubt.

These remarks might be enough, because they show us that the point in debate is something that we are obliged to take for granted and that can't be questioned. Still, it will be of some use to go into more detail about the meaning of the question 'Do our faculties always deceive us?', and to show what the evidence really is that they don't.

It's impossible to perceive something that isn't true.—Now, it is certain that there is a great variety of truths that we *think* we perceive, so the whole question is whether we

<sup>12</sup> I probably wouldn't have discussed this objection if it hadn't been raised by Cudworth at the end of his work on eternal and immutable reality, and answered in a way that I think is not quite clear and satisfactory.

*really* perceive them. The existence of absolute truth is presupposed in the sceptical objection. Suspicion of our faculties and fear of being deceived obviously imply that there is truth; to deny that it exists would be to contradict oneself, because it would be to assert that it is true that nothing is true! This holds also for *doubting* whether there is anything true, because doubting involves a hesitation or suspense of the mind about the truth of what is doubted, and therefore a tacit acknowledgment that there is something true. Take away this, and there is no idea of it left [that sentence is verbatim Price].

So universal scepticism is impossible; truth remains even after we have taken it away! There *is* perceivable truth, then, and we are unavoidably led to believe that we may—and that we often *do*—perceive it. But the point I wanted to make here was that to doubt the reliability of our faculties is to suspect that our reason may be so formed that it misrepresents every object of science to us—to question whether we ever *know* or only *imagine we know*, e.g. whether we actually perceive or only imagine that we perceive a circle to be different from a triangle, or a whole to be bigger than a part.

To the extent that we can't doubt concerning these things, or find ourselves forced to think we perceive them, to that extent we can't doubt our faculties, and are forced to think them right.—So it turns out that we have all the reason for believing our faculties that we have for assenting to any self-evident propositions or for believing that we have any real perceptions.—Whatever we perceive, we perceive *as it is*, and to perceive nothing *as it is* is to perceive nothing at all. A mind can't be without ideas, and what ideas it has

must be true ideas, because a *wrong idea of an object* is the same as *no idea of it* or as *the idea of some other object*.

Observations of this kind may show us the truth of the following conclusions.

(1) No being can be made who will perceive falsehood. What is false is nothing. Error is always an effect not of perception but of lack of perception. As far as our perceptions go, they must correspond to the truth of things.

(2) No being can be made who will have different ideas yet not see them as different. This would involve having the ideas and at the same time not having them.<sup>13</sup>

So there can't be any rational beings who don't assent to all the truths that are involved in the apprehended difference between ideas.—For example, to have the ideas of a whole and a part is the same as seeing one to be greater than the other. To have the ideas of two figures and an exact coincidence between them when laid on one another is the same as seeing them to be equal. The point holds also for many of the truths that we establish by demonstration [= 'logically rigorous proof'], because demonstration is only the self-evident application of self-evident principles.

In short, either there are truths that we are forced to think we know, or there are not. Probably no-one will assert that there are not—i.e. declare seriously there's nothing that he can't help believing. (If there were such a person, he couldn't be reasoned with; his declaration gives itself the lie, but there would be no point in telling *him* this!)—So if there are truths that we think we perceive, it is the greatest folly to claim at the same time that we aren't sure of the reliability of our understandings with respect to them, i.e. to be unsure

<sup>13</sup> There are two ways in which we can go wrong about our ideas: We can mis-name an idea, and we can wrongly think that an idea present in our minds at one time is the same as one that was present at another time. But it's inconceivable that a being contemplating two ideas *at the same time* should *then* think them to be not two ideas but one. You can't have two ideas before your mind without being conscious of it; and you can't be conscious of it without knowing them to be different and having a complete view and discernment of them as far as they are your ideas.

whether we perceive them or not.—•Thinking we are right, •believing, and •thinking our faculties to be right are one and the same. Someone who says that he isn't sure that his eyes are not so made as always to deceive him can't consistently go on to say that he believes he sees some external object. If there is *anything* that we have a necessary determination to believe [i.e. that we are compelled by our nature to believe], we have a necessary determination to believe our faculties; and to the extent that we believe them, we can't distrust them. When people say things of the form

•'On the supposition that my faculties are properly made, I am sure of such-and-such things',

they have it backwards. What they ought to say is:

•'I am sure of such and such truths, and therefore I am to that extent sure that my faculties inform me rightly.'

You may want to object: 'I have found myself mistaken in many cases; how can I know that I am not mistaken in all cases?'—I answer: look into yourself and examine your own conceptions. You can tell from how clear and distinct your apprehension is ·regarding any particular proposition· whether you are right about it or whether instead you may

be wrong. Don't you really know that you are not deceived when you think that *if equals are taken from equals, the remainders will be equal*? Can you have the least doubt about whether the body of the sun is bigger than it appears to the naked eye? or do you think you get a reason to question this from the fact that you once thought otherwise? Granted that you have judged wrongly in some cases—through ignorance, haste, prejudice, or the like—is it reasonable for you to suspect that you judge wrong in all cases, however clear they may be? Granted that through bodily indisposition or other causes •our senses sometimes misrepresent outward objects to us, does that discredit •them for ever? Because we sometimes dream, must it be doubtful whether we are ever awake? Because one man deceived us once, are we to conclude that no trust should be put in any human testimony? Because our memories have deceived us with respect to some events, must we question whether we remember rightly what happened a moment ago?<sup>14</sup>

But let's suppose that for this or some other reason it is *possible* that all our recollections are wrong, all our opinions false, and all our 'knowledge' delusion, that is still only a bare possibility to set against all reason and evidentness,

<sup>14</sup> Inferences of this sort—strange as they may seem—have been actually conducted. It has been argued that because in adding a long series of numbers we are liable to err, we can't be sure that we are right when we add the smallest numbers, and therefore may be wrong in calculating that twice two equals four.

Another sceptical argument that has been insisted on is this: In every judgment that we can form, besides **(i)** the uncertainty involved in our original consideration of the subject itself, there is **(ii)** another uncertainty involved in our consideration of the fallibility of our faculties and the past instances in which we have been mistaken. And then we must add **(iii)** a third uncertainty derived from the possibility of error in the estimate that we make at level **(ii)**, to which must be added **(iv)** a fourth of the same kind, and so on ad infinitum; the final result being that the evidentness [see note on page 43] of the original proposition is whittled away to nothing. See Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* I.iv.1. The part of this strange reasoning that isn't above my comprehension proves just the reverse of what was intended by it. Granted: the consideration of the fallibility of our understandings, and of the cases where they have deceived us, necessarily lessens our confidence that we are right in our opinion that P (let P be anything you like); but when we go on to think about the uncertainty involved in this judgment about our faculties, this *strengthens* our confidence in P rather than lessening it! Why? Because if proposition Q is unfavourable to proposition P, anything that counts against confidence in Q counts somewhat in favour of confidence in P.

and the whole weight and bent of our minds [Price's phrase] obliging us to think the contrary. It's not in our power to give *any* weight to a simple *may be* in opposition to any apparent evidentness [see note on page 43],<sup>15</sup> much less in opposition to the strongest.—Let's go even further, and suppose that there could be a set of rational beings in a state of necessary and total deception, ones to whom nothing of truth and reality ever appears. This is in fact absolutely impossible; I have already pointed out that this amounts to supposing these beings to have no intellectual perception; it is inconsistent with the very idea of their existing as thinking beings. However, let's grant it as a possibility; we still can't help thinking that we are not such beings, and that such beings couldn't possibly think and perceive as we do.

In short, whatever things seem to us to be, we *must* take them to be; and whatever our faculties inform us of, we *must* accept.—Therefore much of the scepticism that some ·philosophers· have professed and defended has to be mere affectation and self-deception.

**3.** I shall conclude this chapter with a few remarks about the general grounds of belief and assent. These grounds fall into three classes.

**(1)** The first is immediate consciousness, i.e. *feeling*. It is absurd to ask *why* we believe what we feel, i.e. what we are inwardly conscious of. A thinking being *must* have a capacity for discovering some things in this way. It is especially from this source that we get the knowledge of our own existence, and of the various operations, passions, and sensations of our minds. In this category I also include the information we get from our powers of recollection or memory.

**(2)** The second ground of belief is *intuition*, by which I mean the mind's survey of its own ideas and the relations between them, and the notice it takes of what is true or false, consistent or inconsistent, possible or impossible in the natures of things. As I explained at length in chapter 1, this is the source of all our •beliefs in self-evident truths, our •ideas of the general abstract states and relations of things, our •moral ideas, and •everything else that we discover without using any process of reasoning.—It is essential to all rational minds to have some degree of this power of intuition, and the whole possibility of all reasoning is based on it. It is always the final court of appeal. . . .—There have to be some truths that can appear only by their own light and can't be proved; otherwise nothing could be proved or known, just as there could be no words if there were no letters, and no complex ideas if there were no simple and undefinable ideas.—Many truths can only be known intuitively, though learned men have enormously confused and obscured them by supposing that they could be known by reasoning and deduction. The subject of this book is one of the most important examples of this; another example is our notion of the necessity that whatever begins to exist has a cause, and our general ideas of power and connection. Sometimes, reason has been ridiculously employed to prove even our own existence!

**(3)** The third ground of belief is *argumentation* or *deduction*. We resort to this when intuition fails us; and, as I have just been hinting, it is highly necessary that we carefully distinguish intuition from deduction, mark their differences and limits, and take note of what we learn from one of them and what we learn from the other.—Our ideas are such that

<sup>15</sup> How trifling then is it to allege, against something that seems to have the balance of evidence in its favour, that if we knew more *perhaps* we might see equal evidence against it! It is always a full answer to this, to say '*Perhaps* not'.—Something that we are wholly unacquainted with may, for all we can tell, count as much *for* any of our opinions as *against* them.

by comparing them with one another [see note in Preface] we can discover countless truths concerning them, and therefore truths concerning actually existent objects so far as they correspond to our ideas—truths that would otherwise be undiscoverable. Thus, a particular relation between two ideas that can't be seen by any immediate comparison may very satisfactorily appear with the help of a mediating idea whose relation to each is either self-evident or established by previous reasoning. . . .

There is no need for me to give examples of knowledge derived from argumentation. We can ascribe to it everything that we know and haven't received from either immediate consciousness or intuition.

[Price now spends a paragraph saying that each of the three bases for belief produces beliefs that vary in how evident they are. Even intuition is 'sometimes faint and obscure'. In the next paragraph he says that we do or could discover some things in two or even all three of the ways he has described; and he adds an emphatic lecture on the advantages to us of getting clear about what the basis is for each of our beliefs.]

An example of something discovered in all three of the ways I have described is the existence of matter. **(1)** Immediate feeling reveals to us our own organs and the states they are in; the soul perceives these by being *present* with them. We have the ideas of matter and of a material world, so we **(2)** see intuitively that the existence of material things is *possible*. (Something that is impossible is *nothing*, and therefore not an object of reflection, i.e. not something of which there can be an idea. So any idea of any object implies that it's possible for that object to exist.) And then **(3)** argumentation, reasoning, plays its part, as follows. We are conscious of certain impressions made on us. . . .from outside ourselves, and know they are produced by some external

cause. We touch a solid substance and feel resistance. We see certain images drawn on our organs of sight and know that something is acting on them. The resistance may be due to a resisting body, and the scenes painted before us may be derived from a corresponding external scene revealing itself to us by means of intermediate matter. If there is an external world, in what better manner could we be informed about it? The sceptical challenge says this:

All the information conveyed to us by our senses, and all the impressions made upon them—corresponding in detail to the supposition of an external world and confirming one another in countless ways—are entirely visionary and delusive.

What is more incredible than *that*? Admittedly, it is still *possible* that matter doesn't exist. Just as it is *possible* that the planets are not inhabited, though every particle of matter on the earth abounds with living inhabitants; that the power that keeps them in their orbits is something other than gravity, though it's certainly gravity that keeps our moon in its orbit; and that we are the only beings in the world and the only productions of divine power, though we have the greatest reason to think otherwise—namely the bare fact that we exist, and the consequent possibility and likelihood that countless other beings exist also. . . . In short, it is self-evident that a material world matching our ideas and what we feel and see is *possible*. We have no reason to think that it doesn't exist. Everything appears as if a material world did exist, and against the reality of its existence there is nothing but a bare possibility, to be weighed against actual feeling and all the evidence that our circumstances and condition as embodied spirits seem capable of.

It is well known what controversies have recently been raised on this subject. Some writers have denied the existence of a material world; others, finding that they couldn't

seriously doubt that there is such a world, treat their conviction as something we can't help having though we can't account for it. It would take me too far afield to add to what I have already said about the nature and grounds of this conviction of ours. So I shall just make one point: the principles on which the existence of •matter is opposed lead us equally to deny the existence of •spiritual beings. Anyone who rejects matter but believes in minds should tell us what reasons he has to believe there exist any beings whatsoever beside himself!

This dispute, after all, turns chiefly on the question 'Is matter, considered as something actually existing outside the mind and independent of its perceptions, *possible*?' There are probably not many people who will deny the existence of matter for any reason except their belief that it is impossible.—One would think that there's no need to spend time in refuting this. *Whatever is conceivable can't be impossible*—if *that* isn't indisputable, nothing is! . . .

But it is time to get to topics that are more closely related to my plans for this book.

[In the third edition Price appended an end-note commenting on what he has just said.]

•START OF END-NOTE•

I have to admit that my observations about the grounds of

our belief in the existence of material objects don't entirely satisfy me; but I have chosen to leave them as they were in the earlier editions, thinking that they might give some help to future enquirers. If you would like to be entertained as well as instructed by a detailed discussion of this subject, and by a full account of all the different theories and opinions concerning it, you should read the two first of Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. Reid's own opinion seems to be that the perception of external objects by our senses is •a conception of them and •a belief in their present existence—a belief that our constitution causes to accompany the impressions on our sense-organs, a belief of which no further explanation can be given. It seems to me that a perception by our senses involves more than is here expressed. A •conception of objects is often produced by impressions on the senses, and accompanied by a •belief in their present existence, without anything like an actual •perception of them. But whatever problems there may be here, the evidence of sense (like the evidence of memory) will always maintain its authority; and it may be best for us to •content ourselves with feeling this, and to •accept our natures as they are, rather than risking creating confusion and darkness by refining too much and trying to explain something that is so clear that it can't be explained.

•END OF END-NOTE•

## Chapter 6

### Fitness and moral obligation. Other accounts of obligation.

#### How rightness relates to obligation.

#### How other writers have expressed themselves when explaining morality

1. After the account I have given of the nature and origin of our ideas of morality, it will be easy to perceive the meaning of many terms and phrases that are commonly used in speaking about this subject.

‘Fitness’ (and ‘unfitness’) often mean **(i)** something about how a certain means relates to a certain end—that it is apt or appropriate (inapt or inappropriate) for reaching that end. But when they are applied to actions, these words generally mean **(ii)** the same as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; and it is usually easy to tell which of these senses these words are being given. It is worth noting that ‘fitness’ in sense **(i)** is just as indefinable as ‘fitness’ in sense **(ii)**: it is as impossible to say what we mean when we say of certain objects, that **(i)** they have a *fitness* to one another, i.e. are *fit* to serve certain purposes, as it is to say what we mean when we say that **(ii)** reverencing God is *fit*, or that beneficence is *fit* to be practised. [Price includes a clause in that sentence, allowing that in either case we might ‘say what we mean’ by presenting a synonym for the word in question—e.g. equating **(i)** ‘fit’ with ‘apt’. Though he doesn’t say so, explanations through synonyms are regarded as useless because in each case it is a *single word* that is presented, rather than a several-word phrase that could help to spell out the meaning of the word that is being defined.] It must be obvious to everyone that it would be absurd to maintain that the source of the idea of **(i)** fitness is an arbitrary sense of the word ‘fitness’, and to conclude that •it signifies nothing real in objects and that •no one thing can be properly the means of another. In both sense **(i)** and

sense **(ii)**, the term ‘fit’ signifies a simple perception of the understanding. [For this use of ‘arbitrary’, see the note on page 4. By ‘can be properly the means of . . .’ Price evidently means ‘can be, as a matter of cold objective fact, the means to . . .’.]

‘Morally good’ and ‘evil’, ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ are terms that are also commonly applied to actions, obviously meaning the same as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’.

‘Approving’ an action is the same as seeing it to be right, just as ‘assenting’ to a proposition is the same as seeing it to be true.

But the term that most needs consideration here is ‘obligation’, and more than two-thirds of this chapter will be devoted to it. [The chapter’s other topic starts on page 62, number 4.]

Obligation to action obviously coincides with—is *identical to*—rightness of action, to such an extent that we can’t form a notion of either of them without taking in the other. To see this for yourself, consider: can you point out any difference between •what is right, meet or fit to be done and •what ought to be done? Think about how clear it is that

- shape implies something that has the shape,
- solidity implies resistance, and
- an effect implies a cause;

—well, it is as clear as *that* that rightness implies oughtness (if I may be allowed this word) or obligatoriness. Just as we can’t conceive of shape without extension, or motion without a change of place, we can’t conceive of an action’s being *fit*

for us to do without its being something that we *should* do, that it is our *duty* to do, or that we are under an *obligation* to do.—Thus, ‘right’, ‘fit’, ‘ought’, ‘should’, ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ express ideas that necessarily include one another. From this I draw five conclusions.

(1) •Virtue as such has a real obligatory power independently of •all positive laws and of •all will, because (as we have just seen) obligation is involved in the very nature of •it. To affirm something of this form:

It would be wrong not to do A, but doing A is not obligatory unless it is conducive to private good (or: unless it is commanded by a superior power)

is an obvious contradiction. It amounts to saying that it’s not true that •a thing is what it is, or that •we are obliged to do what we ought to do, unless it is commanded or is in some way privately useful!—If any actions are *fit* to be done by an agent—other than those that tend to his own happiness—those actions are *obligatory* independently of their influence on his happiness. [Price says that this is so ‘by the terms’, apparently meaning that it is so because of the meaning(s) of ‘fit’ and ‘obligatory’.]—If it is *wrong* for us to do something then it is our *duty* not to do it, whether or not we are commanded by any positive law.<sup>16</sup>—I can’t conceive of anything much more evident than this.—So it turns out that those who maintain that all obligation is derived from positive laws or God’s will or self-love, if they mean anything that conflicts with what I have been saying, are asserting that the words ‘right’ and ‘just’ don’t stand for any real and distinct properties of actions, but merely signify what is willed and commanded or conducive to private advantage, *whatever that may be*; so that •anything can be right and wrong at once, morally good and evil at once, depending on what has been commanded

or forbidden by different laws and wills; and •even the most pernicious effects will become ‘just’ and ‘fit to be produced’ by anyone to whom they offer even the smallest degree of clear advantage or pleasure.

Those who say that *nothing can create an obligation but the will of God* generally hold that God’s power to create obligations consists in his power to assign rewards and punishments for various actions. Thus they in fact subvert entirely the independent natures of moral good and evil, and are forced to maintain that nothing can give us an obligation except the prospect of pleasure to be had ·from divine rewards· or pain ·from divine punishments·. This implies that •vice is really mere imprudence, that •nothing is right or wrong, just or unjust, except insofar as it affects self-interest, and that •an independently and completely happy being can’t have any moral perceptions. The soundness of these inferences is guaranteed by the coincidence between obligation and virtue that I have been insisting on

Let’s pursue this point further. If a person believed either that •there is no God or that •God doesn’t concern himself with human affairs, would he escape being in any way *accountable* for his actions because he felt no moral obligations? If someone happened not to be convinced that virtue tends to his happiness in this life or the next, would he be released from every bond of duty and morality? And what about someone who didn’t believe in any future state and did believe that acting virtuously in certain cases would be against his present interests—would he in those cases be truly obliged to be wicked? . . .

Those who contend that self-interest is the only ground of moral obligation sometimes say that when virtue clashes with present enjoyment all motives to virtue cease (supposing

<sup>16</sup> Obviously, this is very different from saying (absurdly) that if a given action would be wrong to perform in certain circumstances then it will continue to be wrong when the circumstances are greatly altered.



that there is no future state). This is strange, because on their principles the truth is not that in those circumstances *all motives to practise virtue* would cease, but rather that *virtue itself* would cease; indeed, that it would be changed into vice, so that something that would otherwise have been fit and just would become unlawful and wrong. . . .

Something else worth mentioning here is that rewards and punishments presuppose, in the very *idea* of them, moral obligation; they are based on it. Rather than •creating obligations, they •enforce them. . . . A •reward presupposes something done to deserve •it, something conforming to an obligation that existed previously to it; and punishment is always inflicted on account of some breach of obligation. If we had no obligations before the proposal of rewards and punishments, it would be a contradiction to suppose that we could be rewarded or punished.—Someone who was led only by the light of *nature*, and who was ignorant of a future state of rewards and punishments and of the will of the Deity, might discover these—i.e. discover that there is a future state of rewards and punishments, and that there is a God who has a will—by reasoning from his *natural* notions of morality and duty. But if those •moral• notions depend on the other (•theological•) ones, this discovery couldn't be made, and we would be left with nothing from which to learn God's will and the conditions of his favour to us.

(2) Rectitude [= 'rightness'] is a *law* as well as a *rule* to us, i.e. it doesn't only •direct us but •binds us as far as we perceive it.—It certainly is a rule: taking it that 'rule of action' signifies some measure or standard to which our actions should conform, or some information we have regarding what we ought to do, rectitude is in this sense the *only* rule of action; anything else that is properly called a 'rule' is merely a help to the discovery of the rectitude rule. To perceive or to be informed about how it is right to act is the

very notion of a direction to act. And it must be added that it is a direction that implies authority, and that we cannot disregard or neglect it without remorse and pain. Reason is the natural and authoritative guide of a rational being. The only rational beings who are (morally speaking) **free** are those who have no discernment of right and wrong. Someone who has this discernment—through which moral good appears to him and he can't help judging of some action that it is fit to be done and evil to omit it—is strictly and absolutely **tied** in bonds that no power in nature can dissolve, and from which he can't *ever* break loose without •doing unnatural violence to himself, •conducting an assault on his own soul, and immediately •pronouncing his own sentence. [The phrase 'tied in bonds' echoes the origin of 'oblige' and 'obligation' in the Latin *obligare* = 'to tie down'.]

Something is strictly speaking a *law* to us if we always and unavoidably feel and admit ourselves to be obliged to obey it, and if our obedience (or disobedience) to it brings the immediate sanctions of •inward triumph and self-applause (or inward shame and self-reproach), together with •secret thoughts of the favour (or displeasure) of a superior righteous power, and •expectations of future rewards (or punishments).—Something has proper authority over us if our refusal to submit to it involves •transgressing our duty, •incurring guilt, and •exposing ourselves to just vengeance. All this is certainly true of our moral judgment, and contained in the idea of it.

So rectitude—i.e. virtue—is a **law**. It is the **first and supreme law**; all other laws owe their force to it, depend on it, and create obligations because of their relation to it. It is a **universal law**. The whole creation is ruled by it: men and all rational beings exist *under* it. It is the source and guide of all the actions of God himself, and his throne and government are founded on it. It is an **unalterable and indispensable**

**law.** There's a contradiction in supposing that it might ever be suspended, or even relaxed a little, in any part of the universe. Any other law

- has had a date—a time when it was enacted and came into force,
- is confined to a particular region of the universe,
- rests on insecure foundations, and
- can lose its vigour, grow obsolete with time, and become useless and neglected.

Nothing like this can be true of the law of rectitude. It has no date: it never was made or enacted; it has *always* been in force. It is prior to all things. It is self-valid and self-originated, and must forever retain its usefulness and vigour, without any possibility of being lessened ·in scope· or relaxed ·in severity·. It is

- as unalterable as any necessary and everlasting truth is,
- as independent as the existence of God is, and
- as sacred and awe-inspiring as God's nature and perfections are.

—Its authority is essential to it, underived and absolute. It is superior to all other authority, and is indeed the basis and parent of all other authority. Strictly speaking, in fact, there *is* no other authority, nothing else that can claim our obedience or that ought to guide and rule heaven and earth.—Summing up: it is the one authority in nature, the same at all times and in all places; in a word, it is the **divine authority**.

(3) It is absurd to ask 'What obliges us to practise virtue?', as though obligation were not part of the idea of virtue but something extraneous and foreign to it, i.e. as though what is due might not have been our duty, or what is wrong might not have been unlawful. . . .—The question 'Why are we obliged to practise virtue, to abstain from what is wicked,

and do what is just?' is exactly the same as asking 'Why are we obliged to do what we are obliged to do?'—I can't help *wondering* at those •who have so unaccountably tangled themselves in difficulties over a subject that one would think had no difficulty, and •who, because they can't find anything in virtue and duty *themselves* that could induce us to respect them in our behaviour, fall back on self-love, maintaining that it is the sole source of all inducements and obligations.

(4) Now we can see in what sense God can be said to 'have obligations'. Saying this about him is merely •saying that he has a perception of what is right, or •saying that in the government of the world there are certain ends and certain means that he approves, and that are better to be pursued than others.—But we must be very careful about what language we use in discussing this topic. 'Obligation' is a word to which many people have attached various ideas that certainly shouldn't be retained when we speak of God. Whenever we are talking or thinking about God, our language and our conceptions are extremely defective and inadequate, and often very erroneous.—Many •people think it absurd and shocking to attribute anything like an obligation or law to a being who is necessarily ·self·-sufficient and independent, and to whom nothing can be prior or superior—·earlier or higher·. I have already indicated, to some extent, how we should form our thoughts on this subject. The •people I have mentioned should be satisfied with this: the obligations that God is said to have arise entirely from—and exist entirely in—his own nature; and the eternal, unchangeable **law** by which I have said he is directed in all his actions is nothing but **himself**—his own infinite, eternal, all-perfect understanding.

(5) It is clear now what the basis is for the obligations of religion and God's will. Those obligations are clearly branches of universal rectitude. To say that we have an

obligation to obey God's will is merely to say that. . . .it is right and fit to obey it. How absurd it is to make obligation •subsequent to God's will, and •created by it! If that were right, wouldn't *all* will oblige equally? If there's anything that makes one will preferable to another, it is, by the terms [see note on page 54], moral rectitude. What would the laws or the will of any being signify, what influence could they have on the decisions of a moral agent, if there were •no good reason to obey them, •no obligation to respect them, •no pre-existing right of command?—'We are obliged, but not in virtue of reason and right'—that is just to say that we •are obliged but• are not obliged at all!—Furthermore, nothing could be ever commanded by God if there was no prior reason for commanding it. . . .

Notice how the ideas of right and wrong *force* themselves on us, staying with us in some form or other even when we think we have annihilated them. For example, after we have supposed that all actions and ends are in themselves indifferent [= 'neither morally required nor morally ruled out'], one naturally thinks that it is *right* to give ourselves up to the guidance of unrestrained inclination, and *wrong* to be careful in our actions or to give ourselves any trouble in pursuing any ends. Or if we join Hobbes and the orator in Plato's *Gorgias* in supposing that

the strongest may •oppress the weakest and •take for themselves whatever they can seize,

or that

unlimited power confers an unlimited right,

this obviously still leaves us with the idea of *right*, and merely establishes another species of it.—Similarly, when we suppose that all the obligations of morality are derived from •laws and contracts, we at the same time find that we *have to* suppose something before •them—something not absolutely indifferent in respect of choice, something good or

evil, right or wrong—that gave rise to •them and led to their being respected after they were made.

Returning now to my main topic: God's **sovereign authority** comes not merely from •his almighty power but also from

- his necessary perfections,
- the infinite excellences of his nature as the fountain of reason and wisdom,
- the entire dependence of all beings on him, and
- their getting from his bounty their existence and all its blessings and hopes.

These are the reasons that make him the proper object of our supreme homage, create his right to govern, . . . and make it the first duty of the whole thinking world to obey, to please, and to honour him in everything they think and do.—Those who hold that God's power to make us happy or miserable is all the reason we have to obey him and all the meaning there is in our 'obligation' to obey him—those people are maintaining something that it's *amazing* to see seriously accepted by a human mind! They're maintaining that •if we could suppose that we had nothing to hope or fear from God we wouldn't have the least desire for his approval, or the least concern about what he expects from us, or any reason for paying any attention to him; that •setting aside the consideration of our own •self-interest, it simply doesn't matter what our dispositions and behaviour are with regard to God; that •his nature, attributes and benefits—however glorious they may be—are in themselves incapable of having any effect on any rational nature; and that •if we suppose God to have his actual power but to have the rest of his character changed or reversed, we would still be equally obliged to love, revere, and obey him, to resign our wills to his, and to try to win his approval.

2. What I have said will tell us what to think about various accounts and definitions of *obligation* that have been given. These are clear cases of the puzzles that arise from trying to define words that express simple perceptions of the mind. ·I shall discuss six of them·.

(i) An ingenious and able writer, John Balguy, defines ‘obligation’ as ‘a state of the mind into which it is brought by perceiving a reason for action’. If you substitute this definition for every occurrence of the words ‘duty’, ‘should’ or ‘obliged’, you’ll soon see how defective it is. What it is saying is that ‘obligation’ denotes the attraction or excitement that the mind feels when it perceives right and wrong. But that isn’t •obligation—it’s merely •the effect of perceiving an obligation. Also, apply that definition to the correct statement ‘The duty or obligation to act is a reason for acting’ and you get ‘Obligation is a state of the mind into which it is brought by perceiving an obligation to act’! [Price reports and criticises another part of Balguy’s account of obligation, and diagnoses its trouble:] What produces confusion in these cases is the failure to distinguish •perception from

•the effect of perception, between •obligation and •motive. Not all motives are obligations, though all obligations create motives. . . .

(ii) Several writers have said that obligation is the necessity of doing a thing in order to be happy.<sup>17</sup>

I have already said enough about the opinion from which this definition is derived, and therefore shall here only ask: If this is the only meaning of ‘obligation’, what is the meaning of the statement ‘A man is obliged to take account of his own happiness’? Isn’t it obvious that this statement means only that it is right to take account of our own happiness, and wrong to neglect it? If we interpret the statement in terms of the definition at the start of this paragraph, taking ‘obliged’ to mean ‘required for happiness’, the statement is ridiculous because then it means only that if you are to be happy you need to take account of your happiness.

(iii) The very learned William Warburton maintains that ‘moral obligation’ always denotes some object of will and law, i.e. implies some obliger. If that were right, it would be jargon to talk about our being ‘obliged to obey the Divine

<sup>17</sup> Bishop Cumberland in his treatise *On the Laws of Nature* etc. writes: ‘The whole force of obligation is this: the legislator has annexed natural *good* to the observance of his laws and natural *evil* to the transgression of them, and the prospect of such ·rewards or punishments· moves men to perform actions agreeing with the laws rather than disagreeing with them.’—And again: ‘I think that moral obligation can be universally and properly defined thus: Obligation is the act of a legislator by which he declares that actions conformable to his law are necessary for those for whom the law is made. An action is then understood to be necessary for a rational agent when it is certainly one of the causes required for the happiness that he naturally—and therefore necessarily—desires.’. . . —The remarks made on these passages by Maxwell, the translator of Cumberland’s treatise from the Latin in which he wrote it, are so good that I cannot help copying some of them here. Speaking of the necessity of observing the law as a means to our happiness, Maxwell writes: ‘If this is the whole of the law’s obligation, then breaking the law is not •unrighteous, sinful and criminal, but merely •imprudent and unfortunate. . . . But the obligation or bond of the law is the legal restraint expressed by *non licet*, “you may not do it”; but a bare *non licet* or *prohibition* isn’t sufficient to enforce the law; so the legal restraint links the sin with punishment—links the precept with a sanction—and the full expression of it is *non licet impune*, “you may not do it with impunity”. But though sin and punishment are closely connected, the obligation of *non licet* (it may not be done) is distinct from the obligation of *non impune* (not with impunity), because sin and punishment are distinct things to think about. But if a man can’t do a thing •without sin, or can’t do a thing •without punishment, he is bound [= ‘obliged’] either way; and both these obligations are in every •law, and they jointly create the obligation to keep •it.’ [Maxwell goes on to say that the obligation of *non licet* comes before the obligation of *non impune*, which is to say that the law has moral force independently of there being punishments for breaking it. He develops this line of thought at some length.]

will', whereas in fact that is a perfectly proper thing to say. Actually, he seems to mean that the word 'obligation' signifies only the special case of the fitness of obeying the Divine will, and can't properly be applied to any other fitness; and this narrows the sense of the word in a way that doesn't fit the common use of it.

(iv) The sense that Hutcheson gives to 'obligation' agrees to some extent with my account of it. He says that a person is obliged to perform an action if every spectator—and the person himself, on reflection—must approve of his performing it and disapproving of his not performing it. But this isn't perfectly accurate, and here is why. Although

•obligation to act, in one sense,<sup>18</sup>

and although

•obligation to act (in that sense) implies and is implied by •reflex approval and disapproval,

they seem to differ as an act of the mind differs from an object of the mind, or as perception differs from the truth

that is perceived. Saying that *it is our duty to do A* isn't just the same as saying that *we approve of doing A*; one is the quality of the action, the other the mind's discernment of that quality. The two are so strongly connected that there is often no great need to distinguish them, and in ordinary speech the term 'obligation' often stands for the sense and judgment of the mind regarding what is fit or unfit to be done. [In the phrase 'sense and judgment', the word 'sense' isn't doing much work. (The same is true of its occurrence in 'sense and conscience' quoted from Clarke on the next page, where Clarke implicitly equates that phrase with 'judgment and conscience'.) Price is not slipping into the view that we have an implanted and arbitrary moral *sense*.] Still, I think it would prevent some confusion, and keep our ideas more distinct and clear, if we bore in mind that a man's •judgment that he has an obligation to do something is not strictly speaking •the obligation itself, and that 'obligation' in its primary and basic meaning coincides with 'rectitude' or 'rightness', however variously and loosely the word may

<sup>18</sup> Why only 'in one sense'? Because a man may, through involuntary error approve of doing something that he ought not to do, or think to be his duty something that is really contrary to it; and yet in such a case it is really his duty to act in conformity with his judgment. So there are two views of obligation, which will be apt to produce confusion if we don't attend to them. In one sense, a man's being (i) **obliged to act in a particular manner depends on his knowing that he is; in another sense, his being (ii) obliged doesn't depend on this. Without (i) we could incur guilt when acting with the fullest approval of our consciences. Without (ii) it would make no sense to speak of showing someone what his obligations are. . . . This perfectly fits the division of virtue into •absolute and •relative, which I shall explain in chapter 8. [In this footnote, every occurrence of 'sense' is Price's; so is the word 'views'—it seems that the 'two views of obligation' somehow correspond to the two senses of 'obligation'.]** does always accompany •reflex approval and disapproval,

<sup>19</sup> I notice that William Adams in his excellent sermon on *The Nature and Obligation of Virtue* agrees with me in his account of obligation. What does the obligation to virtue and right action consist in? He answers:

'The idea of *right* includes the idea of *duty*. To perceive an action to be right is to see a reason for doing it—seeing this in the action itself, abstracted from *all* other considerations. This perception, this acknowledged rightness of the action, is the very essence of obligation; it is what commands the approval and choice, and binds the conscience, of every rational being.'

And again:

'Nothing can bring us under an obligation to do what appears to our moral judgment to be wrong. We can make sense of "Consider a case where it is in someone's interests to do something he thinks to be wrong", but we can't make any sense of "Consider a case where it is someone's duty to do something he thinks to be wrong".'

be used in common speech.<sup>19</sup>

(v) I leave it to you to judge how far these remarks are applicable to what Samuel Clarke says on this topic in his *Evidences of Natural and revealed Religion*. His account of obligation is very like the one I have just been discussing, and it may be worthwhile to quote some of his remarks. ‘The truest and most formal obligation to act in a certain way comes from

the judgment and conscience of a man’s own mind concerning the reasonableness and fitness of acting in accordance with a given rule or law.

This is more properly and strictly obliging than

any opinion regarding the authority of the giver of a law,

and than

any concern he may have regarding its sanctions by rewards and punishments.

What gives primacy to the first of these is the fact that anyone who acts contrary to this sense and conscience of his own mind is necessarily *self-condemned*, and the greatest and strongest of all obligations is the one that a man can’t break through without condemning himself.—The obligation that is the source of all other obligations is **the eternal reason of things**, the reason that God himself—despite having no superior to direct him, and being happy in a way that can’t be increased or lessened—constantly obliges himself to govern the world by.’ . . .

(vi) Joseph Butler in his *Sermons on Human Nature* and

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[He talks a little about other pressures to do what one thinks to be wrong. Then:]

‘Power may compel, interest may bribe, pleasure may persuade, but only reason can oblige. This is the only authority that rational beings can accept and the only one to which they owe obedience.’

I have been very agreeably surprised by the agreement—here and elsewhere—between my opinions about virtue and those of this most judicious writer. It has given me more confidence in some of the opinions I have maintained than I would otherwise have had.

the explanatory remarks on them in the Preface, insists strongly on •the obligation implied in reflex approval—i.e. a man’s approval of his own conduct when he reflects on it—on •the supremacy of the principle<sub>c</sub> of reflection within us; and on •the authority and right-to-direct that are constituent parts of the idea of self-approval. Let me borrow one more observation from this incomparable writer (I am not quoting him verbatim):

Every being who is endowed with reason and conscious of right and wrong is necessarily a law to himself. So the greatest possible degree of ignorance or scepticism concerning •the likely effects of virtue, •the authority of the Deity, •a future state, and •the rewards and punishments to be expected in it, still leaves us fully accountable, guilty, and punishable, if we break this law. Our ignorance or scepticism won’t do anything to exempt us from justice, won’t help in the slightest to excuse or save us, if it should turn out that such authority and future state do really exist. What makes an agent ill-deserving is not •any opinion he may have about a superior power or positive [see note on page 5] sanctions, but •his doing wrong by acting contrary to the conviction of his mind. . . .

**3.** A certain objection to this deserves to be considered.

[In a footnote Price refers to Henry Home’s *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*.] It may be asked:

‘Aren’t there many actions—e.g. returning good for evil, acting generously and kindly—of which it can’t

be said that we are bound ·or ·obliged· to perform them, but which it is ·right for us to perform? And doesn't the actual performance of these actions appear to us even more morally attractive than if they had been strictly our duty?'

I answer that the most that can follow from this is not that rightness doesn't imply obligation, but that it doesn't imply it so absolutely and universally that there can be no sense in which actions can be called 'right' without implying that they are obligatory. The nature of rightness may vary according to the objects or actions to which it is ascribed. It is not the case that all right actions are 'right' in precisely the same sense of the word, and it wouldn't do much harm to the position I have been defending if we granted that some things are 'right' in a sense that doesn't imply that they are our indispensable duty. But then let it be remembered that this proposition:

Whatever is 'right' in a sense such that the omission of it would be wrong is always and indispensably obligatory,

holds universally and incontestably. And let it be understood also that although the idea of ·rightness may be more general than that of fitness, duty, or obligation,...this can't be said of ·wrongness. The ideas of wrongness and obligation certainly have the same range: I mean that although there may be cases where something that we approve of as right isn't something that *ought* to be done, everything that we disapprove of as wrong is something that *ought not* to be done.

I have dealt with ·Home's· point by restricting my initial position regarding how rightness relates to obligation; but a more careful enquiry will reveal that no such restriction is needed. The following remarks support this.

**(a)** Beneficence in general is undoubtedly a duty, and it is

only with respect to the particular acts and instances of it that we are at liberty. Someone performs an act of kindness to someone else: we say 'He might not have done it' or 'He wasn't obliged to do it'—i.e. he wasn't obliged to perform *this particular* kind act. But everyone is obliged to be kind sometimes, to do all the good he can to his fellow-creatures; and we necessarily regard a person as blameworthy and guilty if he ·doesn't have that aim and ·contents himself with merely abstaining from injury and mischief. We owe to those about us a certain part of our fortunes and labour, but the particular objects and methods of beneficence are not absolutely fixed. Here we are left to our own choice, and...there may be nothing in any particular objects or methods of beneficence that make it fit and right they should be chosen rather than others. (·Though sometimes there is... Other things being equal, it is right that friends, relations, and benefactors should be preferred to strangers, and anyone who does otherwise is acting contrary to his duty.)

**(b)** The precise limits of some general duties can't be determined by us. No-one can tell exactly *how beneficent* he ought to be, *how far* he is obliged to exert himself for the benefit of other men... To form a judgment about this in particular cases, we must attend to so many details in our own circumstances and abilities, and in the state of mankind and the world, that we can't help being in some uncertainty... The same is true of the general duty of worshipping God. Exactly *how* and *how often* God ought to be worshipped has not been clearly marked out to us... ·But· whenever any degree of beneficence, or any particular method and frequency of divine worship, appears to be—all things considered—*best*, then it becomes obligatory...

·But what shall we say regarding the greater amiableness [= 'moral attractiveness'; see note on page 29] of the actions in

question? How can there be greater virtue, or any virtue at all, in performing particular actions that we could have omitted without any blame?—The answer is easy. What makes an agent qualify as ‘virtuous’ and entitles him to praise is his acting from a regard for goodness and right. Now, someone may be acting from a regard for goodness and right when he does something that he was morally required to do *or* something that he wasn’t; relieving a miserable person is *virtue*, even if there is no reason that *obliges* the agent to select this miserable person in particular out of many others. Worshipping God may arise from a general sense of duty, even in someone who knows that the particular times and manner of his worship have nothing morally better in them.—And as to the greater merit we see in many actions of this kind, . . . here is the explanation of that.—Everything an agent does is virtuous to the extent that he was determined to it by a concern for virtue, so the more of this concern the action reveals, the more we must admire it. Someone who fixes on more rather than less beneficence, worship, or whatever reveals a correspondingly stronger virtuous principle. If he chooses to devote more of his fortune, time, and labour to promoting the happiness of his fellow-creatures, or to serving his neighbours or his country, when for all he knows to the contrary he might have done much less and still deserved commendation, it is more obvious that he is acting from good motives. And even when someone goes too far in this direction, being led to visible extremes and an inappropriate neglect of his private concerns, we always approve—except when we suspect the influence of indirect motives. . . .

(c) It has been said that the performance of *mere* duty produces no love or friendship towards the agent. This is far from being true; on the contrary, someone who—however tempted and opposed he may be—does his whole duty, trying

faithfully and uniformly to be and do in every way just what he ought to be and do, is the object of our highest love and friendship. The false thesis about ‘mere duty’ in relation to love and friendship seems to be based on the idea that we will have affectionate feelings about someone who does *more* than his ‘mere duty’. But that is false too. To aim at acting beyond obligation is the same as aiming at acting contrary to obligation; doing more than is fit to be done is the same as doing wrong.

4. Having presented what appears to me to be the true account of the nature and foundation of moral good and evil and of moral obligation, I will now add, as a supplement to this chapter, an examination of some of the forms of expression that various eminent writers have used on this subject.

To grasp the meaning and design of these expressions, bear this in mind: necessarily all actions are •right, •indifferent, or •wrong; and which category a given action belongs to is *the truth of the case*—i.e. the facts about the agent and the objects and the relations between them. There are certain ways of behaving that we unavoidably approve of as soon as we know what the relations are—i.e. how the agent or the action relates to other people or other facts or things. Change the relations and a different way of behaving becomes right. Nothing is clearer than that what is due or not due, proper or improper to be done, must vary according to the different natures and circumstances of the things and people involved. If a particular treatment of one nature is right, it can’t possibly be the case that the same treatment of a different nature, or of all natures, is right.

That is the source of the expressions

‘acting suitably to the natures of things’,  
‘treating things as they are’,  
‘conformity to truth’,



‘agreement’ and ‘disagreement’ between actions and relations.

These expressions are useless, almost senseless, if considered as intended to define *virtue*, because they evidently presuppose virtue. Treating an object ‘as being what it is’ is treating it in the way that is right for such an object. ‘Conforming ourselves to truth’ means the same as conforming ourselves to the true state and relations we are in, which is the same as doing what is right in such a state and such relations. In given circumstances, there is some particular definite action that is *the* best to be done; and when these circumstances cease, that action stops being the best, and other obligations arise. This naturally leads us to speak of ‘acting suitably’ to circumstances, natures, and characters, and of the ‘agreement’ and ‘disagreement’ between them. When these ways of speaking are understood in this way, they are wholly proper and intelligible. But it is very obvious that they are only different phrases for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’! I wish that the writers who have used them had attended more to this, and avoided the ambiguity and confusion arising from •seeming to deny that there is any immediate perception of morality without any deductions of reasoning, and from •trying to give definitions of words that can’t be defined. If someone defined ‘pleasure’ as ‘the agreement between a faculty and its object’, what would we learn from that? Wouldn’t we be entitled to ask: ‘What is this “agreement”?’ Do you mean by it anything other than the pleasure itself that the object is fitted to produce by its influence on the faculty?’

It is well known that William Wollaston, in a work that

has rightly obtained a great reputation, places •the whole notion of moral good and evil in •signifying and denying truth. If he means that all virtue and vice comes down to these particular instances of them, it’s very obvious that this leaves the nature and origin of our ideas of virtue and vice as undetermined as they were before. It doesn’t tell us where our ideas of the rightness of telling the truth and wrongness of lying come from; it supposes them to be perceptions of self-evident truths, as indeed they are, but no more so than our ideas of the other principles of morality.—The evil of ingratitude and cruelty is not the same as the evil of affirming a lie. [Price’s next bit is stated awkwardly, in terms of a technical term of Wollaston’s. Its gist is that lying or producing false beliefs doesn’t define what it is for an action to be subjectively wrong, wrong from the point of view of the agent] because there may be no intention to deny anything true, or to get anyone to accept anything false. If someone were the only rational creature in the world, he *couldn’t* aim to declare a falsehood to anyone; but ingratitude and cruelty would still be wrong, because they are quite distinct species of evil.—Someone who neglects the worship due to God may have no thought of denying God’s existence or of conveying that denial to anyone else. It’s true that he acts •as if God didn’t exist, i.e. •in a manner that can’t be justified unless God doesn’t exist, and so figuratively speaking he may be said to contradict truth and to declare himself to be self-caused and self-sufficient.<sup>20</sup>

This eminent writer probably meant to say little more than this, and I don’t absolutely condemn the •figurative• language that he has introduced. All I want is to guard

<sup>20</sup> It is so obvious that the basis for talking in this way in this case is our perceiving that if God exists then this way of behaving is *wrong*—this being a perception that we have independently of any ‘figurative’ talk about ‘contradicting truth’! Similarly with any other examples Wollaston might produce. In short: We can never know when to say that an action affirms or denies truth unless we already have a perception of its being right or of its being wrong. So how can such language explain and define right and wrong?

against applying it wrongly.

With that same aim in mind, I must add that when it is said that

P: virtue consists in conformity to the relations of persons and things,

this mustn't be considered as a *definition* of 'virtue' or as intended to give a reason justifying the practice of virtue. Nothing can be gained by P when it is used with either of those intentions. If we ask 'Why is it right to conform ourselves to the relations in which persons and objects stand to us?', we'll find ourselves obliged to end up with a simple perception through which something is *ultimately* approved, i.e. approved without any justifying reason being givable for it.—Explaining virtue by saying that

Q: virtue consists in the conformity of our actions to reason

is even less proper, because this 'conformity to reason' can only mean that our actions are such as our reason discerns to be right, so that Q says only that virtue is doing right. [Price has a footnote here, quoting William Adams—already invoked in the footnote on page 59—saying things that agree with what Price has just been saying.]

Note also that P and Q don't direct us to proper criteria by which to judge in all cases what is morally good or evil. If after weighing the state and circumstances of a case, we don't perceive how it is proper to act, it would be word-spinning to tell us 'Well, find out which action is in conformity with the state and circumstances!' If in a given case we can't discover what is •right then we must be also equally unable to determine what is •suitable to those circumstances. It is indeed very proper to direct us, in order to judge an action, to try to discover the whole truth about its probable or possible consequences, the circumstances and features of the object, and the relations the agent has to that object, because this

(I repeat) is what determines the moral nature of the action; and that is all that can properly be intended by presenting truth and relations as criteria of virtue.

If the language we are considering—i.e. the likes of P and Q above—doesn't express either definitions or proper criteria of virtue, what use is it? What is it *for*? I answer that it is clearly intended to show that morality is based on truth and reason, i.e. that it is as necessary and immutable as the natural proportions and essential differences of things, and is perceived by the same power as they are.

'But is it anything more than a bare assertion? What proof of this does it convey?' In reply to this, one might point out that the same questions can be put to those who have maintained the contrary view, namely that our ideas of morality are derived from an arbitrary •sense [see note on page 4], and not from ideas of the •understanding. They regard this as something that has been decided; but before reaching that conclusion, I think, they should have examined the matter more thoroughly.

The **(1) agreement of proportion between certain quantities**—as expressed for example in the truths of arithmetic—is •real and necessary, and is •perceived by the understanding. Why should we doubt that the **(2) agreement of moral fitness between certain actions and certain relations** is also •real and necessary, and •perceived by that same faculty? The different natures, properties, and positions of objects necessarily result in

**(1)** different relative non-moral fitnesses and unfitnesses,

different productive powers, different aptitudes to different ends, and agreements or disagreements among themselves. Where's the absurdity in saying that the various relations of beings and objects result in

**(2)** different moral fitnesses and unfitnesses of action,

different obligations of conduct, which are just as real and unalterable as the former, and equally independent of our ideas and opinions? For **(1)** any particular natural objects to exist at all is the same as their existing with such-and-such mutual proportions. Similarly, for **(2)** reasonable beings of particular natures and capacities to exist at all in such-and-such circumstances and relations is the same as its being the case that such-and-such conduct is fit or proper. And just as the Author of nature in creating the objects in **(1)** willed the existence of the proportions and truths implied in them, so also in creating the beings in **(2)** and placing them in their respective relations to one another and to himself, he willed that such-and-such actions should be performed and such-and-such duties observed.—When we **(2)** compare [see note in Preface] innocence and eternal misery, the idea of unsuitableness between them arises in our minds. And from **(1)** comparing together many natural objects and beings we get an idea of a totally different kind of unsuitableness, perceiving some kind of clash between them—e.g. that one can't be made to fit into the other, or that their different properties cannot co-exist in a single thing, or that they can't produce such-and-such particular effects on one another.

Why should the mis-match in **(2)** be regarded as less real than the mis-matches in **(1)**?—No-one can avoid admitting that he has the idea of *unsuitableness* (i.e. a sentiment of wrong) in the application of eternal misery to innocence. I challenge him to find a *reason* for denying that this is a sentiment of his understanding and a perception of truth.

The advocates of 'fitness' as the foundation of morality have been arguing to this purpose; the drift of their assertions and reasonings seems to me to have been in the direction of views like mine. But it must be admitted that they have used *certain* words too loosely, providing an opening for the objections of those who have embraced and defended the contrary opinion. It wouldn't be difficult to show how a similar dispute might break out concerning the origin of our ideas of *power* and *connection*—the same objections offered, and the same tangles produced!

[The chapter finishes with a paragraph comparing knowledge of good and evil with knowledge of equality and inequality. It consists mainly in a criticism of certain misuses of language that might infect either of these topics; the misuses are not intrinsically interesting, and Price does not name any of the culprits.]

## Chapter 7: What are the main *kinds* of virtue?

There are still three more questions to be considered regarding virtue:

- (1) What are the main *kinds* of virtue? What specific sorts of behaviour do we label as 'virtuous'?
- (2) What is the principle<sub>c</sub> or motive from which a virtuous agent acts?
- (3) What does it mean when we say that some actions and characters are *more* virtuous than others? And how do we judge this?

I shall address the questions in that order—(1) in this chapter, (2) in chapter 8, and (3) in chapter 9.

There would be less need to raise question (1) if it weren't for the fact that several writers have maintained that the whole of virtue consists in *benevolence*. I can't improve on what Bishop Butler said about this:

'Benevolence and the lack of it, considered on their own, are nothing like the whole of virtue and vice. If they were the whole of virtue and vice, . . . we would approve of benevolence to some persons rather than to others only on the grounds that this was thought likely to produce more happiness than any other distribution of benevolence, and we would disapprove of injustice and falsehood only because of the misery they are likely to produce. But that isn't how we think about these matters. Take the case of two men who are competitors for some good that would be equally advantageous for both of them. It would be grossly impertinent for a stranger to busy himself with getting one of them preferred over the other; but if such efforts were exerted on behalf of a friend or a

benefactor they would count as *virtuous*, quite apart from any thoughts about distant consequences (e.g. that examples of gratitude and care for friendship would in a general way be good for the world). [Butler then gives a second example: increasing the amount of happiness in the world by stealing something from one person and giving it to another who would enjoy it more.] (This is from the fifth observation in the *Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue*, appended to Butler's *Analogy of Religion*.)

The cases Butler presents are clear and decisive, and it's hard to think of anything that can be said in reply to them. And many other cases could be cited.—Promises, for example: it can't be true that •promises are never binding on anyone except when he thinks that keeping them will produce good for the whole to society, or that •we are free from any obligation to keep a promise as soon as we believe that breaking it won't hurt the person to whom it was made; or that •if breaking a promise would harm to the person to whom it was made, that will be balanced by the benefit it will bring to ourselves. . . . [Price continues with colourful presentations of treacherous actions that would *obviously* be morally vile, whatever difference their consequences made to the balance of good and evil. Followed by similar exclamations about the wrongness of lying, even in a case where lying would result in more over-all happiness than telling the truth. He sums up:]—Can we, when we consider these things, avoid declaring that there is *intrinsic* rightness in keeping promises and in sincerity, and an *intrinsic* evil in their contraries? . . . We are faced here with the idea that the goodness of the end always

consecrates the means, i.e. that other things being equal it is as innocent and laudable to achieve our purposes by lies, prevarication and perjury as it is to achieve them by faithful and open dealing and honest labour! Could this be seriously defended? Could it even be *tolerated* by an honest mind? . . .

This is about as bad as a mistake can be, because, as Butler observes, ‘it is certain that some of the most shocking instances of injustice, adultery, murder, perjury, and even persecution could sometimes not seem likely to produce an overbalance of misery in the present state [see note on page 119], and sometimes may even appear to produce an overbalance the other way’ . . .

No-one denies that the human mind disapproves of ingratitude, injustice, and deceit; what we are arguing about is the *ground* for this disapproval. Does it arise solely from thoughts about inconvenience to others and the confusion that such behaviour causes; or is the behaviour *immediately* perceived to be wrong, independently of its effects? The examples and considerations that I have offered seem to settle this well enough; it appears that when the behaviour in question produces no harm, even when it is in some degree beneficial, we still disapprove of it.

It may be replied that in cases of this kind the source of our disapproval is connected with the thought of beneficial consequences, in one or other of these two ways:

- Custom has established in our minds the idea of a *plan or system* of common benefit, and we see these vices as inconsistent with that.
- We are in the *habit* of considering these vices as having generally bad consequences, and we’re unconsciously influenced by that when we think about particular cases.

—But why must we have recourse to the influence of habits and associations or general plans in this case? This has

been the refuge of everyone who wants to reduce all our moral perceptions to thoughts about private advantage, and it can be used to evade almost any evidence provided by our experience of the workings of our minds and the motives of our actions. To see that it doesn’t work, consider this: From the cases I have mentioned we can remove entirely the idea of a public, and suppose that no-one exists whose state can be in any way affected by the actions in question; or we can suppose that all memory of the action will be lost for ever as soon as it is done, and that the agent foresees this; and either way the same ideas of the ingratitude, injustice, or violation of truth will remain.—If the whole reason for respecting truth-telling arose from its influence on society, a primitive Christian wouldn’t have been blameworthy for renouncing his religion, blaspheming Christ, and worshipping the pagan gods (all of which are merely denials of the truth) whenever he could purchase his life by these means and at the same time avoid discovery, and thus prevent any harm to Christians and pagans that might arise from his conduct! . . .

Also, it doesn’t seem that mankind in general does pay much attention to remote consequences. Children, especially, can’t be supposed to think about consequences, or to have any fixed ideas of a public or a community, yet we see in them the same aversion to falsehood and liking for truth as in the rest of mankind. . . . Those who derive all our desires and actions from self-love are often met with the objection that they are crediting men with views and reasonings which never entered the minds of most of them, and which probably haven’t been thought of by *anyone* in ordinary everyday life.—The same objection holds against those who derive all our sentiments of moral good and evil from our approval of benevolence and disapproval of the lack of it; and both of these schools of thought have, in my opinion, undertaken tasks that are almost equally

impracticable. Look impartially into your own mind: in your dislike of various vices don't you feel something different from a thought about how they will lessen happiness or produce misery? Isn't it easy for you to see that it isn't merely under *those* notions that you always censure and condemn them? It is true that when you *do* have this thought about bad consequences it heightens your disapproval. Falsehood, ingratitude, and injustice undermine the foundations of all social relations and happiness, and if they became universal the consequences would be terrible.—For this reason, if morality were based on an arbitrary structure of our minds, there would have to be distinct senses—one each for lying, ingratitude, and injustice—that immediately condemned and forbade them. The alternative would be leaving them to the influence of a *general* disapproval of all actions showing a neglect of public good, with no particular attitude against them except to the extent that people thought them likely to produce more misery than happiness; and the effects of *that* arrangement would be dreadful. It probably wouldn't even come close to giving human society a reasonable degree of order. Many people are incapable of thinking broadly; their thoughts are confined within the narrowest limits. And all people are naturally •disinclined to pay any attention to remote events, and •liable to take up the wrongest opinions about the probable consequences of their actions. . . .

[In unhelpfully elaborate prose, Price now refers to the conflict between 'All virtue is benevolent' and 'Each of us cares only about his own interests'; and between 'All morality is a matter of asserting or denying the truth' and 'The moral status of truth-telling comes entirely from its relation to beneficence'. He responds to this pair of debates with a protest:] Why must there be in the human mind approval only of one sort of actions? Why must all moral good be reduced to one particular species of it. . . .? Why mightn't we

have an immediate liking for truth, for candour, sincerity, piety, gratitude, and many other kinds and principles<sub>c</sub> of conduct?—If all our ideas of morality are to be derived from implanted attitudes, the attitudes towards candour, sincerity etc. are just as possible as the attitude towards benevolence; and, as I indicated earlier, securing the general welfare requires all of them as well as the benevolence one, so that one would *expect* that a good Being would give them to us.

Men have such a love of uniformity and simplicity that they look for them where it is difficult to find them! This is unreasonable, and in other intellectual areas it has often led men astray. In natural philosophy [here = 'science'] great mistakes and extravagances have been produced by the desire to discover •one principle<sub>c</sub> to account for •all effects. I don't deny that in the human mind, as well as in the material world, examples of wonderful simplicity are to be found; but we should learn to *wait* until careful observation and enquiry shows us what that simplicity consists in, and not •permit ourselves to rush to any conclusion about it, or to •accept any •claims about general causes and principles<sub>c</sub> that can't be proved by experience.

If the account of morality that I have given is sound, it's inconceivable that the whole of our duty should consist in promoting the happiness of others, or that we could determine what is right or wrong without taking account of anything except the public good. . . .

With these remarks as an introduction, I shall now proceed to list six of the most important branches of virtue, or types of rectitude and duty.

(1) What requires the first place is our *duty to God*—i.e. the whole of that regard, subjection and homage that we owe him. [Price will reach (2) on page 71.] These seem unquestionably to be objects of moral approval independently of any question of utility. They are regarded as indispensably obligatory, but

when we perform those duties the source of our conduct can't be an intention to be in any way *useful* or *profitable* to the object of them [i.e. to God]! It would take an uncommonly weak and ignorant man to intend by his religious services to increase the happiness of the Deity, or to think that God expects his gratitude and prayers because of what they will do for Him. I know that some very worry writers have written as though they thought that the secret spring of all obedience to God. . . . is a desire to contribute to his satisfaction and delight. It would be wasting the time of most of my readers to spend much time showing the prodigious absurdity of such an opinion!

[Price writes this next paragraph as an indirect-speech report on a possible conversation; this version instead presents it directly as a conversation. The content has not been altered.] Let us suppose we are questioning a pious man who has good sense and no superstitions:

'Why do you approve of piety to God? Is it to make God happy? Do you submit to his will and worship and pray to him because you think that these activities will—in the literal sense of the words—*please* or *gratify* him?'

'Certainly not! (pause) I obey and worship God because it is *right* for me to do so—because I see it as my *duty*.'

'Why do you think that obedience and devotion to God is your duty?'

'Because God is the creator, governor, and benefactor of the whole world; and especially because he is *my* creator, governor, and benefactor.'

'Why do you think it is your duty to honour and worship your maker, benefactor and governor?'

Our pious man would wonder at this question, as well he might! It would seem to him to be like asking 'Why is twenty greater than two?'—Why shouldn't we admit here the natural and unperverted sentiments [Price's word] of men, and

acknowledge that submission, reverence, and devotion to such a being as God are—as much as any behaviour towards our fellow-men—instances of *immediate duty intuitively perceived*, the perception of which is a spring and motive of action, just as friendly feelings are. There's no difficulty about this, and it seems obviously right.

[Price says now that no-one who thinks about it will believe that we could have an effect on God's 'state and happiness'; but even if we *could* do this (he continues), that wouldn't 'have any effect in releasing' us from our religious duties. Then:] It is true that pious and virtuous people are actuated by their love for God, which implies joy in his happiness; but this love would never produce any acts of acknowledgement and obedience towards him, or any care for the good of others in accordance with his intentions, if the people in question •didn't think they could affect his happiness, and at the same time •had no perception of fitness in such behaviour independently of such effects.

These remarks apply in some degree to superiors and benefactors among *created* beings; the grounds of duty towards them are of the same general kind as the grounds of our duty to God. A fellow-man may be so much above us in station and character, and so little within the reach of any effects of our conduct, that the reason for our respectful and submissive behaviour towards him can't be any prospect of bringing him benefit; the main spur to action—perhaps the *only* one—is our sense of what is *in itself* right, decent, or appropriate.—To *any* being we owe suitable feelings, attitudes and ways of behaving—made suitable by his nature, character, abilities, and relation to us. And as long as his character and relation to us don't change, the behaviour we owe to him doesn't change either; the two are tied together as invariably as the proportion between any two numbers or geometrical figures.—The •higher the rank of any being is,

the more perfect his nature, the more excellent his character, the closer his connections with us, and the more he has done for us, •the more strict and indispensable our duty to him is, and the greater is the degree of regard, affection, and submission that we owe him.

This last remark shows us what ideas we ought to have of the importance of the duty we owe to God, and of its place among our other duties. [Price fills a vast paragraph with details about this, a rhapsodic account of the worship we owe to God because of the infinite greatness (also ecstatically described) of his power, goodness, superiority to us, and so on. For example, ‘The whole universe, compared with God, is nothing in itself, nothing to us. He ought then to be all to us. . . .’ The paragraph touches on moral philosophy here:] It is here, undoubtedly, that virtue ought to begin. It should arise out of this. A regard for God as our first and sovereign principle<sub>c</sub> of conduct should always possess us, accompany us in the performance of all our private and social duties, and govern our whole lives. [Price will expand on that soon. A couple of fragments from the remainder of this paragraph:] Every degree of real worth that we observe among inferior beings should be properly acknowledged and esteemed, but only as being mere rays from God’s glory and faint resemblances of his perfections. God ought to have supremacy in our minds; every action and design should be sacred to him. . . .

I should remark on the extremely defective characters of people who, whatever they are like in other respects, live in neglect of God. It is a melancholy thing to see so many people able to maintain a good opinion of themselves although *they know* that they don’t think about piety or attend to the Author of all good. Misbehaviour of this kind is as truly inconsistent with goodness of character and sound virtue. . . . as any other misbehaviour—can anyone seriously

question that? If neglect and *ingratitude towards the Author of the world* doesn’t show great evil of character, what *could* do so? Why should impiety be less wicked than dishonesty?

Every man is to be loved and valued to the extent that he performs his private and social duties, and there’s nothing we can say that should discourage him. However much •or little• real virtue a person possesses, he is sure to be better off—somehow or other—for any good that he does. Even if it isn’t what is needed to save him from just condemnation •on the day of judgment•, it will at least make him that much less guilty and unhappy.—But as long as men continue to live without religion and piety, there is great reason to think that they don’t have the genuine principle<sub>c</sub> of virtue •within them•, and don’t have much true moral worth. Their good behaviour of other kinds will probably come more from •instinct and natural temperament, or from •the love of distinction, authority, and private advantages, than from •a sincere concern for what is reasonable and fit as such. —Someone who forgets God and his government, presence, and laws, lacks the main support and the living root of genuine virtue, as well as the most fruitful source of tranquillity and joy; and he won’t be capable of performing his duties to himself and others in an appropriately exact, careful, and reliable way. In fact, someone who doesn’t have the proper feelings towards the Author of his being. . . . should be ashamed to present himself as having any integrity and goodness of character. . . .

But I must add that the persons who fall into the contrary extreme are in every way the most inexcusable and wicked. I’m talking about those who purport to be religious though they have neither benevolence nor honesty, who are zealously devout but at the same time envious, peevish, perverse, spiteful, and can cheat and trick, lie and slander. Nothing can be *conceived* that would be more inconsistent or shameful than this. . . . Religion gives us the strongest motives for social



duties, and lays us under additional obligations to perform them. It is in the nature of religion to increase our zeal for everything just and good, to increase our love of all men, and to make us more gentle, mild, fair, honest, and upright, in proportion to the degree in which it truly possesses our hearts. So anyone who does something wrong while he is under some influence from religion and has the idea of God in his mind is that much more blameworthy and shows that much greater degeneracy and viciousness of character.

Before we leave this subject, let me pause a little in order to consider •what is meant by the *will* of God, and •how important and awe-inspiring a motive to action it implies. [What Price says on the strength-of-motive theme is pretty much what we would expect. One sample:] If someone who is tempted to do something unlawful would hold back until he had duly attended to the *sense* and felt the *weight* of the truth that ‘God disapproves of and forbids my doing this’, he would tremble at the thought of what he had been planning to do, and would lose all inclination to do it. . . .

We aren’t in general at a loss to know *what* God wills. Whatever afflictions or disappointments happen to us. . . it is as certain that •he wills us to bear them and accept them as it is that •we suffer by them. •Is it really as certain as *that*? Yes!• because it is *demonstrable* that in God’s world and under his eye nothing can happen to us that isn’t consented to him and directed by him. [Then some more about the *strengthening* effect of the conviction that what one is doing has God’s support, enabling one to think:] ‘I am doing the will of him to whom the world owes its birth, and whom the whole creation obeys; I am imitating the perfections and securing the friendship of the Being who •is everlasting truth and righteousness, who therefore •can’t be conceived to be indifferent to those who are truthful and righteous, and •who has infinite power and can cause all of nature to bless me

with its provisions.’. . . .

I don’t think that even the most casual reader will think that what I have been saying puts a greater stress on •*God’s will*• than is consistent with the foundation of morals that I have been defending.

I have *not* said that God’s will can, of itself, have any effect on morality, or be an end and *rule* of action. Whether we take ‘God’s will’ to stand for •the general power of producing effects or •the actual exercise of this power, it is perfectly obvious that God’s will implies nothing in the nature of a rule, direction, or motive. It is entirely at the service of these, and presupposes them. •Understanding comes before •will, because when any thinking agent exercises his will he must be planning to produce some effect that he thinks to be possible; and •knowledge comes before •power, because when any thinking agent exercises his power he must know what he is doing. Any being that is capable of design and action has *will* in the general sense; so the mere fact that someone or something wills that we do A can never put pressure on us to do A.

What makes obedience to the will of God such a high and indispensable duty is precisely its being the will *of God*, the will of the universal and almighty parent, benefactor, and ruler, a will that

- is necessarily united with perfect rectitude,
- always acts on the dictates of perfect rectitude, and
- directs to what is absolutely best.

When we obey *this* will, then, what we are obeying is unerring rectitude, the voice of eternal wisdom, so that *that* is when we act most wisely.

(2) The second kind of virtue to be discussed [the first began on page 68] is the kind that has *ourselves* for its object. There is undoubtedly a certain way of behaving towards ourselves that is properly a matter of *duty* to us. ‘An action’s relation

to our own happiness or misery, when no other beings are affected, can't have any influence in settling whether the action ought to be performed. . . .—that is too absurd to be maintained by anyone!—It is *contradictory* to suppose that the necessity that makes us *choose and want* a certain end is not accompanied by *approval* of using the means for attaining that end. •How we employ our faculties in doing things relating to our own interest is no more morally indifferent than is •how we behave to our fellow-creatures. If it is my duty to promote the good of someone else and to avoid hurting him, it most certainly must be my duty to promote my own good and to avoid hurting myself. It would be contrary to all reason to deny this, i.e. to assert that I ought to be careful about the good of others but not of my own. . . .—The truth of the matter is far from that. Other things being equal, it is right and appropriate for me to prefer myself to someone else—e.g. keeping for myself a means of enjoyment that I own rather than giving it to a stranger to whom it won't be more beneficial than it is to me. It would be strange if anyone could avoid admitting this.

Clearly this provides another instance of right behaviour that doesn't come from •friendly feelings, and can't be explained in terms of any thoughts about •public utility or •sympathy with others. We have here •an indisputable proof that actions showing friendly feelings are not the only ones we approve of, namely •the fact that in many cases we approve of letting self-love prevail against friendly feelings for others, and are aware that in these cases it *should* thus prevail. Self-interest provides us with the fullest scope for virtue; the practice of this branch of duty is just as hard, and demands just as much resolution and zeal, as the practice of any other branch of duty. Our lower principles<sub>c</sub> and appetites are by no means always friendly to true self-love. They interfere with it almost as often as they

interfere with benevolence. We continually see men, through the influence of their lower principles<sub>c</sub> and appetites, acting in opposition to their own acknowledged interests as well as to the interests of others, and sacrificing to them their fortunes, healths, and lives.—Now, when a person is tempted by a clamorous appetite to forgo his own happiness, it really is as *praiseworthy* to •overcome the temptation and preserve a steady regard for his own interests as it is to •perform any acts of justice or to overcome temptations to be dishonest or cruel.

- Restraining unruly passions,
- strict temperance, sobriety and chastity,
- rejecting present good for greater good in the future,
- governing all our lower powers so that they don't disturb the order of our minds,
- acting in a way appropriate to the dignity and hopes of thinking immortal beings, and
- uniformly and steadfastly pursuing our own true perfection in opposition to any difficulties that come in our way

—this is high and true virtue! We can't help approving and admiring such conduct. [There now follows half a page of colourful stuff about how a person's life will fall apart if he doesn't take intelligent care of his own interests; and then a short paragraph saying that in general the virtue of someone's intentions shows up more clearly in what he does for others than in what he does for himself.]

**(3)** Another part of rectitude is beneficence, i.e. care for the good of others. Public happiness is something that necessarily determines all minds to prefer and desire it. It is of essential and unchangeable value and importance, and there's nothing that appears to our thoughts in a brighter or more evident manner, or of which we more undeniably have an intuitive perception, than that it is right to promote

and pursue public happiness.—This is such an important part of virtue, and is so universally acknowledged, that a considerable debate has broken out over whether it is *the whole* of virtue.

In discussing (2) I remarked that it would be strange if an action's tending to the good of someone else could make it fit for me to perform and yet its tending to my own good couldn't have that moral effect. And now the converse point can be made: it can't be consistently supposed that an action of mine could be justified by its favouring my own good but couldn't be justified by its favouring the good of others.

All thinking beings ought to have a share in our friendly wishes and feelings. But we are surrounded with *fellow-men*, beings with the same nature as ours, in the same circumstances and having the same wants; so we are linked and related to them in a very special way, and their happiness and misery depends greatly on our behaviour towards them. These considerations should draw us into working to be useful to mankind, cultivating to the utmost the principle<sub>c</sub> of benevolence towards them. [Price goes on about the 'amiable' nature of the man who has 'this divine principle<sub>c</sub>' reigning within him.]

(4) The next kind of virtue to be mentioned is gratitude. When we have received benefits, that fact gives us special obligations to our benefactors, and makes it wicked for us to behave towards them in certain ways that would be innocent if towards others. Is this merely an effect of the *utility* of gratitude? That it is *not* so is shown clearly enough, I think, in the passage quoted from Butler at the start of this chapter.

Gratitude is only one of many areas of morality in which particular facts and circumstances make a difference to what conduct is right towards this or that person—facts and circumstances that don't include anything about the conduct's consequences. There are countless cases where

such moral differences come from differences in people's •moral qualifications, •degrees of nearness (of various kinds) to the agent, and •many details of their situations and characters, which make it right to prefer some of them to others. Some of these details matter so little in themselves that their moral effect can be cancelled by almost any appearance or possibility of greater good, though when there is no such appearance they have a full effect in settling what is right. I shall mention an example of this when I come to (6) justice [page 75].

I accept that in all our enquiries into rightness the most general and central consideration is the question of what will be most beneficial, i.e. productive of the greatest public good. This is so important in cases where the public interest depending on it is very considerable that it can dislodge every obligation that would otherwise arise from •the common rules of justice, or from •promises, •private ·self·-interest, •friendship, •gratitude, and all particular attachments and connections.

(5) Veracity [= 'truthfulness'] is a most important part of virtue. I have already said a good deal about it, ·but I shan't rush through or past it now·. The morality of veracity depends to a certain extent on different beliefs and feelings regarding truth and falsehood, and it would be as well for me to go into some details about the foundation of these.

The difference between •truth and •falsehood is the same as the difference between •something and •nothing. It's a much bigger difference than that between •realities and •illusions or fictions, because illusions have a real existence in the mind, and that gives them a possible existence in the outer world. . . .—Now, it's inconceivable that •what is real should be regarded by the mind in the same way as •what is not real. Truth must be pleasing and desirable to any thinking nature, and it is bound to be disagreeable to such

a nature to find itself in a state of deception and mocked with error.—The more error there is in any mind, the more darkness it contains, the closer it is (if I may put it this way) to not existing! And the more truth it possesses, the more perception and knowledge it has. To dislike truth or to love error is to want not to see anything as it is. It's true that we are often pleased with finding that we have been mistaken, but what pleases us in those cases is not *having been mistaken* but rather *some advantage that came to us through the mistake*. In the same way we may be pleased by an act of villainy—meaning that we are pleased by some of its consequences or circumstances, not by the villainy itself. We frequently delight in our errors, but not *as* errors. As soon as we discover that we have been in error about something we are no longer in error about it, and this discovery is always welcome to us for the same reason that truth is welcome to us.—All this tells us something about the view that

- our liking for truth and
- the difference between our attitude to truth and our attitude to falsehood are *arbitrary*, .i.e. result from the workings of some God-given feature of our make-up that could have been otherwise.

We find that this view implies something that is impossible.

So truth *necessarily* recommends itself to our preference. And lying, the essence of which consists in using established signs in order to deceive, must be disapproved by all thinking beings for the same reasons that they desire truth and knowledge and prefer right judgment to mistake and ignorance. Anyone who had no preference for truth over falsehood, and who didn't care which of them he embraced, couldn't possibly take offence at being lied to or at anyone else's being lied to.

**what Price writes next:** And he who will not say, that, consequences apart, (which is all along supposed) to *know* is not better than to *err*, or that there is nothing to determine any being as rational, to chuse wisdom rather than folly, just apprehensions rather than wrong, to be awake and actually to see rather than to be in a continual delirium: He, I say, who will not maintain this, will scarcely be unwilling to acknowledge an immediate rectitude in veracity

**what that boils down to:** And anyone who *does* prefer truth to falsehood will accept that there's something intrinsically *right* about veracity.

I include under 'veracity'

- impartiality and honesty of mind in our enquiries after truth,
- a sacred regard for truth in all we say,
- fair and honest dealing,
- openness and simplicity of temperament that excludes guile and prevarication and all the contemptible arts of craft, equivocation and hypocrisy,
- fidelity to our promises,
- sincerity and uprightness in our transactions with ourselves as well as with others, and
- careful avoidance of all secret attempts to deceive ourselves and to evade or disguise the truth in examining our own characters.

Some of those, though they belong to the division of rectitude I am now discussing, which is defined by its being aimed at *truth*, are not properly included in the meaning of 'veracity'.—But it should be understood that promise-keeping *is* a kind of veracity.—We must look into this with care, because the nature of promises and the obligation to keep them have been said to be very difficult topics.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* III.ii.5.

By a promise a declaration is made or assurance given to someone else, giving us an obligation to behave in some way that we wouldn't have been bound to without the promise. Merely •declaring what you intend to do doesn't create such an obligation, so •promising must mean more than this; the whole difference is that one relates to the present and the other to the future.—When I say 'I intend to do A' I affirm only a *present* fact.—But 'I promise to do A' declares that A *will* be done. . . . After declaring an intention to do A, a man is under no obligation actually to do A, because he didn't say he would; his word and veracity are not at stake, and his not doing A doesn't imply that he is guilty of violating truth. On the other hand, when a person declares that he *will* do A he becomes obliged to do it, and can't afterwards *not* do A without being open to the charge of declaring a falsehood—just as really as •if he had said something he knew to be false about the past or the present, and in much the same way as he would have done •if he had claimed to *know* and had accordingly *asserted* that a certain event would happen at a certain time and it didn't happen then. But there's a considerable difference between this last case and the falsehood implied in breaking promises: the object of a promise that someone makes is something the existence of which depends on him; and he has it in his power to make it happen; and therefore the falsehood in this case must be known to him and deliberate, and entirely chargeable to his own neglect and guilt. But in the case of predicting events that are not under our control, if there is any blame it must be for claiming to have knowledge that we really don't have, asserting absolutely something we're not sure of.

So that's what it is to promise to do something: it is to *assert something whose truth depends on the promiser, with an intention to produce faith in it and reliance on it as something that is certainly going to happen*; so the obligation to keep a

promise is the same as the obligation to be truthful. Some writers have said that the intention in making a promise is to create a new obligation; but this can't be right, taken in the sense in which they meant it, unless it can be claimed that the obligation to be truthful is created by the mere breath of men every time they assert anything! Of course, if by 'creating a new obligation' we mean merely 'doing something as a result of which one has an obligation that one didn't have before', then it can be agreed that promising is creating a new obligation; but there is nothing in the least mysterious about this, and nothing worth making a philosophical fuss about. All we have is that after promising to do A one is obliged to do A; just as after doing something wrong one is obliged to repent, after doing harm one is obliged to make reparation, and so on. . . .

This account of promising hardly needs any further confirmation, but here is a confirming point: What kinds of circumstances make a false declaration less bad than it might have been? and what kinds make it worse? The answers have to do with how solemnly the declaration was made and how important its subject-matter is; and those are *exactly* the things that make a broken promise less bad or worse!

(6) The last part of virtue that I shall discuss is *justice*—meaning by 'justice' the part of virtue that has to do with property and commerce. [Price may have been using 'commerce' in the sense—dominant in his day but recessive now—of 'social interactions'.]

The origin of the idea of *property* is the same as that of right and wrong in general. It stands for a relation that a particular person has to a particular object, implying that it is •fitting that he rather than anyone else should have this object at his disposal, •and wrong to deprive him of it. This is what everyone means by calling a thing 'his right', or saying

that it is 'his own'.

Two questions arise: **(a)** How does an object come to relate to a person in this way? **(b)** How are we to analyse and understand the right and wrong that we perceive in these instances?

**(a)** Writers on ethics are very well agreed in their answers to the first of these questions. It is obvious that an object will acquire the 'is owned by' relation to a person as a result of •first possession, •its being the fruit of his labour, •donation, •succession, and many other ways that I needn't list here. [In this context Price, like some other early modern writers, uses 'possession' to mean something like 'having in one's physical control'. I may take possession of a book by picking it up and walking away with it; possession doesn't necessarily involve *ownership* or having the thing as one's *property*.]

**(b)** There is much less agreement about how this ought to be explained, though I can't find any special difficulties about this. Countless facts and circumstances vary and modify the general law of right, and alter the relations of particular effects to it [the last nine words are Price's]. Consider this as a way of behaving, considering just *this* and abstracting from all the details of the situation:

Taking possession of an object and disposing of it as I please.

That is innocent. But suppose that the further details include this:

The object was previously possessed by someone else who *made* it and doesn't consent to be deprived of it. In that case my conduct is wrong, not merely because of its consequences, but *immediately* wrong.—Taking to ourselves some means of enjoyment that is quite loose from our fellow-creatures, i.e. not related to them in any of the ways that create ownership, can't be the same as doing this when the contrary is true; it's not possible to give the same moral

judgment on such an action in those different circumstances. ·There really is no mystery about this·.

That •first possession, •prescription, •donation, •succession etc. should be facts that alter the nature of a case, determine right and wrong, and create obligations ·relating to property· where otherwise there wouldn't have been any

is no harder to conceive than

that •benefits received, •private or public interest, •the will of certain beings, or any of the other considerations I have discussed, should have this effect.

There is no way to account for this other than 'Such is the truth, such is the nature of things'. Whenever this account distinctly appears [Price's phrase] it is ultimate and satisfactory and leaves nothing further for the mind to desire.

Peoples' limbs, faculties, and lives are *theirs*, i.e. to be counted among their properties—the things they own—in much the same sense and for the same reasons as their external goods and acquisitions ·such as teaspoons and houses·. The former don't differ from the latter any more than the latter differ among themselves; ·my right leg is very unlike my watch, but my watch is at least as unlike, for example, my house·. The right to them is obtained in different ways, but is equally real and certain. Some say that before society and conventions were entered into for common convenience there was no property of the latter kind—no such thing as *owning* a watch or a house—so that if we took and held something for our own use there was no moral significance in any fact about how the thing had related to someone else. If *that* was ever true, presumably it would also be true of the other kind of property—limbs, lives etc.—so that there was no-one had a right to anything. It would be hard to show that this didn't follow.

Then there is the view that when we speak of someone

x as having a 'right' to some object y, all we mean is that it best for society as a whole that x should have the exclusive enjoyment of y. This implies that when general utility is not involved, •a man has no more right to his liberty or his life than he has to objects that have nothing to do with him, and •because he has *no* property a man can't suffer injurious or unjust treatment. [Price applies this to a supposed case of two men who live together with no connection to the rest of the world, contending that according to the view he is discussing there would be nothing *wrong* with any treatment that either of them gave to the other. He sums up:] We wouldn't have much reason, on these principles, for rejecting the opinion that a state of nature is a state of war!

These remarks can be more clearly applied to independent *societies* of men, which are to be looked on as in a state of nature with respect to one another. If the notions of property and justice are not natural, being derived wholly from the consideration of public good, it's a very strange fact that those notions should prevail almost as much between societies as between private persons—*strange* because whatever one society can take from another may be equally useful to both. And another point: If public good were the sole measure and foundation of *property* and of peoples' *rights*, this would follow:

Innocent beings don't have a *right* to exemption from misery; it is morally all right to make them miserable if their misery—whether great or small—would give rise to some good that outweighed it, however slightly.

Indeed, any number of innocent beings might be put into a state of absolute and eternal misery, provided that this was made up for by producing at the same time a greater number of beings in a greater degree happy. [The next part of the paragraph is hard to follow closely. In it Price credits his present opponent—the balance-of-happiness-over-misery

theorist—with being committed to the following: There is no morally significant difference between these two:

- (i) giving a man a quantity K of happiness and no misery,
- (ii) giving a man a quantity J of misery and a quantity J+K of happiness,

because in each case what counts is the amount of uncancelled happiness [not Price's phrase], which is K each time. And, says Price, the opponent is also committed to saying that there is no morally significant difference between these two:

- (ii) getting a surplus of happiness in the manner of (ii) above by giving some misery but more happiness to **one** person,
- (iii) getting a surplus of happiness by making a large number of people totally miserable while making a large number of **other** people happy to an even greater degree.

Price continues with a comment on (iii):] The procedure in (iii) is clearly wrong and unjust, especially if we suppose the sufferings of the unhappy people to be in some way part of the means to greater happiness for the rest. Is a man x, whatever his relations (e.g. of friendship, benefaction etc.) are to another man y, unable to be *wronged* by y through any actions that aren't harmful to the public? Is it all right for a man to ruin any number of his fellow-creatures (doing this innocently, i.e. not wanting to ruin them), provided he causes the good of others in a greater degree? Such consequences are plainly shocking to our natural sentiments, but I don't know how to avoid them on the principles I am examining, i.e. on the thesis that public utility is the only criterion of right and wrong. It is indeed hard to determine what degree of superior good would make up for the irreparable and undeserved ruin of one person, i.e. what overbalance of happiness would be great enough to justify the absolute misery of one innocent being. [In a footnote here, Price

quotes Cicero as saying that ‘some actions are so foul that a good man would not do them to save his country’, and adds details.] Be these things as they may, the points I have made are at least enough to show that public happiness cannot be the sole standard and measure of justice and injustice. But I could set those arguments aside and let the whole issue rest on the answer that any impartial person will find he has to give to the following question:

Concerning an object that can’t be divided or enjoyed in common by two persons, and would be equally advantageous to both of them: Isn’t it fitting—setting aside all distant consequences—that the person who possessed it first, or the one whose skill and labour had produced it, should have the use and enjoyment of it rather than the other person?

The affirmative in this case is very obvious; and anyone who gives that answer has to think that the origin of *property* is something like what I have said it is.

What may have helped to mislead some writers is the visible general connection between •injustice and •cruelty; but even if •these were more inseparable than they are, we would still have no reason for running them together. A little reflection will show an unbiased person that the notion of an action’s being *unjust* is different from that of its being *cruel*, *inhuman*, or *unkind*. If they weren’t different, how could the guilt of a •cruel action always appear to be made worse by its also being •unjust? Someone may reply: ‘The injustice of an act of cruelty adds to the private damage it does a damage also to the public, and that makes it appear more cruel and therefore more wrong.’ But how could anyone think that possible harms to the public in the distant future (many of which are not immediately discovered ·even· by those who *search* for them) are always thought of by the bulk of men? If they were, that would make simple and illiterate people

in some cases better judges of what is just and unjust than those who are learned and studious! . . .

[In two short paragraphs, Price (i) repeats his earlier point about settling ownership disputes by ‘frivolous’ differences if there are no weightier ones, and (ii) reminds us of the ‘intelligible’ view that someone who owns something is free to give it to anyone else he chooses. In a third paragraph he (iii) writes about two situations in which x and y are quite relaxed about which of them owns z—in one of them •x and y are good friends or close relatives, in the other •z is something such as air or water, that is easily and plentifully available. He says that these aspects of *property* pose no problem for his account of property and justice, and he silently implies that they are problematic for the theory that the concept of justice (and therefore the concept of property) is definable purely in terms of public utility.]

The particular rules of justice are various, and in many cases it’s hard to determine what justice requires. There’s no need for me to go into all that. But I do want to say this: although I can’t allow •public good to be the sole source of justice, •it undoubtedly has a great influence on it, and is one important factor in many of its maxims. •It gives to the rights of men a considerable additional force, and in some cases •it entirely creates those rights.—It is utterly obvious that the happiness of the world and the existence of society require that possessions be stable, and property sacred, and not liable to be violated except on very extraordinary occasions. When we are considering what the common interest requires in regard to some proposed action, we have to take into account not only •the immediate effects of the action, but also what its longer-term consequences are likely to be—what it opens the way to, and what would actually happen if everyone acted in this way. If it is morally all right for *me* to take a man’s property. . . .on the grounds



that I am poorer than he is, or he doesn't need it, or I plan to give it to someone worthier than he is, then it is all right for *anyone* to act in this way in similar circumstances; and if that happened, the boundaries of *property* would be overthrown and the door opened to general anarchy, distrust and savageness.—But it is far from true that considerations of this kind are the sole guides to men in their sentiments about property and justice; indeed (I repeat) men usually don't think about such things *at all*. . . .

These then are the main types of virtue. There may be particular cases that don't cleanly belong to any of the types. We judge what is or isn't to be done by attending to •people's different relations, circumstances, and qualifications, and to •the natures and tendencies [here = 'causal powers'] of objects—in short by examining the whole truth of the case we are considering. The universal law of rectitude considered in the abstract is always invariably the same, but what it demands continually changes from case to case because there's so much variety in the cases—the situations of agents and objects are always changing.

However different from one another the types of virtue that I have listed are, the very notion of them as types of *virtue* implies that they all involve one general idea and should be regarded only as different specifications of *one* basic all-governing law. In all these virtues it is the same authority that commands, the same truth and right that oblige, the same eternal reason that instructs. Virtue thus considered is necessarily one thing. No part of it can be separated from any other.

This shows us what a defective and inconsistent thing *partial virtue* is—e.g. for someone to have all the virtues except piety. The same law that requires piety also requires benevolence, veracity, temperance, justice, gratitude, and so on. All these rest on the same foundation, and are alike

our indispensable duty. So someone who generally neglects some one of them is a rebel against reason and a deserter from the cause of righteousness and order, just as if he had neglected them all. The law's authority on one point is not different from its authority on another, and on all points. To break the law on one point (I mean: to do so habitually and wilfully) is therefore to throw off one's allegiance and to trample on the whole authority of the law. True and genuine virtue must be uniform and universal. Nothing short of an entire good character can help us to be accepted by God on the day of judgment. As long as we retain any evil habit we can't be counted as loyal subjects of the divine government, we continue under the curse of guilt, slaves to vice, and not qualified for bliss. I'll have occasion to say more about this later.

Something else that helps to unite the types of virtue I have listed is that they often agree in requiring the same actions. An act of justice may be also an act of gratitude and bene-ficence, and any act of any of these kinds is also required for the virtue of piety towards God. If injustice, fraud, falsehood, and a neglect of private good were universally prevalent, what a dreadful state the world would be in! and how thoroughly the ends of benevolence would be defeated!—There are many virtues, but annihilating any *one* of them has the most pernicious consequences for all the others. This •unity of the virtues• can be seen in good measure in how things go in •the present state of things, but in •the final issue of things •in the after-life• the harmony between them will be found to be much more strict. Whatever exceptions may now happen •in our present life•, if we look forwards to the whole of our existence we'll find that the three great principles<sub>c</sub> of the love of God, the love of man, and true self-love will always draw us the same way; and we have the strongest reason to assure ourselves that *eventually* no-one

will be able to say that he has prospered because of some unjust action, or that although he has been less scrupulous than others he has been more successful and happy.

But although the types of virtue I have listed agree in often requiring the same course of action, it is also true that they often interfere with one another. . . .in particular cases.—This perhaps hasn't been sufficiently attended to, so I shall emphasize it.

The difficulty of determining what is morally right or wrong in particular cases is created mainly by this interference between the different general principles of virtue.—The pursuit of the happiness of others is a duty, and so is the pursuit of one's own happiness; on the whole these two duties are inseparably connected, but in many particular instances one of them can't be pursued without giving up the other. When the public happiness is very great and the self-interest very inconsiderable, there is no problem. . . . But when the public happiness ·that is at stake· is lessened, and the private self-interest is increased to a certain degree, doubt arises and makes us entirely incapable of determining which we ought to choose. We have the most satisfactory perception that we ought to care for our own good, and within certain limits prefer it to that of anyone else; but where exactly are those limits? Who can tell us in all cases of opposition between the two types of duty where the boundaries are of right, of wrong, and of indifference [= 'neither required nor forbidden'] are to be found? [Price continues with other examples: the duty to seek one's own and the public good may clash with duties having to do with friendship, gratitude, justice, and so on. Different bases for ownership may clash. Such conflicts as these confront us with difficulties that we often lack the skill to overcome. There's nothing remarkable about this, Price says; in non-moral matters also we are sometimes 'at a loss to know what is true, when

the arguments for and against a proposition appear nearly equal'.]

Bear in mind that the principles themselves are self-evident. It is very unreasonable to argue thus:

- Because in many individual cases the principles clash and create obscurity, *therefore* they aren't self-evident (or: therefore there are no moral distinctions).

That inference is like these:

- In some circumstances we can't judge the distances and sizes of bodies by their appearance to the eye; *therefore* we never can.
- Undeniable· principles can be used in proving particular doctrines and in opposing them; *therefore* these principles are not undeniable.
- In some cases it isn't easy to determine what the effect will be of different forces variously combined and acting contrary to each other; *therefore* we can't be sure about what any force acting separately will produce (or: therefore we can't know that there is any such thing as force).

[Price elaborates that a little in a footnote, that ends:] The weakness of our discerning faculties cannot in any case affect truth. Things themselves continue invariably the same, however different our opinions of them may be, or whatever doubts or difficulties may perplex us.

These remarks may be useful in helping us to determine how far and in what sense morality is capable of demonstration [= 'logically rigorous proof']. There are certainly many moral principles and maxims that need only to be understood to be assented to. I don't see why such propositions as these,

- Gratitude is due to benefactors,
- Reverence is due to our Creator,
- It is right to care for our own happiness,
- An innocent being ought not to be absolutely miser-

able,

•It is wrong to take from someone the fruit of his labour,

and others of that kind may not be laid down and used as axioms, the truth of which appears as irresistibly as the truth of the basic propositions of geometry. But the picture changes when we come to consider *particular* effects. When people speak of ‘demonstrating morality’ they must mean relating these particular cases to the general self-evident principles of morality, showing *with certainty* how they relate to them. It would be happy for us if this were always possible! We would then •be relieved of many painful doubts, •know universally and infallibly what we should do and what we should avoid, and •have nothing to attend to except making our behaviour conform to our knowledge. Everyone must see how impracticable this is. Even if benevolence were the only virtuous principle—so that we had no clash-of-principles difficulties—we would still be far from being able to apply it always, with no danger of mistake, to particular actions. Why? Because we can’t be more sure in a particular case that *doing A would be an instance of beneficence* than we are of the likely consequences of doing A. [And the same point could be made (Price continues) if self-love were the only principle of virtue. Applying the principle to individual cases would require knowledge, which we often don’t have, about likely consequences of doing A or doing B. Similarly with •duty to God, •the properties and rights of others, and •gratitude: if any one of those were the whole of virtue, we would still have daunting difficulties in many particular cases. All this is offered as evidence against the thesis that ‘morality can be demonstrated’ in the sense Price adopted early in this paragraph.]

A second source of insuperable difficulties ·for the thesis in question· comes to the surface when we remember that in

order to discover what is right in a particular case we ought to extend our views to all the different types of virtue, to examine how relevant each of them is to the case in hand, and to compare their respective influence and demands—not to mention the fact that they often interfere with one another. To know that we ought to do A, it isn’t enough to know that doing A will bring good to others; we must also take into account how it affects ourselves, what justice has to say about it, and so on; all this must be taken in and weighed if we want to form a true judgment about the rightness of doing A on this occasion. The truth of the matter is this:

•To be capable of deducing—demonstrably, accurately and in particular detail—the whole rule of right as it applies in every case, we must have universal and unerring knowledge.

And no finite understanding is equipped to have such knowledge. Only he who knows all truth is acquainted with the whole law of truth in all its importance, perfection and extent.

These considerations may help us to form a judgment about the different sentiments and practices, in several areas of morality, that have held sway in different countries and ages. All men at all times have agreed in accepting the general principles that I have listed ·on the preceding page·. It can’t be shown that there have *ever* been human beings with no ideas of property and justice, or of the rightness of veracity, gratitude, benevolence, prudence, and religious worship. The only disagreements have concerned particular usages and practices; and it is inevitable that different people will have different ideas about these, according to their various opinions •about how these practices relate to the universally acknowledged moral principles, or •about their purposes, connections, and consequences.—Those who plead for passive obedience and non-resistance—·holding that it is *never* right to resist the power of the king—think

that divine command or public good requires something that others, with more reason, think to be a reproach to human nature and destructive of the very purpose of magistracy and government.—The nations where people accepted the customs of *exposing* children and aged persons—leaving them out in the wilds to die of starvation or cold or animal predation—approved of these customs because they believed them to be •conducive to the general advantage and •friendly to the sufferers themselves.—Self-murder [Price's term] among some of the ancients was justified and applauded because they thought of it as a method of extricating themselves from misery, one that only brave men could use, rather than seeing it as what it truly is, namely an act of very criminal discontent and unwillingness to put up with suffering, a desertion of the place assigned to us by Providence, and a cowardly flight from the duties and difficulties of life. —As far as anyone has ever approved persecution, it could only have been because they thought they were serving God, inflicting his wrath upon his enemies, justly punishing obstinacy and impiety, and. . . preventing the propagation of anything that tends to subvert true religion and ruin the souls of men.—The most superstitious practices and ridiculous rites of worship have gained credit and support merely because they were thought to be •pleasing to God, •means of procuring his favour, and •proper expressions of homage and adoration.

[In the next sentence and some later ones, the line between 'speculative' and 'practical' can be equated with the line between 'not having to do with morality' and 'having to do with morality'. In this early modern sense of the word, 'speculative' doesn't mean anything about guess-work, as 'speculate' does today.] In these and countless other instances of the same sort, men's practical errors have clearly arisen from their speculative errors—mistaking facts, or not knowing all the relevant facts—which has the result that they often think to be right practices that they would unavoidably condemn

if they had sounder beliefs on matters of fact. The rules by which to judge are universally the same; those who approve and those who disapprove are applying the same principles, and differ only in *how* they apply them. When they are in error, the error consists in thinking that something belongs to a particular species of virtue when really it doesn't. It is just as reasonable to expect disagreement •here as in •the application of agreed principles of knowledge and assent in general. The inference

•Men are diverse in their speculative opinions; therefore they don't have speculative reason,

is no more extravagant than this:

•Men are diverse in their opinions about the fitness or unfitness, lawfulness or unlawfulness, of particular practices; therefore they have no powers of moral perception (or: therefore there is no fixed standard of morality).

Until men can be •raised to the level of not having any defective knowledge, and •secured against partial and inadequate views, they will go on being apt to •believe cases and facts and the tendencies of actions to be otherwise than they really are, and consequently to •form false judgments about right and wrong. . . .

[In Price's day 'education' had a somewhat broader meaning than it does today, so that it could often be replaced by 'upbringing'.] Bear in mind also some questions that arise about the influence of custom, education, and example. •To what extent can they alter our natural sentiments? To what extent can they give us an undue attachment to some qualities, and vivacity to some ideas above others? •How much depravity and blindness can they introduce into our moral and intellectual powers? •Reflecting a little on the third question: through the influence of custom etc. the most stupid notions may come to be rooted in our minds beyond the possibility of

being eradicated, we may be made hostile to things that are naturally very agreeable, and our very sensations may be perverted.

Some writers have been disposed to **infer** from this that *all we are* is derived from •education and habit; that we can never know when we are free from •their influence and forming our beliefs on the basis of sound evidence; or that there are no *natural* sensations and desires at all, and no principles of truth that are in themselves certain and invariable, and compelling everyone's assent. This **inference** is unreasonable. Education and habit can't give us any new ideas. The power they have presupposes something *natural* as their foundation. If it weren't for the *natural* powers by which we perceive pleasure and pain, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the ideas of them could never be aroused in us •by education etc. or in any other way•, any more than the ideas of colour can be aroused in persons born blind. . . . If the ideas of proportion, similarity, existence, identity, and so on weren't essential to our understandings, we would lose all capacity for knowledge and judgment, so that we couldn't possibly be *mised*. . . .by wrong biases! If we had no natural ideas of virtue and vice, we wouldn't be capable of approval or disapproval—love or hatred—of actions and characters, except on the basis of their being advantageous or disadvantageous to us. Custom and education can only alter the *direction* of natural sentiments and ideas, connecting them with wrong objects.—The part of our moral constitution that is chiefly liable to being ruined by these causes is the part that depends on *instinct*. Our outright horror at vice and our attachment to virtue may be impaired, the conscience deadened, the nature of particular practices mistaken, the sense of shame weakened, the judgment darkened, the voice of reason stifled, and self-deception practised, to the most lamentable and fatal degree. Yet the grand lines and primary

principles of morality are so deeply worked into our hearts, so integral to our minds, that they will always be legible •there•. The general approval of certain virtues and dislike of their contraries must always remain, and can't be erased except through the destruction of all intellectual perception. The most depraved people never sink so low as to lose *all* moral discernment, all ideas of right and wrong, justice and injustice, honour and dishonour. This is clear enough from •the judgments they pass on the actions of others, from •the resentment they show whenever *they* are ill-treated, and from •the inner uneasiness and remorse that they can't help feeling and are sometimes severely tormented by. All the satisfaction and peace within themselves that they are capable of enjoying comes largely from their taking care *not* to think about themselves, and from their having learned to disguise their vices under the appearance—the appearance *to themselves*—of some virtuous or innocent qualities, which shows that vice is still so foul and frightful to them that they can't bear the direct view of it in themselves. [Price winds this up by saying that even if everything he has said about these 'most depraved' people is wrong, they can safely be ignored by those who care about moral truth and the truth about human nature.]

The sources of error and disagreement that I have been discussing would produce very considerable effects even if all the particulars of duty and rightness were in themselves plain and easy to discover. Something that was so plain that differences about it wouldn't be caused by educations, temperaments, views, and degrees of wisdom as different as those of mankind, or by inattention, prejudices, and corruptions as great as those that prevail among men—that would have to be very plain indeed!—But if we remember the things I have said about interference between the principles of morality, and about the impossibility of a complete and

scientific deduction of what we ought to do and what we ought to avoid in particular circumstances, we'll accept that *the subject itself* is often wrapped in real darkness and accompanied by insurmountable difficulties that produce even greater and more unavoidable disagreements. What I have said •seems to account well enough for the diversity of men's sentiments concerning moral matters, and •makes it reasonable to expect that they should be no less various than their sentiments concerning anything else.

One last point: Even if all men in all cases judged *rightly* what is virtue and right behaviour, the moral practices in different ages and countries would still vary considerably. The reason is obvious. In different ages and circumstances of the world, the same practices don't always have the same connections, tendencies, and effects. The state of human affairs is perpetually changing, and is very different in different nations at the same period of time. Amidst this variety the subject-matter of virtue couldn't possibly continue precisely

the same. When new connections are established, and new customs, laws, and political constitutions are introduced, it is inevitable that new obligations arise and changes occur in what behaviour is morally proper. Practices that are justifiable and proper •under one form of government, or •when a community is first established, or •among people with a particular cast of mind that leads to their having particular regulations and opinions, may be quite wrong in another state of things or among people of other characters and customs. The ancient Spartans, we are told, accepted *theft* as a practice. They didn't care much about wealth, and that fact together with many circumstances in the state of their affairs might rightly relax their ideas of ownership, and make each instance of *taking from someone something that he owned* different from what it is now among us. Some virtues or accomplishments may be more useful and more difficult—and therefore deserving of more applause—in some countries than in others. . . .

## Chapter 8

### The nature and essentials of virtue in practice as distinct from absolute virtue.

#### From what principle<sub>c</sub> or motive does a virtuous agent act?

Before starting on the main topic of this chapter, I must give you a clear account of the distinction between *abstract* or *absolute* virtue and *practical* or *relative* virtue. I mentioned this earlier, but now it will be the basis for what I shall have to say on the main topic.

I expect to show clearly that there is a sound basis for this distinction. If we don't attend to it we shan't be able to •have an accurate view of the nature of virtue, or •avoid getting into many tangles in our enquiries into it.

The phrase 'abstract virtue', when used properly, stands

for a quality of an external action or event. It stands for a property that an action can have independently of what the agent thinks about it. An abstractly virtuous action is one that is right, in itself and absolutely, for the agent to perform; it is what such-and-such an agent in such-and-such circumstances *should* do—what he would judge, if he judged truly, that he ought to do. *Practical* virtue, on the other hand, is essentially tied to what the agent thinks about his actions. It signifies what he ought to do given that he has such-and-such sentiments.—A distinction something like this is the line some writers have drawn between *materially good* actions and *formally good* actions [This distinction is mentioned again on page 95].—Moral agents are apt to •be mistaken about the circumstances they are in, and thus to •form wrong judgments about their own obligations. This presupposes that these obligations do really exist independently of their judgments. But when they are in any way mistaken, it doesn't follow that then nothing remains obligatory, because there is a sense in which the following is true:

What a person in the sincerity of his heart thinks he ought to do is what he indeed •practically• ought to do; and he would be at fault if he didn't do it, even if it is contradictory to what is his duty in the former •abstract• sense.

—If anyone objects that 'this implies that an action can be both right and wrong at the same time', that is mere trifling because it overlooks that fact that two different views of the action are at work here. Take the following case:

A magistrate gives a judgment awarding an estate to person x rather than to person y because there is overwhelming evidence that x and not y is entitled to it. It later turns out that the estate really does belong to y.

The magistrate has certainly done what is right in one sense,

though it is just as certainly wrong in another sense—it is practically right, abstractly wrong.

If we reject this distinction •by dropping the notion of 'abstract virtue' and having 'practical virtue' as our only moral notion•, we'll be committed to •some intolerable consequences: •things really are whatever we think they are, •there is no sense in which someone can 'act wrongly' without incurring guilt and blame, •while we follow our judgments, we cannot err in our conduct, •if through an involuntary mistake a man

breaks the most important engagements, hurts his best friends, or bestows his bounty on the most worthless objects,

if through religious zeal and blind superstition he

commits the most shocking barbarities, thinking that in this way he is serving God,

and if through a belief in their lawfulness he

engages in violence and deceit,

there is *no* sense in which his conduct 'contradicts rectitude', or in which it can be truly said that 'he acts wrongly'. Thus the difference between an enlightened conscience and an erroneous one would vanish, no moral mistake would be possible, all the fancies of men concerning their duty would be equally sound, and the most ignorant people would be as well informed about the subject-matter of virtue as the most knowing!—But there's really no need for me to go on about this—the point is obvious. . . .

From knowledge of •a person's nature and capacities, •his relations, connections, and dependencies, and •the consequences of his actions, it is possible for us to work out the whole of what he *ought to do* in the first sense—•i.e. as a matter of abstract virtue—without paying the least attention to his private judgment. But to decide what he *ought to do* in the second sense—•i.e. as a matter of practical

virtue—we do have to know about his judgment, what he actually thinks about what he is doing at the time of doing it; and that is the *only* thing we have to take into account. Abstract virtue requires a great variety of circumstances to be taken into account, and we can't possibly know it for sure on every occasion, any more than we can always know for sure the whole truth about anything else. Practical virtue, on the other hand, involves few difficulties. The greatest degree of doubt about the abstract morality of an action may leave us with no hesitation at all about its practical morality. Our rule is to take care to *inform* •our consciences in the best manner we can, and then to follow •them steadily and faithfully; and when in doubt to take the safer option, i.e.

- not to risk doing anything about which we have doubts, when we know that there can't be anything wrong with *not* doing it,

and, on the other hand,

- not to omit to do anything about which we have doubts, when we know there can't be anything wrong with *doing* it.

Now consider a case where we think it may be wrong to do A, and also think that it may be wrong *not* to do A, and where our doubts •or uncertainties• on the two sides are equal. In such a case it becomes *practically* indifferent which way we act. When the doubts on one side outweigh the doubts on the other, it's obvious that we ought to take the option in which there seems to us the least danger of going astray.—It's a fortunate thing for us that our entitlement to count as 'virtuous' beings depends not on the correctness of our opinions, or the constant objective [= 'abstract'] rightness of everything we do, but on the conformity of our actions to the sincere conviction of our minds. If we came to suspect that that is *not* the standard for 'virtuous person', the results of that would be very bad: it would cause us to distrust

our only guide (•conscience•), and would throw us into a permanent state of bewilderment. . . .

I have applied the adjectives 'real' and 'absolute' to the first kind of virtue, for an obvious reason, but don't get the idea that the second kind isn't also in a different sense 'real' virtue. It is •really and• truly and absolutely right that a person should do what the reason of his mind—his perhaps *misinformed* mind—requires of him, or what according to his best judgment he is convinced is the will of God. If he doesn't do this he will necessarily and justly come to dislike himself, and will forfeit all claims to integrity. [At this point Price has a long footnote which is here raised into the main text.]

•START OF THE LONG FOOTNOTE•

So all the claims to dominion over conscience—how absurd they are! What those who have pleaded for such dominion have been trying to get is a power or right to oblige people to act against their private judgment—i.e. a right to oblige people to act wrongly. Every man ought to be left to follow his own conscience, because it's only then that he acts virtuously. Where the plea of conscience is real (and who but God can judge how far in general it is or isn't so?), it is *wicked* to put restraints on it. For that is violating the rights of what is above all things sacred [Price's phrase], trying to turn men into hypocrites and knaves, establishing *human* authority on the ruins of *divine* authority.—The only interference with anyone's conscience that is ever right is necessary self-defence when some men's consciences lead them to hurt others, to take away their liberty, or to subvert the public.—It flies in the face of common sense, as well as being impious, for any men to claim a power to oblige their fellow-men to worship God in any manner other than the one that is most agreeable to their consciences. . . .—The civil magistrate goes out of his domain when he intervenes in religious differences. His role is only to secure the liberties



and properties of those under his jurisdiction, to protect all good subjects, to preserve the peace amongst conflicting sects, and to block them from encroaching on one another.

Forgive me if I work in an extra point here. It is the fact that we have something very close to a *demonstration* [= 'a logically rigorous proof'] that God will not and cannot **(a)** grant to any particular man or set of men a power to direct the faith and practices of others in religious matters without at the same time **(b)** making them infallible and impeccable. For if he did **(a)** without **(b)**, what would the **(a)** amount to? It would be simply a grant of power to mislead and deceive! We *know* what errors, what corruptions, what desolation have been actually produced when **(a)** this power has been claimed by men who did not have **(b)** those qualifications!—It is a part of the special good fortune of this nation that principles of this kind have been so well explained here and are now so widely accepted here. May they be still more widely accepted and better understood, and may our constitution and laws, already the best in the world, grow to a perfect conformity to them! As for those who favour giving up their liberty and independence and submitting to human authority in religious matters, may their number continually decrease, and may the joyful time soon come when all slavish principles are detested and held in contempt by everyone!

·END OF THE LONG FOOTNOTE·

These different kinds of rectitude have such an affinity that we are very apt to confuse them with one another in our thoughts and talk, and we have to attend carefully if we are to know which of them we are talking about. It is hardly possible in writing on morality to avoid blending them in our language, often talking about both even in the same sentence. But I have said enough to enable an attentive person to see when and how this is done, and to prepare the way for the explanation of the nature and essentials of

*practical* virtue that I now embark on. ·My discussion will have three main episodes·.

**1.** Practical virtue presupposes *liberty*. Whether or not everyone will agree about this, it can't be omitted.

[Price is about to make heavy use of 'determine' and its cognates. Its uses can be seen as having two strands: **(i)** In the phrase 'acting and determining', it means something like 'deciding', but not in the sense of 'deciding to do A next week'. To say that I 'determine to do A' is to say that I actively set myself to do A right now; an act of determining was sometimes called 'an act of the will' or 'a volition'. **(ii)** In the phrase 'not necessarily determined', it means something like 'caused'. The common meaning that ran through both uses was that of 'settle', 'fix', 'pin down' or the like. If I determine to do A I *settle* the question of what I am about to do. If an explosion determines the outbreak of a fire, it *settles* the question of whether there will soon be a fire. So there was no outright ambiguity in 'determine'; and for Price and some others there weren't even two clearly separate strands in its use, because in their view when you actively set yourself to do something—i.e. when you determine to do it—you do literally *cause* yourself to do it.]

The liberty I am talking about here is the power of *acting* and *determining*; and it is self-evident that if anyone lacked that power he could have no moral capacities. When someone *acts* he must himself be the cause of the action, and therefore not necessarily determined to act. Let anyone try to find for the expressions 'I will', 'I act', a sense that is consistent with supposing that the volition or action does not come from *myself*. [In that sentence, 'I will' means 'I perform an act of the will'; it is present-tense, not an auxiliary verb in the future tense as in 'I will visit you tomorrow'.] Virtue presupposes determination, and determination presupposes a determiner, and 'a determiner who doesn't determine himself' is an obvious contradiction. Determination requires a cause. If this cause is the person himself, that's all I ask for. If not, then it is no longer *his* determination, i.e. the determiner

is no longer *him* but rather the motive—or whatever else anyone will say is the cause of the determination. When you are told that a certain person did A, to ask ‘What brought about the determination to do A?’ is to ask ‘Who did A?’ Surely everyone can feel the absurdity of saying that *my* volitions are produced by an *outside* cause, i.e. are not *mine*; or saying that I determine *voluntarily* and yet *necessarily!* And such denials of liberty, as well as being absurd, fly in the face of experience.—We have a constant and necessary awareness of our liberty, on a par with our awareness that we think, choose, will, or even *exist*. Whatever anyone may say to the contrary, no-one can possibly think in earnest that he has no active, self-moving powers and isn’t the cause of his own volitions, or fail to ascribe to himself things that he must be aware of thinking and doing.

This question about liberty has been enormously much darkened by fallacious reasonings, and creates much danger of falling into a confusion of ideas; and I don’t want to go much further into all that. I merely point out that it is hard to say what virtue and vice, commendation and blame, *mean* if they don’t presuppose agency, free choice, and an absolute dominion over our decisions.—It has always been the general sense of mankind. . . .that they can’t be accountable for anything that they have no power to avoid. Applauding or reproaching ourselves for events that *we* didn’t cause any more than we caused our own existence, and that we couldn’t have prevented any more than we could

prevent the returns of the seasons or the revolutions of the planets—nothing can be more glaringly absurd than *that!* The whole language of men, all their practical sentiments and schemes, and the whole structure and order of human affairs, are based on the notion of liberty and are utterly inconsistent with the supposition that. . . .our purposes and determinations are not subject to our own command, but are rather the result of physical laws that can’t be resisted. [That’s Price’s first use of ‘physical’ in this work. (Previous occurrences in this version are all tagged as editorial.) At his time and earlier, ‘physical’ bore traces of its origin in the ancient Greek trilogy—Logic/Ethics/Physics, what-must-be/what-ought-to-be/what-is. Thus, ‘physical laws’ are just causal laws governing what goes on in the world, what actually happens; with no implied restriction to matter or body.]

If any of the advocates of the doctrine of necessity should find that what **they** mean by ‘necessity’ is consistent with the ideas of agency and self-determination, there won’t be much left to argue about: the liberty that **I** insist on as essential to morality will be admitted, and we won’t have to pay much attention to any difficulties relating to the nature of that influence we commonly ascribe to motives.<sup>22</sup>

**2.** Intelligence—i.e. the ability to think—is also required for practical morality. Some degree of this is necessary for the perception of moral good and evil, and without this perception there can be no moral agency. Doesn’t liberty include or imply the ability to think? No! All the lower orders of beings possess true liberty. Self-motion and

<sup>22</sup> ·Not that these ‘difficulties’ amount to much·. When we say that someone’s motives ‘determine him’, all we mean is that he chooses to follow his judgment and desires, or that he actually does what he is inclined to do. There is not much mystery in *that!* In saying this, we don’t mean that the man’s motives are involved in causing his determination, or that his judgment and views are physically connected with the actions consequent upon them. It would be *absurd* to say that our inclinations act on us, or compel us, that our desires and fears put us into motion or produce our volitions, i.e. are agents! But it is perfectly conceivable that they may be the *occasions* of our putting ourselves into motion.—There’s no need for me to *prove* that the idea of an efficient cause—a cause that *makes* something happen—is essentially and totally different from an explanation (Price’s word is ‘account’) or occasion. If ball x strikes y, the location of y on the billiard table is the occasion or explanation of the collision—i.e. it is a background condition, and is part of the explanation of the collision—but it’s senseless to say that y’s location is the efficient cause of its motion. . . .

activity of some kind are essential to every conscious living being. There seems to be no difference between •having no spontaneity and •being entirely inanimate. [At Price's time 'animate' often meant not 'living' but, more narrowly, 'breathing'; so plants were 'inanimate'.]—But though liberty doesn't presuppose intelligence, yet intelligence plainly presupposes liberty. For what I have just said about all creatures that can *feel* is much more strictly true of creatures that can *think*. A thinking, designing, reasoning being that has no liberty, no inward, spontaneous, active, self-directing principle<sub>c</sub>, is something that no-one can form any idea of. That's a measure of how unreasonable are all objections to the making of free creatures, and how absurd it is to ask why men were made free. But,

**3.** The main point now to be insisted on is that an agent can't be rightly called 'virtuous' unless he acts •from a consciousness of rectitude, and •with a regard to it as his rule and purpose. This seems to me to be undoubtedly true and of great importance, but I know that there are many who'll be hard to convince of it; so I should make a special point of trying to explain and prove it.

Liberty and reason constitute the *ability* to be virtuous; what makes a person's character *actually* virtuous is the intention with which he acts.—Don't forget the distinction that I drew at the start of this chapter. To mere theoretical virtue—i.e. the abstract reasons and fitnesses of things—praiseworthiness is not applicable. The object of our praise and esteem is the actual conformity of moral agents' wills to what they see or believe to be the fitnesses of things. We could reasonably label one of these as 'the virtue of the action' and the other as 'the virtue of the agent'. No particular intention is required for virtue of the action, because what is objectively right can be done from any motive, good or bad; so someone's doing something objectively right doesn't

confer any merit on him—indeed, it is consistent with the greatest guilt. On the other hand, in assessing the virtue of the agent the most essential thing is the agent's intention. When the intention is good, that confers virtue on the agent, whatever is the objective moral status of the action, for it often happens that an agent is entitled to commendation for some objectively wrong action that he performs.

It may help us to think more clearly about this matter if we take the position that very strictly speaking the only thing that an agent *does* is what he *intends to do*. What happens beyond his intention or contrary to it, even if it happens through a chain of natural causes that has his determination on it, shouldn't be imputed to *him*. Our own determinations are, strictly speaking, our only actions. They are all that we have absolute power over and are responsible for. . . . —It seems indeed to be utterly obvious that there are two views or senses in which we commonly speak of 'actions'. Sometimes we mean by a person's 'action' his determination or volition, of which his intention is an essential part. And sometimes we mean the real event, the effect produced in the outer world. For a being who has infinite knowledge and power, these two always coincide: what such a being designs and determines to do is always the same as the actual event produced. But we have no reason to think this true of any inferior beings.

In further explaining and proving the thesis that I am working towards, it will be proper to show that **(1)** someone's perception of right and wrong does stimulate [Price's word is 'excite'] him to act, and **(2)** that it is the only sufficient principle<sub>c</sub> of action. With these two points established, we'll be better prepared to judge how far there can be practical virtue without it, .i.e. without a perception of right and wrong.

(1) If we attentively consult our experience and our reason, we'll soon be satisfied about the first of these two points. All men continually feel that the perception of right and wrong stimulates them to action, feeling this so naturally and strongly that most of them would be puzzled at anyone's questioning whether it is so. There are many supposable cases where it is impossible to assign any other reason for action. [Price sketches some of these—cases where someone keeps a promise, refrains from stealing, obeys and honours God, and so on and so on, asking in each case: Why would the man act in that way if not because of his perception that it was the right way to act?]

In addition to all that, it seems extremely evident that stimulation [Price: 'excitement'] belongs to the very *ideas* of moral right and wrong, and is essentially inseparable from the thought of them. My account of obligation in chapter 6 is enough to show this.—When we are aware that an action is fit to be done, or that it ought to be done, it isn't *conceivable* that we can remain uninfluenced, or have no motive to action. It wouldn't be much use arguing with someone who denies this and maintains that the fitness or reasonableness of an action is no reason for doing it, and that the immorality or unreasonableness of an action is no reason against doing it. A •liking for or •inclination toward rectitude can't be separated from the •perception of it. The knowledge of what is right, without any approval of it or concern to do it, isn't conceivable or possible. And this knowledge will certainly be followed by corresponding actual •behaviour whenever there is nothing to oppose •it.

- Why does a reasonable being act reasonably?
- Why does he have a disposition to follow reason, and some aversion to doing wrong? Why does he choose to do what he knows he should do?
- Why does he think it *matters* whether he abstains

from conduct that he knows to be evil and criminal? These questions need not be answered. They don't deserve to be answered.

So, as I pointed out earlier, instincts aren't needed for the choice of ends. The nature of any being that can think is its own law. It has within itself a spur to action and a guide of action that it can't suppress or reject. Rectitude is itself an end, an ultimate end, an end superior to all other ends; it governs directs and limits all the other ends, and its existence and influence don't depend on anything arbitrary [see note on page 4]. It presides over everything. Every appetite and faculty, every instinct and will, and all nature are subjected to it. To act from •affection for rectitude is to act with light, conviction, and knowledge, whereas acting from •instinct is acting in the dark and following a blind guide. Instinct •drives and precipitates, but reason •commands. We can resist the impulses of instinct without doing violence to ourselves. Our highest merit and perfection often consist in doing just that. But we can never contradict the dictates of reason without a sense of shame, and without giving to our beings a wound in their most essential and sensitive part. Our experience of the operations of instincts •in us• is evidence of our imperfection, and meanness, and low rank. The perception of rectitude prevails most in the higher ranks of beings. God's chief glory is that he is removed infinitely from the possibility of any other principle<sub>c</sub> of action.

(2) With two things now made clear—that •our judgment concerning the nature of actions as morally good or bad prompts a motive to do or avoid them; and that •this judgment (although it often doesn't prevail) is always the first, the proper, and the most natural and intimate spur and guide of the actions of reasonable beings—let us now explore a further question. Is a reasonable being's judgment about right and wrong the *only* spur to his action that can

qualify him as morally good and worthy? Is such a judgment the *only* principle<sub>c</sub> from which flow all the actions that lead us to esteem the agents? In short, is virtue itself *the* thing that a virtuous agent aims at?

Remember that the only things that are strictly *done by* an agent are things that he designs to do, and that something that wasn't in any way an object of his design is not strictly *his*, or at least can't give him any claim to merit or praise. It follows from this that someone can't be properly said to *practise virtue* if he doesn't design to practise it, if it is of no importance to him, or if he doesn't think about it at all. It seems utterly evident that an action that is under no influence or direction from a moral judgment can't be 'moral' in the practical sense, i.e. that when virtue isn't pursued or intended there is no virtue in the agent: morally good intention, without any idea of moral good, is a contradiction. To act virtuously is to obey or follow reason—and you can't do *that* without knowing and intending it!

I know that according to the account of virtue that some writers have given, virtue presupposes that the agent has some intention other than the intention to be virtuous. That is because on their account of virtue. . .

**how Price finished this sentence:** it denotes only the emotion arising in us on observing actions flowing from certain motives and affections, and, in the original constitution of natures, is applicable alike to actions flowing from any motives.

**what he seems to have meant:**•when we call an action 'virtuous', all we mean is that when we observe the action and the motives and feelings that produced it, we experience a certain emotion in ourselves; and •the basic constitution of our minds doesn't restrict this kind of emotion to any special subset of motives.

If this account were true, it would be a gross blunder to

suppose that how a person acts is influenced by his sense of virtue and duty, or by any respect for moral good. But those of us who reject the underlying theory of virtue needn't be troubled by this consequence of it; indeed the theory's having this consequence is a large part of the case against it.

If a person can be virtuous and praiseworthy although he never thinks about virtue and isn't ever motivated by it, then intelligence [still = 'the ability to think'] certainly isn't required for moral agency, and the lower animals are just as capable of virtue and moral merit as we are.—By this standard, couldn't a person be regarded as 'public spirited' just because he makes a discovery that enriches his country, even if he did this accidentally and without any view to public good? Mightn't a course of behaviour count as 'ambitious' even if it didn't arise from the love of honour and power? or as 'selfish' even if it didn't aim at private interest? or as 'friendly' even if it wasn't associated with any friendly intention?

[Price's next paragraph consists mainly in some quotations from Lord Shaftesbury's book *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, which present the view of virtue that Price has been defending. Such quotations continue in a long footnote; but there Price writes less favourably about Shaftesbury's performance in another of his works, thus:] Shaftesbury's account of virtue in his *Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit* is extremely deficient in several ways, especially in its limiting virtue so much. . . .to the cultivation of natural affection and benevolence, and overlooking entirely. . . .the *authority* belonging to virtue and to the principle<sub>c</sub> of reflection. Still, Lord Shaftesbury has said many excellent things about virtue and providence, and about life and manners; and it's a very sad thing that his works are stained by his prejudices against Christianity, which have contributed so much to depriving his insights of their good

effects.

You may ask: 'Isn't *benevolence* a virtuous principle<sub>c</sub>? And don't we approve all actions that come from it?' I answer by repeating my earlier point [pages 32 and 39] that benevolence is of two kinds, rational and instinctive. *Rational* benevolence entirely coincides with rectitude, and the actions coming from it coincide with actions coming from a concern for rectitude. And the same is to be said of all those feelings and desires that would arise in a thinking nature just because it was capable of thought. Could it ever be the case that efforts to achieve an end which we as reasonable beings can't help loving and choosing were not approved by reason? Could it be the case that something that is necessarily desirable to all beings is not also something that it is necessarily right to pursue? No, neither of those is possible!

But *instinctive* benevolence is not a principle<sub>c</sub> of virtue, and actions motivated by it alone are not virtuous. To the extent that you are influenced by instinctive benevolence, you are influenced by something other than reason and goodness, and that detracts from the moral worth of your action and of your character. This observation agrees perfectly with how ordinary people commonly think and feel and decide. When we know that a person's conduct comes from mere natural temperament or inclination, we may indeed *love* the person—as we commonly love lower animals that we find to be gentle and easily managed—but we won't have any tendency to regard to him as a virtuous agent. A soft and simple-minded man, however compliant, generous and good-tempered he is, never stands high in our esteem because we see his character as coming less from any influence of reason and moral good than from an agreeable instinct and turn of temperament that he was born with. Similarly, the tenderness of parents for their offspring,

a fond mother's risking her life to save her child, and all actions motivated by the nearer attachments of nature, seem to have their *moral* value lessened in proportion as they •come more from natural instinct and •are less accompanied by reflection on their reasonableness and fitness. In the absence of this reflection, it makes no *moral* difference what sort of feeling an action comes from. . . .—But bear in mind that such reflection will usually accompany friendly and benevolent actions, and is certain to have some part in producing them—you *can't* experience or think about such actions without approving of them. And, more generally, some ideas of right and wrong are always present with all men, and must have *some* influence on almost everything they do. We have an inescapable awareness of *rightness* in relieving misery, in promoting happiness, and in every service of love and good-will towards others. This is what consecrates kindness and humanity, elevating them to the level of *virtues*.

Think about your attitude to

(i) actions motivated by universal, calm, and dispassionate benevolence,

and to

(ii) actions producing as much good as those, or even more, directed toward people to whom nature has closely linked us, and arising from *kind* impulses in our minds that are narrower (not universal) and more urgent (not calm and dispassionate).

Everyone regards the actions in (i) as more virtuous and amiable than the actions in (ii). Why? Because in (i) the operations of instinct have less effect and are more subdued, and the attention to what is morally good and right is more open and forceful. If we were prompted to the acts of universal benevolence in the same heated and urgent way that parents are prompted to the care of their children, that

wouldn't lead us to think of those acts as more virtuous. These facts can't be explained consistently with the theory that virtue consists in

acting from kind feelings that can't be derived from *thinking*, and can't be influenced by it in their immediate exercise.

If that theory were right, why couldn't it be the case that the virtue is **greatest** where the kind impulse is strongest? How could we explain the fact that when all use of reason is excluded, and only the force of instinct is at work, the virtue is the **least** and tends to vanish entirely? And why, especially, should we regard

resisting our strongest instincts, and steadily following the deliverances of cool unbiased reason *against* our instincts

as the highest virtue? Those who defend this theory would probably give it up, and accept the position I am defending, if they could be convinced that benevolence is essential to intelligence—essential to thinking—and not merely an implanted principle<sub>c</sub> or instinct.

These remarks are also applicable to self-love. Reasonable and calm self-love, as well as the reasonable and calm love of mankind, is an entirely virtuous principle<sub>c</sub>. They are both parts of the idea of virtue. Where virtue is greatest

there will be the most ardent and active benevolence, and likewise the greatest degree of *true prudence*, i.e. the highest concern about bettering ourselves to the utmost, and the most effective and constant pursuit of private happiness and perfection, in opposition to whatever hindrances and temptations to neglect them may be thrown in our way.

Our natural desires carrying us to our own self-interest are very strong, and our •pursuit of our own interests is more likely to arise from these desires without any rational reflection or help from moral judgment than is our •pursuit of public good; and that is one reason why the former pursuit is not considered as *virtue* to the extent that the latter is. Avoiding a *present* danger or securing a *present* good for ourselves isn't often regarded as at all virtuous; but the same can't be said of trying to prevent a *future* danger or to secure a *future* good. The reason for this is that we are drawn towards what is *present* with a greater degree of instinctive desire<sup>23</sup> and therefore with less input from moral thinking. The present makes itself felt more strongly than the future does, and strikes our minds more forcibly. Yet, in some circumstances where particular passions are opposed to reason, and where different pleasures compete with one another, it can be really virtuous to act with the motive of securing some *present* good. And quite generally, the more

<sup>23</sup> This is a very wise and necessary disposition of our natures. If the prospect of distant good aroused our desires with the same urgency as our desires for present good, think how distracted we would be in our pursuits! How inattentive to what is present, how impatient, how miserable it would make us! •There is also a bad consequence of the way we *are* constituted. Because we are more strongly drawn to present good than to future good, there is a danger that we will choose and settle for the one and neglect the other. But this drawback (which it is the business of reason and a principal part of virtue to prevent) is much less than the opposite drawbacks that would have come with a different constitution of our natures.—If you look at the situation coolly, it may seem very strange that someone who is acting solely from a concern for his own private good will knowingly choose a lesser good rather than a greater one, a present good rather than a much more important future one. If on such occasions we were determined by nothing but the simple and calm thought of good as such, this fact would indeed be entirely inexplicable. But when we attend to the fact that we have a stronger *instinctive* determination to present good than to future good, the difficulty mostly vanishes. The fact in question won't be harder to explain than the fact that sometimes in other contexts a man will follow his passions and instincts in opposition to •his own happiness and to •all the reasons that can be put to him. . . .

remote a good is, and the more temptations we have to resist in order to get it, the greater is our virtue in staying focused on it. These are cases where •reason is more needed to interpose and decide, •our passions are less in agreement with its dictates, and •our determinations are more derived from its authority. There are some kinds of future good the pursuit of which *always* proves virtue. Others are so agreeable to the lower parts of our natures, and so connected with strong instinctive desires, that actions produced by the prospect of getting them provide little if any evidence of virtue, even when reason approves of our choosing them. But when reason condemns certain gratifications, when lower pleasures stand in competition with higher ones, or when for any reason intrinsically innocent pleasures ought to be forgone—in *these* cases guilt and blame become the consequences of pursuing those pleasures.

This gives us a clear view of how far hope and fear can be virtuous principles<sub>c</sub>, and why (for example) it isn't virtuous to do something so as to escape an ignominious death or to obtain a valuable promotion, although it is often virtuous to refrain from gratifications that we know are harmful to us, or to give up a debauched way of life—to which passion and habit strongly urge us—because we think it will have a bad effect on our health and fortune.

These facts (and there are many more of the same kind) are all very strong evidence for the truth of the conclusion I am trying to establish, namely that the virtue of an agent is always less in proportion to the degree to which •his natural temperament and inclinations fall in with his actions, •instinctive principles<sub>c</sub> operate, and •rational reflection on what it is *right* to do is lacking.

Something else that should be noticed: what I have said about self-love and the actions flowing from it shows us clearly what truth there is in this:

Conduct based on religious principles, and influenced by thoughts of the rewards and punishments that will follow virtue and vice in the after-life, can be fairly said to have *no* moral goodness.

•Specifically, what it shows is that there is no truth in this! It is indeed surprising that anyone should ever have had anything negative to say about conduct in which we extend our care to the whole of our existence, act with a view to our final welfare, and elevate our minds above this-worldly objects because of our concern for a blessed immortality. If anything gives dignity to a character and raises one man above another, *this* does. If anything is virtue, *this* is. Especially given that *virtue* is the very reward that is expected -

- the highest degrees of moral improvement,
- a close resemblance to God,
- opportunities for the most extensive beneficence, and
- admission into a state into which no defilement can enter, and the love and hope of which imply the love of goodness.

—In short, if it is always virtuous to engage in a reasonable and steady pursuit of one's own private happiness amidst temptations to forgo it through passion and present gratifications, it isn't hard to work out what opinion we ought to have of the pursuit of the very special happiness that virtuous men are taught to expect in another world! . . .

Returning now to the main topic of this chapter: What I have said about virtuous actions can easily be applied to vicious actions. [See note on 'vicious' on page 21.] Someone's performing a vicious action doesn't imply that *he* is vicious, unless he knew or could have known that his action is vicious. . . . One way—and perhaps a good way—of putting the point is to say that *the viciousness in an action* isn't the agent's any more than *the vicious action* is his, and no more



of the vicious action is his than was included in his intention. (I said this earlier about the virtue of the action and of the agent.)

When we learn that a person had no suspicion of wrong in an action of his, and that he certainly wouldn't have performed it if he *had* had such a suspicion, it would be utterly unjust to charge him with guilt and ill-desert on account of this action. It's true that his lack of suspicion—that his action is vicious—may be an effect of criminal error and carelessness, but in that case the agent's guilt comes from them and not from the resulting action that he performs in the belief that it is innocent. Every single action that a person performs has in it some precise and fixed degree of guilt, innocence or virtue, which depends *only* on his perceptions, views, and state of mind at the time of doing it, and can't be increased or decreased by anything that happened before the action was performed or by anything that happens afterwards. What has been once true of an event must always remain true of it. The real exact character of an action at the time of performance—I mean its status as commendable or blameworthy—must for ever remain its character without alteration.—If it turns out to have pernicious consequences, they increase its guilt to the extent that the agent, at the time of acting, foresaw or suspected that such consequences would ensue, or had some awareness that he ought to be taking greater care about the possible effects of his conduct. A series of evil actions may give rise to other evil actions; if these are only materially [see page 85] evil, they may themselves *be* a very severe punishment of former wickedness, but they can't increase the agent's guilt or make him liable to further punishment. . . . If we accepted that one faulty step can taint all the actions that it may unfortunately have led to, whatever our present sense of them may be, . . . our condition

would be deplorable! It would require impossible skill in looking forward: who can ever know all the effects that will result from his actions? And in many cases it would require impossible skill in looking back: who can be sure that the beliefs that he is now acting on didn't have, anywhere in the thought-sequence that led to them, some influence from undue bias? . . .

Don't think that what I am saying here has a tendency to excuse men for being negligent in their enquiries. [Price wrote '. . . a tendency to render men negligent in their enquiries', but this was presumably a slip.] Though a crazy or drunken man may not be immediately to blame for performing many actions that are in themselves very evil, it is extremely wicked for a man to put himself into a state in which he knows he will be likely to perform such actions. Doing what we foresee may cause us to do something evil blindly and unknowingly is not very different, morally speaking, from doing the evil deliberately.

This shows us, how inexcusable voluntary ignorance is, and how important it is that we avoid all unfairness in forming our beliefs. No upright person can be indifferent about this. Indeed we never have more scope for virtue, or better opportunities for exercising some of the mind's noblest dispositions, than when we are enquiring after truth and duty. Considering the dismal evils that can arise from dishonesty about this, and what a sad thing it is to have darkness as our inner light, and what mazes of error, superstition and destructive conduct we can be led into by a misguided judgment, we can't be too diligent in working to get our consciences rightly informed, too anxious about acquiring sound beliefs and freeing ourselves from the power of whatever prejudices or passions tend to warp our minds and are inconsistent with the coolness, honesty, and impartiality that are absolutely essential for anyone trying to

discover what is true and right.

Thus I have given what I think to be the true account of the nature of practical virtue. I started with the thesis that practical virtue requires liberty and the ability to think. But what I have mainly emphasized is that we don't regard as 'virtuous' any actions flowing merely from instinctive desires or from any other principle<sub>c</sub> except a concern for virtue itself. I have tried to show that what a virtuous agent cares about most is just *being virtuous*.—Virtue, if I have argued rightly, must be desired, loved, and practised on its own account. Nothing is an exercise of virtue unless it comes from an inward liking and respect for virtue for its own sake.—And I hope I have explained well enough how benevolence and self-love, and the actions to which they

prompt us, are morally good and praiseworthy only to the extent that they are derived from this source. Some may say that

*A respect for God's will* is a principle<sub>c</sub> of virtuous conduct that isn't reducible to the desire for virtue.

Nothing could be more unreasonable than that! Why do virtuous agents obey the will of God? Isn't it from a sense of duty? What *merit* would there be in obeying God's will out of blind awe or servile dread, with no knowledge that this conduct is fit and appropriate?. . . . Here, as everywhere else, the ultimate spring of virtuous practice in reasonable beings is the reasonable faculty itself, the consideration of duty or the perception of right.

## Chapter 9:

### What does it mean to say that some actions and characters are *more virtuous than others*? How do we judge this?

#### Difficulties in the practice of virtue, the use of trial and discipline in getting reasonable beings to be virtuous, and the essentials of a good and bad character

Throughout this work I have considered virtue generally and abstractly—its nature, foundation, obligation, and principal types—until in chapter 8 I considered it more particularly in relation to actual practice, and the capacities and wills of moral agents. I am now going to continue with that, explaining the various degrees of virtue in different actions and characters, and showing •how we calculate them, •how far the temperament should be formed by virtue, and •how the faculty that perceives virtue is related to our other powers.

As I showed in chapter 8, what makes us virtuous and deserving of reward is our reflection on the *fitness* of what we are about to do and the *right of the case* [Price's phrase] concerning it. It's the intention to act virtuously, and the influence that a concern for virtue has on our resolutions, that makes us objects of moral praise and esteem; and the greater this influence is, the greater we must judge the virtue to be and the more we must admire the action. Our judgment about the *degree* of moral good and evil in actions, then, is based on the *degree* of regard or disregard, of attachment or lack of attachment, to truth and rectitude that the actions display. External actions are to be considered as signs of the motives and views of agents. We can usually infer the motives from the actions with sufficient certainty; and when

this happens to be impracticable, that prevents us from making any judgment about the merit or demerit of actions.

Here are some facts that provide good enough support for the thesis I have been presenting.

There isn't much virtue in performing a good action that the agent has little temptation to omit: someone who isn't drawn by virtue to perform a good action that •won't cost him much trouble or expense, and •doesn't noticeably get in the way of any of his natural desires, must have a *very* low level of virtue!—When secular interests, love of fame, curiosity, resentment, or any of our individual attitudes work together with virtue in prompting an action, the action is virtuous just to the extent that it was influenced by the agent's thought of its rightness; and that influence can't be great if the action is known to be in line with the agent's non-moral way of thinking and with the current of his passions.—When difficulties occur, and secular interest, humour, vanity, or any of our inferior powers clash with virtue, the degree of virtue is proportional to the difficulties—or the number and violence of the passions—that are overcome.—When a given action would fulfill several different virtues, the performance of the action gives less strong evidence for virtue than it would if it had been motivated by a concern for just one of those virtues. A right action that was hard to perform

and was motivated •purely by gratitude is more virtuous than the same action, equally difficult and performed with an equal effect, when motivated •by gratitude, public and private interest, justice and veracity. So the virtue must be greatest when

- any single type of it,
- every view of what is decent and fit,
- every decision of our practical judgments,

is sufficient to determine us in opposition to all temptations, when we are ready to follow wherever virtue leads us and have a moral sensibility that makes us shrink from every appearance of wrong, and a horror at guilt that makes us afraid even to move towards it.

What about vicious actions? Well, the same circumstances that lessen the virtue of an action increase the vice in omitting it, and vice versa. If A is an evil act that I am not much tempted to perform, I don't have to be very virtuous *not* to perform it; but if I *do* perform it that is very criminal because it shows very great weakness of the moral principle<sub>c</sub>.—When someone performs an evil action without having any thought of its being evil, he isn't displaying a disregard for virtue and so he isn't guilty.—When the agent *does* think of his action as evil, but his motives for committing it are very strong and pressing, the guilt of the action is lessened and all that can be inferred is (not the absolute but) the *comparative* weakness of the agent's virtuous principle<sub>c</sub>, i.e. its being weaker than some other principles<sub>c</sub>.—The more deliberately a wrong action is done, the more wicked it appears to us. That's because in this case reason and conscience have time to marshal their forces and exert their utmost strength, and yet are conquered. That is why a single deliberate and willful act of vice may be the strongest proof of •the agent's• bad moral state and a sufficient indication of his whole moral character; and this

can't be said of any spur-of-the-moment faults that the agent is rushed into by the violence of sudden passions. In a word, with respect to an action that a man performs,

- the more evil it is,
- the more it contradicts his instinctive desires as well as his ideas of rectitude,
- the greater number of the different types of moral obligation it violates,
- the clearer his perception is of wrong in it,
- the longer his time for reflection is, and the fewer and weaker his temptations,

the greater is the vice he can be accused of and the more flagrant is his guilt. On the other hand, it is evident that the degree of guilt in an evil action is lessened if the number and strength of temptations is increased, and the time for reflection and the sense of wrong is shortened; and these factors may bring the guilt-level so low that all disapproval of the agent vanishes. From these observations we may draw the following •four• inferences.

(1) [Price says that an agent can be thoroughly virtuous even if in his right actions he doesn't have to overcome difficulties and temptations. His virtue is secured by the facts about how he *would* behave if he *were* in such difficulties. Price continues:] Difficulties and drawbacks that get in the way of virtue are the means for showing to others what our moral temperament is. And they also have the following effects on ourselves. They awaken our attention to righteousness and goodness, they call forth the moral principle<sub>c</sub> to exert itself in a manner not otherwise possible, and thus become the means of producing stronger virtuous efforts, and of increasing the force and dominion of reason within us, and improving and confirming virtuous habits.—These are the uses of the difficulties and temptations that are met with in virtuous conduct, but it must

be accepted that in some respects they are also the causes of very great evils. They ·often· improve virtue, but they also ·sometimes· overwhelm and ruin it. They give rise to moral discipline, but they also obstruct it, producing moral depravity and generating all the corruptions and vices of the world. It isn't part of my present plan to explain this fact, but I can't resist going off-course so far as to raise a question about ·the moral education of· beings like ourselves, who grow up gradually to the use of reason, and on the way to it need •to acquire some habits or other and •to be guided by instinctive principles<sub>c</sub>. Among such beings, how far might the evils I have mentioned have been prevented? We can't answer this with certainty. Can virtue be disciplined and tested without being endangered? or endangered without sometimes being lost? Can we acquire any security or confirmation in virtue until we are habituated to it? And before the habit is acquired, and in the dawn of reason, won't there inevitably be a risk of moral degeneration?

It may be thought that there *could* be beings who were so constituted that:

When they come into existence their constitutions and circumstances are such that while they are advancing towards maturity of reason, and acquiring sufficient views of the nature and excellence of virtue to keep them steady in the practice of it, their inclinations and desires always coincide with •their duty, and they don't acquire habits that are unfavourable to •it.

For all I know, this *is* possible. And that is just one of many reasons why we have to admit that there's much in the present state of mankind that we can't explain. In fact, given where we stand in the universe and given the limitedness of our intellects, it would be very strange if we could explain all the facts about *any* object in nature, let alone the nature of mankind!—Be this as it may, it can't be wrong to make this

point: Given the natures and circumstances of men as they now are, if our desires and our duty always coincided we might have spent years behaving in an *objectively* virtuous manner without becoming *truly* virtuous in a grounded way; it could happen that ·during all those years of struggle-free virtuous behaviour· the moral principle<sub>c</sub> was lying dormant in us, so that if the slightest temptation turned up we *would have gone astray*. ·As things are with mankind·, difficulties in doing our duty and particular desires drawing us away from it ·do us a good service: they· force us to exercise virtue in a more wary, attentive, and constant manner, which accelerates our progress in it and grounds our respect for it. Although early on the virtuous principle<sub>c</sub> may be scarcely able to turn the balance in its own favour, every repeated instance, in which the inward spring of virtue thus exerts its utmost force and overcomes opposition, gives it new power. It has often actually happened that virtuous men have

- through a course of virtuous struggles and long practice of self-denial,
- through being accustomed to repelling temptations, restraining appetites and disregarding sufferings that their duty forced on them,

gradually strengthened the virtuous principle<sub>c</sub> and established the sovereignty of conscience in themselves to such an extent that difficulties have in a manner vanished, and virtue has become easy and delightful. And bear in mind that although this is the period when the difficulties of such a person are *least*, it is also the period when his virtue is *greatest*. So the truth of the matter is that the difficulties a virtuous agent meets with are in general evidence only of the defects of his virtue. If he had a sufficient degree of virtue he wouldn't meet with *any* difficulties; and the more •virtue he has,

- the less effect any given degree of temptation has in turning him aside from virtue or disturbing his resolutions,
- the more he is master of every inclination within him,
- the less reluctance he feels in the discharge of his duty, and
- the more pleasure and eagerness he has in sticking to his duty.

How unreasonable it is, then, to •assert that human virtue exceeds that of angels because of the opposition it encounters, or to •think that the question ‘Would the excellence of God’s moral character be increased if he had within him some dispositions contrary to goodness?’ is hard to answer!—Can the very facts that are evidence for imperfection in virtue also add to its merit? [Price answers ‘No’, both regarding angels and regarding God. He is especially emphatic about God—‘His moral excellence consists in a degree of purity or holiness that makes him incapable of being tempted to evil.’ In the course of his long and unnecessary paragraph developing this line of thought, Price adds two footnotes:]

**(i)** What I am saying here can be illustrated by substituting •power for •virtue. . . . The power of a being is the same, whether or not it meets with opposition. The difficulties that the being finds in overcoming opposition only serve to show its weakness: the *greater* the power it has, the *less* difficulty it must find in producing any given effect; and when the power is supposed to be infinite, as God’s is, the very notion of difficulty and opposition becomes a contradiction. **(ii)** The way I am talking about God is suitable to our common ways of conceiving of his perfections, but it isn’t strictly proper. In fact, it is in general hardly possible to speak about God otherwise than improperly. . . .

This discussion shows that what I said about the extenuation of guilt by the strength of temptations must be understood with some restrictions. The strength of someone’s temptations may show only that his power of resistance is weak, that the spring of virtue (the contrary force in our minds that should repel temptations) is unwound or broken. ‘My temptations were strong’ is often pleaded as an *excuse* for vice—but what a wretched excuse it is! Temptations commonly owe their strength to strong evil habits that the guilty person has acquired and to the low and slack state of his moral powers. How absurd it is to make the lack of virtue an excuse for the lack of virtue, and to justify guilt by guilt!—However, . . . we can conceive of temptations so strong that no human virtue could overcome them. Although it’s only because our virtue is imperfect that we are vulnerable to being overcome by *any* temptations, . . . being overcome by some temptations may show much less defect of virtue than being overcome by some others. That is all that is meant by the plea of temptation as extenuating guilt. No-one, for instance, will say that a crime committed through fear of immediate tortures and death implies as much guilt as the same crime committed to avoid a slight inconvenience. [That completes **(1)**, which began on page 98.]

**(2)** This discussion of degrees of virtue and vice has little or no relation to the question of whether there are any different degrees of objective right and wrong in actions, and doesn’t imply anything concerning it. Even if there were no different degrees of right and wrong, so that the only way to apply them was in judgments of the form ‘This action is absolutely and totally right’ and ‘This action is absolutely and totally wrong’, there would still be just as much room for countless degrees of virtue and vice, of merit and guilt in *agents*, and also in *actions* considered (not in the absolute and abstract way, but) in relation to the intentions and views

of •the agents or as signs and effects of •their respect for absolute virtue.

That is how we most commonly consider •actions, and it is the true source and meaning of the different degrees of commendation and blame, of praise and censure, that we bestow on •them, and of the various words and phrases by which these are signified. . . .

**(3)** [Price now criticises Hutcheson's formula for computing the morality of actions. He thinks it is along the right lines except for its fundamental assumption that—in Price's words—'benevolence is the whole of virtue'.]

**(4)** It is sometimes said that some good actions are more amiable [see note on page 29] than others because they are *more free*; but that cannot be right. It is very improper to speak of *degrees of* natural liberty and necessity. There seems to be no conceivable intermediate case between being the cause of an effect and not being its cause, between determining ourselves and not determining ourselves, between agency and its contrary. Every act of the will that I am conscious of—if it really *is* my act—must be *entirely* mine, and can't be *more or less* mine. You may want to object: 'But two or three or any number of causes may work together to produce one single effect.' But that doesn't hold as an objection, because in the case you have envisaged each cause has its own individual *share* of the effect to produce, which this cause alone produces, and it would be absurd to say that this cause was 'helped' to produce that share.—Besides, voluntary determination is a simple effect, not a complex and compounded one; so it doesn't admit of more than one cause or principle<sub>c</sub>, because it's a contradiction to suppose

that the determination of a being may be partly his and partly another's.

Setting that aside, let us turn our thoughts to the more intelligible suggestion that what is being said to lessen the merit of good actions must be not •natural necessity (which would take away the whole idea of action and will) but •moral necessity. This is the 'necessity' that arises from the influence on the mind of motives and feelings; it is said to be present when, given that the agent has such-and-such views, circumstances, and principles<sub>c</sub>, it is *certain* that he will decide to do so-and-so. Now, it is undeniable that the very *greatest necessity of this sort* is consistent with—indeed it is *implied by*—the idea of the most perfect and meritorious virtue, so that it can't possibly *lessen* it!<sup>24</sup>

The more confident we can be that a man will perform an action when he is convinced of its propriety, whatever obstacles may lie in his way—i.e. the more effective and unconquerable the influence of conscience is within him—the more amiable we must think him.—Similarly, the most abandoned and detestable state of wickedness implies the greatest necessity of sinning and the greatest degree of moral impotence. The most vicious man is the one who is most enslaved by evil habits, or in whom *appetite* has gained the upper hand, and the respect for virtue and duty is weakened, to such an extent that we can always foretell with certainty that he will do evil when tempted to it.—Arising from that, let me refer back to the issue of *liberty* discussed earlier. I want to remark in passing that an idea of liberty must be very erroneous if it •makes liberty inconsistent with the most *zx*absolute and complete certainty—i.e. with the

<sup>24</sup> When someone says that a virtuous action is more amiable the less 'necessary' it is, if he means that the action is more amiable the less the agent is urged to it by. . . .any motives other than virtuous ones, this will be very true. But in that case what increases the virtue of the action is not the mere circumstance of its being less 'necessary' but its coming more from the influence of love of virtue; and that fits with what I said at the beginning of this chapter.

kind of ‘necessity’ I have been discussing—or if it •supposes necessity to overthrow all steadiness of character and conduct. The greatest influence of motives that can rationally be conceived can in no way affect liberty (taking it that a rational account of motives doesn’t involve the obvious and intolerable absurdity of treating motives as though they were physical causes—*pushes* in an almost literal sense·). It is surely *very* surprising that anyone should imagine that. . . .when a man does something with the full consent of his will, with the least reluctance and the greatest desire and resolution, he should *for this very reason* be suspected of not doing ·it· freely, i.e. not *doing* at all.

My account of the various degrees of virtue and merit in actions, and of how we estimate them, enables us to understand why it is that

- when we judge calmly and impartially, we form much the same judgment of good actions affecting strangers as we do of good actions affecting ourselves or friends, and also why

- if an agent has no opportunities to exercise his virtue, or if his good endeavours produce effects contrary to the ones he designed, our esteem for him is not lessened.

There’s no way to explain these facts if virtue is (as it must be if our ideas of it come from an implanted sense) merely a particular kind of agreeable feeling or sensation. There can be no doubt that our *feelings of pleasure* are lessened if the beneficiary of a good action is remote from us, or if well-intentioned conduct fails to have a good effect; so our *assignments of virtue* will also differ, if it’s true that virtue is merely an agreeable feeling. In contrast with this, the

account of virtue that I have presented provides us with a stable and fixed rule of judgment, and shows us that the object of such judgments—namely the merit or virtue of actions and characters·—is real and determinate in itself, unchangeably the same through all changes in our opinions or points of view. But the other notion of virtue that I have been criticising provides no basis for any rational estimate of virtue, leaves no fixed standard for it, and implies that all thoughts about it are equally sound because no-one can be mistaken about the morality or immorality of a particular action or character if all he is doing is to say what *he feels* about it.<sup>25</sup> It’s true that he *can* err regarding how much good is produced, or regarding how exactly the agent felt when acting; but these are not the same as *virtue* according to the theory I am now criticizing. . . .

I added the restriction ‘when we judge calmly and impartially’ because it is perfectly obvious that the causes I have mentioned do often pervert and mislead our judgments. [Price devotes a page to elaborating this point. We are likely to give more moral credit to someone who succeeds in doing good to us than to someone who does good to people we don’t know or who tries but fails to do good to anyone. But we should guard against this ‘bias’.]

Having thus explained the general foundation of the different degrees of virtue and vice in *actions*, and stated the principles and rules by which we judge them, it will be useful next to get a clear view of what it takes for an *agent* to qualify as virtuous, i.e. for his character to be rightly labelled ‘virtuous’ rather than the contrary.

Anyone who has any idea of moral good must have an affection for it that can’t fail to have *some* influence on

<sup>25</sup> ‘The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or unpleasure that results from encountering or thinking about the sentiment or character in question; and that pleasure or unpleasure has to be known to the person who feels it; from which it follows that there is just so much virtue or vice in any character as everyone places in it, and that we can’t possibly be mistaken about this.’ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, III.ii.8.



his actions and temperament.—It isn't conceivable that a creature who is capable of reasoning should **(i)** have *no* respect for reason and its dictates, having *no* notion of the distinction that we express when we say 'This is to be done' and 'That isn't to be done'. A perception of that distinction is essential to our nature, and so is always present with us; and it's not conceivable that this perception should ever become wholly ineffective in someone.—Nor, strictly speaking, can a being who is capable of reasoning **(ii)** have any tendencies within him that are *contrary* to rectitude. I mean: he can't dislike rectitude as such, or be inclined to do wrong because it is wrong.—To suppose **(i)** is to suppose the entire destruction of the being's powers of thought; and the very idea of **(ii)** is self-contradictory. There *can't* be a being so corrupt that the unreasonableness of an action—i.e. his seeing reason *against* it—will be for him a reason *for* doing it or not a reason *against* doing it. . . .

So **(i)** and **(ii)** aren't *possible*, and don't make any part of the idea of an evil character. This reminds us that the sources of all vice are our lower propensities and appetites. They are in themselves natural, innocent, and useful; but with us in our present state it is inevitable that they often interfere with reason and take over from it as influences on us—as much when they *can't* be lawfully gratified as when they *can*. [Our 'present state' is meant to distinguish us as we now are with what we might come to be like in the after-life.] That is how it comes about that •we often actually deviate from the path of rectitude, and that •how men differ in

•the strength of the reflecting principle<sub>c</sub> in them  
is not in any way correlated with how they differ in

•the strength of their instinctive powers and desires.  
The rightful place of the reflecting principle<sub>c</sub> in the mind is that of *superiority* to all these powers and desires, and of absolute dominion over them. As Butler has pointed out, it

is in the nature of that principle<sub>c</sub> that

- it always has the role of examining, judging, deciding, directing, commanding, and forbidding, that
- it shouldn't ever let anything push it aside, that
- it ought to model and superintend our whole lives, and that
- every motion and thought, every affection and desire, should be subjected constantly and wholly to its inspection and influence.

Reason is so intimately built into men that a deliberate decision not to be governed by it is scarcely possible, and that even when men are urged by passion and appetite they can seldom openly contradict it, or ever break loose from its guidance, without the help of tricks and sophistry, without many painful blinkings at the light and hard struggles to escape the force of conviction, without earnestly searching for excuses and palliatives, and thus trying to throw a cloud before their own eyes, to reconcile themselves to the wrong they are doing, hide its ugliness, and deceive themselves into thinking that in their circumstances it isn't wrong after all. This shows plainly •how great the force of reason is, •how sovereign and unsurmountable it is in its nature, •how it clings to us when we are trying to cast it off, and •what effect it will have in our minds, somehow, however much we do to obscure, abuse, or subvert it.

This essential pre-eminence of the reasoning faculty is what ought chiefly to be considered in settling the true idea of human nature. [At this place Price has a footnote, which is here raised into the main text.]

•START OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE•

The human mind would apparently have little order or consistency if it were only a system of passions and feelings that are continually drawing us different ways, without anything at the head of them to govern them, with the strongest

of them at any given moment necessarily determining our conduct. But this is far from being the mind's real state. It has a faculty that is essential to it, to which every other power within it is subjected; the special task assigned to this faculty is to reconcile the differences amongst all our particular feelings, to point out to us when and how far each one of them shall or shall not be gratified, and in all cases of competition to settle which is to give way. This faculty is our *moral faculty*; and what gives us the true idea of human nature is the subservience of all within us to this faculty. Its supremacy, I have remarked, is implied in the idea of it, but we have also a demonstration of it from fact. The least violation of this faculty at the behest of all our other powers in combination gives us pain and shame; whereas the greatest violation of our other powers at the behest of the moral faculty is approved by us; indeed, the more we contradict our other powers in compliance with it, and the greater sacrifice we make of their enjoyments and gratifications to it, the more pleased we are with ourselves, and the higher inward satisfaction and triumph we feel. [The footnote adds a reference to Butler as agreeing with this, and to Hutcheson. Price says that it is hard to reconcile Hutcheson's correct views on this matter with his other views about virtue, and continues at enormous length to explain why.]

·END OF FOOTNOTE·

It proves to us quite certainly that the basic, proper, and sound state of our natures is the state in which this faculty—our natures' distinguishing part—is indeed pre-eminent, and all the other powers and principles<sub>c</sub> are obedient to it.—**Goodness** in mankind is this state restored and established. It is the power of reflection raised to its proper position of direction and sovereignty in the mind, conscience fixed and kept on the throne and governing all our passions. The least it implies is some predominance of good feelings,

and superiority of virtuous principles<sub>c</sub> above all others.—**Wickedness**, on other hand, is the subversion of this basic and natural state of the mind, or the prevalence of the lower powers in opposition to the authority of reason. It implies that good principles<sub>c</sub> are inferior to some others within us, gives us a greater attachment to some particular objects than to truth and righteousness, or makes our attitude to virtue so defective that it is consistent with knowingly acting wrongly. It is the violent and unnatural state of the mind, the deposition of reason, and the exaltation of appetite, the death of the man, and the triumph of the brute, slavery in opposition to liberty, sickness in opposition to health, and uproar and anarchy in opposition to order and peace. [That last sentence is verbatim Price.]

Thus, if we want to know our own characters, to find out which class of men we belong to, the good or the bad, we must compare

- our concern for everlasting truth and righteousness with our concern for friends, credit, pleasure, and life,
- our love of God and moral excellence with our love of inferior objects, and
- the dominion of reason over us with the force of appetite,

and find which *prevail*. Until the rational part gets the victory over the animal part and the heart is mainly turned towards virtue, until the principles<sub>c</sub> of piety and goodness obtain in some degree the supremacy and the passions are compelled to give up their usurped power, we are within the confines of vice and misery.—There's reason to believe that many people deceive themselves into thinking that since they have many valuable qualities and feel the workings within them of good principles<sub>c</sub>, since they love virtue and hate vice and do good in their roles or positions in life, they have little reason to distrust their characters. What they are overlooking is

the point I have been emphasizing, namely that they ought chiefly to attend to the place and degree of these principles<sub>c</sub> *in comparison with others*. The people who are truly virtuous and worthy are not those who hate vice but those who hate it above pain, dishonour, or anything whatever; not those who love virtue but those who have a *supreme* concern for virtue, putting it ahead of anything that can compete with it. It is often said that it is the *ruling passion* that determines how someone's character should be described. The ruling love of power, fame, and distinction qualifies a man as 'ambitious', the ruling love of pleasure makes him 'a man of pleasure', the ruling love of money makes him a 'covetous' man. Well, similarly, the ruling love of God, of our fellow-creatures, and of rectitude and truth is what makes a man qualify as 'virtuous'.

'How can I know that the love of virtue is predominant in me? What are the marks and effects of the superiority of good feelings that you have said are essential to a good character?' This is a natural question to raise.

(1) The •predominant passion always pulls the thoughts after it, gives them their principal employment, and gives a touch of •itself to all our studies and deliberations. What we most love is what we think about oftenest and attend to the most. If we want to know whether virtue and conscience *rule* within us, therefore, we must examine which way the main current of our thoughts runs, what objects show up in them most frequently and unavoidably, what lies on them with the greatest weight, and what we dwell on most and take into consideration most when we are planning and deciding what to do.

Specifically, when you are deliberating about some project that you might undertake, do you think not so much about how it will affect your credit, fortune, or ease, as about what, all things considered, reason and right require of

you, what you would expect anyone else to do in the same circumstances, what good it may produce, how it will appear to you in retrospect, what effect it will have on God's favour to you, how well it fits with your interests on the whole, and how well it suits the dignity of a being with your faculties, your relationships, and your expectations? But,

(2) This predominance will mainly show up in actual practice, in how we live our lives. Our actions *always* show what stands foremost in our thoughts and feelings. The strength of inner feelings is always proportional to their effects on external conduct. When the intellectual and moral principle<sub>c</sub> is the reigning one, therefore, it excludes everything irregular and immoral from the behaviour, all unreasonable courses of action are dropped, the whole of duty is faithfully attended to and carried out, no bad habits are spared, no wrong dispositions are given free rein, no known obligation is deliberately and openly neglected. [That sentence contains the first of several occurrences of a cognate of 'regular' used in a moral sense. On the basis of the word's etymology (Latin *regula* = 'rule'), conduct is 'irregular' if it breaks the moral rules, i.e. if it is morally wrong. Cognates of 'regular' in *our* everyday sense of it occur quite often up to page 34. On page 121 it seems to be used a couple of times in both senses at once.]

To qualify as having good characters we must—above all—have virtue that is not *partial*; we must act in conformity with every relation in which we stand, however it is made known to us; we must attend not to one duty or one kind of right conduct to the neglect of others, but be equally concerned about every type of duty and the whole of moral rectitude. Someone who is just, kind, meek, and humble, but also an habitual drunkard, has no claim to genuine virtue. The same is true of •anyone who is sober and temperate but will deceive and cheat; of •anyone who prays and fasts, is exact in all the external parts of religion, and is zealous for

truth and piety, but lacks honesty, gentleness, meekness, veracity, and charity; of •anyone who is chaste, generous, friendly, and faithful, but lacks piety. . . . I gave part of the reason for this in chapter 7, and here I shall add one more: it is that someone who habitually breaks *one* divine law, or retains *one* cherished vice, demonstrates that if he had equal temptations to transgress in all other parts of virtue he would do it, and become totally abandoned. As long as any •one• passion holds sway over us and remains rebellious and lawless, there's plainly something within us stronger than virtue, something that masters and subdues it; God and conscience don't have the throne; the mind still doesn't have the right balance, and its order and health are not recovered. Until we have an *equal and entire* affection for goodness, we don't have *any* affection for it that is truly acceptable or that can be of much account and value. [Price develops this line of thought in the language of love for a woman, ending with:] Her nature is such that she can't admit of any rival. He who doesn't love her above everything else doesn't love her at all.—A partial concern with rectitude is inconsistent and absurd. . . . If you want to be genuinely good, you must be consistently and thoroughly good. . . . If you aren't, then give up all claim to true virtue, and give up all hope of the happiness in reserve for it.

You'll see that I am not saying that we must be *perfect*. We are indeed quite incapable of that. . . . Some infirmities will cling to the best people, and it is impossible at present [= 'in this earthly life'] always to discipline our passions so strictly that they never surprise or hurry us into doing something that our hearts will disapprove of. But whenever this happens, it is essential to the character of a good man that this •moral failure• is his greatest trouble, and that it makes him even more vigilant in future. His settled prevailing commitment in heart and life is to truth, piety,

and goodness, though unfortunately he may sometimes be misled. Conscience is uppermost, the sovereignty of reason is established, and bad habits are suppressed—though not so thoroughly that he will never be in danger of deviating. The enemies of his virtue will never find him off his guard.

**(3)** In order to discover whether the love of •virtue is predominant in us we should investigate what degree of *delight* we have in •it. Anything that gives to the soul its prevailing tone and direction and generates its chief pursuit will be agreeable to it. All acts arising from established habits are free, unconstrained and cheerful. What our hearts are most set on will make the principal part of our happiness. What we love most, or have the greatest esteem and liking for, must be the source of our greatest pleasures.—So a man should suspect himself of bad character if he finds that virtuous actions, the duties of piety, and the various exercises of love and goodness to which he may be called, are distasteful and burdensome to him. For every virtuous man,

- virtue is what chiefly gives him contentment,
- exercising virtue is his chief delight, and
- his consciousness of •his own• virtue gives him his highest joy.

He ought always to be ready to do whatever it requires from him, never reluctant to do what he is convinced is his duty, and never more satisfied or happy than when he is doing it.

You may want to ask: 'These pleasures that are inseparable from virtue, especially the pleasures of the higher degrees of it—don't they tend to make virtue that much more self-interested and thus to lower its value?' I answer that this may indeed be the consequence, insofar as the pleasure that merely accompanies virtue can be the motive for virtuous conduct. But it is scarcely in our power (whatever we may think). . . . really to deceive ourselves in this manner.

[Price explains how self-deception comes into this. If you are to do A in order to get pleasure from the thought of having acted virtuously, you must be planning •to do A for that pleasure-seeking reason and •to *deceive yourself* into thinking that you have done A for a motive that makes this virtuous.]

(4) One further criterion of a good character must not be overlooked, namely the constant endeavour to *improve*. True goodness must be a growing thing. All habits gain strength through time and exercise. There can't be any question of someone's having sound principles<sub>c</sub> of virtue in him if he isn't concerned about strengthening them to the utmost and •thereby• getting a total victory over all the enemies of his happiness and perfection. Whoever has tasted the joys of benevolence and righteousness hopes to get more of them, and is grieved by the remains of moral imperfection in his character. •If all he wanted was• to keep within the bounds of what is innocent or lawful, •he might fully achieve his aim; but• he can't have so little zeal that *that* is all he wants! A person who thinks himself 'good enough' can be sure that he isn't good at all. When the love of virtue becomes the reigning affection •in us•, it won't be possible for us to be satisfied with any degrees of it that we can acquire.—We find an analogue of this when any of our lower affections takes charge. Every passion, when it becomes uppermost, constantly urges us to provide new gratifications for it. A man whose prevailing passion is the love of power, or of money, or of fame, seldom thinks (however much he has) that he has acquired enough, but is continually grasping at more and working to add to his glory and treasures.—This fact about the passions, namely that when they pass their natural boundaries they can't be satisfied, •is a sad perversion of a disposition that is truly noble, and often •leads to unbearable misery. . . . One of the most pitiable spectacles in nature is a covetous, ambitious

or voluptuous person who, not contented with what he has, loses all the enjoyment it could give him and is tortured perpetually on the rack of wild and restless desire. But consider the good man who can't be satisfied with his present level of goodness, who is driven by the high and sacred ambition to grow wiser and better, to become more like God, and to move steadily towards perfection—how desirable and happy *his* state is!

. . . .The understanding has two branches, •moral and •speculative [see note on page 82]. Our speculative understanding is evidently capable of infinite improvement, so our moral understanding must be so as well. Why? Because these are the same faculty applied to different subject-matters, so they must be inseparably connected, and it's inconceivable that they don't influence each other. In a good person

- every improvement in his speculative knowledge,
- every advance he makes in the discovery of truth,
- every addition to the strength of his reason, and the extent and clarity of its perceptions,

must be accompanied by perceptions of •*moral* good that are correspondingly more extensive, with a clearer and better acquaintance with •its nature, importance and excellence, and consequently with more scope for practising •it and a more invariable direction of the will towards •it. This •improvement of the understanding•, combined with the growing effects of habit and of constant exercise of the man's virtue, can gradually strengthen and exalt the practical principle<sub>c</sub> of rectitude to such an extent that it absorbs every other principle<sub>c</sub> in him, and annihilates every contrary tendency. In moral or intellectual improvement there is *no* point beyond which we can't go through hard work, attention, correct cultivation of our minds, and the help of proper advantages and opportunities. [Can •vice intensify without limit, as •virtue can? Price's answer has a puzzling

No-Yes-No form, but we can work out what his position is. A limitless diminution in the strength of the moral principle<sub>c</sub> in someone leads to its being completely wiped out, and then—Price seems to say—he is throwing out reason and is no longer a being to whom moral categories apply. But short of that limit there is room for endless variety in how thoroughly the vicious man's moral principle<sub>c</sub> is out-gunned by his other desires and passions.]

[Price offers an exclamatory page about the many moral frailties of human beings and the correspondingly many opportunities for moral improvement. Then:]

One question more on this subject can properly be raised here: 'In our idea of a *good character* should we include not only •the subordination to the faculty of reason of all our other powers but also •a correct ordering of those lower powers in relation to one another?' A sufficient answer to this •can be given briefly; it• is that the subordination to reason of the lower powers *implies* their due state, measure, and proportion in relation to one another. It may happen that some of them are stronger than they ought to be in comparison with others; but if reason is in charge the irregularity that would otherwise follow will be prevented, and the right balance will be gradually restored; the moral principle<sub>c</sub> will strengthen the side that is too weak and restrain the one that is too strong.—I have remarked that when we increase the force of reason we correspondingly lessen the occasion for appetite and instinct. So there can't possibly be any drawbacks in any reduction of instinct if reason is *correspondingly* raised. But we men aren't in fact capable of improving our reason as much as that, so that in fact great evils would arise from taking away •our instincts and passions. •They were wisely, kindly given to us. . . .

•to be our only guides until reason becomes capable of taking over as our director,

and after that

- to enforce reason's dictates, and aid us in obeying them,
- to give vigour and spirit to our pursuits, and
- to be the sail and wind (so to speak) for the vessel of life.

What we should be concerned about, then, is not eradicating our passions (which would be a wicked thing to do, if it were possible) but keeping reason vigilant and immovable at the helm, and making the passions more easily governable by it. . . .

The character and temperament of a man who naturally has the passion of *resentment* in a strong form, with little compassion to counter-balance it, will certainly degenerate into *malice* and *cruelty* if he is guided solely by instinctive principles<sub>c</sub>. But if is guided by reason and virtue, the excessiveness of his resentment will be checked; all that is hard, unfair, injurious, revengeful, or unkind will be excluded from his conduct; his temperament will be softened and humanized; the miseries of others will be duly regarded, and all that is proper will be done to ease their burdens and increase their joys. The same thing holds for someone whose *self-love* and desire for *distinction* are naturally too high in relation to his *benevolence*, and who will become proud, selfish, and ambitious unless he is governed by reason. And similarly with all other cases of passions that aren't properly strength-related to one another.—A man's being virtuous rules out his allowing any excess in his feelings or any internal disorder that he is aware of or that he could discover and rectify. Neither anger, nor self-love, nor the desire for fame can be so powerful. . . .as to make him envious, gloomy, covetous, cowardly, self-neglectful, mean-spirited, or slothful. •Piety and •virtue consist in the proper regulation of the passions—no better definition can be given of •them. They

signify nothing more than  
 excluding whatever is inconsistent with true worth and integrity,  
 making those who claim to have them better in every aspect of life, and  
 making irritable people good-natured,  
 making fierce and overbearing people gentle,  
 making obstinate people compliant,  
 making haughty people humble,  
 making narrow and selfish people open and generous,  
 making sensual people temperate, and  
 making false and deceitful people faithful and sincere.

Reason is inconsistent with every kind of unreasonableness and irregularity. It is *essential* to it that as far as its command extends it directs the passions to their proper objects, confines them to their proper functions, and prevents them from disturbing our own peace or that of the world. . . .

[Price now writes ecstatically about the ‘tranquility and bliss’ that comes with great virtue, and the ‘contempt as well as pity’ that we must feel for ‘those who prefer shadows and tinsel to this first and highest good’.]

To conclude this chapter, let me remark that my account of the requirements for having a good character gives us a melancholy view of the condition of mankind. If my account is right, true goodness is by no means as common as we could wish, and the indifference and carelessness that we see in a great part of mankind is utterly inconsistent with it.—Many of the people who have good reputations, and whose behaviour is in the main decent and regular, may owe

this more to •the particular favourableness of their natural temperament and circumstances, or to •their never having had much opportunity or temptation to be otherwise, than to •any genuine and sound principles<sub>c</sub> of virtue established within them and governing their hearts. Most people are not grossly wicked or eminently good—these two extremes are almost equally scarce—but they are as far from being *truly good* as they are from being *very bad*; they are lazy and unthinking, neglecters of God and immortality, wearers of the form of piety without the reality of it. They are, in short, blameworthy and guilty not so much because of what they *do* as because of what they *do not do*.

So we *all* have the greatest reason for being careful of ourselves, and for closely watching and examining our hearts and lives.—I suspect that it’s much too common for men to think that their duties are less onerous than they really are, and to expect. . . .that they may rise to bliss under the divine government as a matter of course, and without working at it very hard.—There isn’t indeed *anything* more necessary than to call on men to consider seriously the nature of the present state, the precariousness of their situation, and the danger they are in of remaining destitute of the virtuous character and temperament that are necessary qualifications for bliss. More than anything else, they need to be warned to save themselves from the evil of the world, and to be reminded, often, that if they want to escape future condemnation they must exercise vigilance, attention and zeal, and try to be better than mankind in general are.

## Chapter 10

### **Using my account of morality to explain and support some of the principal doctrines of natural religion, particularly God's moral attributes, his moral government, and a future state of rewards and punishments**

Before I embark on the announced topics of this chapter, bear with me while I recapitulate part of what I have already said in this work, and try to give you a clear, unified, over-all view of the state of the controversy about the foundation of virtue.

It is discouraging to think of the confusion that arises in most debates and enquiries from the ambiguous senses of words. If we could •understand one another's meaning precisely, •see in detail how our views differ, and •communicate our naked and genuine opinions to one another without risking their being more or less mistaken because of the imperfections of language, we would find that there are few if any points on which we disagree as much as we seem to. Many questions have been fiercely debated about down the centuries although the disputants on both sides have all along really meant pretty much the same, and been nearly agreed—as far as they had ideas. I say 'as far as they had ideas' because men in general lack ideas as much as they lack anything; and a controversy can become very tedious and voluminous while neither party have any definite opinions about the subject of it and both are zealously and quarreling over a set of *phrases*. . . .

Our present topic has suffered from a great many of the tangles caused by the ambiguity of words; and it seems that the word 'foundation', especially, can have various senses which, if they aren't attended to, are bound to produce

endless disputes. For how *could* we agree on a view about what the foundation of virtue is if we give different meanings to 'foundation' and therefore have different ideas about what the question *is*?

Let us, then, consider in careful detail what we mean when we investigate the 'foundation of virtue'. And let us stipulate that by 'virtue' we mean 'absolute virtue' or the rightness, propriety or fitness of certain actions; everyone attributes this to *some* actions, and the only way I can explain it is to ask you to reflect on what you are conscious of when you experience or think about those actions.

**(i)** When now we ask 'What is the foundation of virtue?', using 'virtue in the sense I have just explained, we may mean 'What is the true explanation or reason that such-and-such actions are right, or appear to us under the notion of *right*?' And only two explanations of this can possibly be given. It may be said **(i)** that right is a species of sensation, like taste or colour, and therefore 'right' doesn't stand for anything absolutely true of the actions to which we apply it. This answer places the foundation of right entirely in God's will and good pleasure. It may instead be said **(ii)** that 'right' stands for a real characteristic of actions, something true of them, something necessary and unchangeable and independent of our perceptions, like equality, difference, proportion, or connection; so that there's nothing to be said about *why* such-and-such actions are right, any more than



about why the natures of things are what they are—e.g. why the opposite angles made by the intersection of two straight lines are equal, or why it is impossible that anything should exist without a cause.—It would be extremely unreasonable for anyone to demand more than this, asking ‘What is the foundation of truth?’ When we have traced a subject back to *the natures of things* we are always completely satisfied, and it is trifling and silly to want any further explanation. If someone seriously asked ‘Why is the whole greater than a part?’ or ‘Why is two different from twenty?’, would he deserve an answer? Wouldn’t we think he was out of his mind? It has been said that *the will of God is the foundation of truth*, but no-one can understand this. It is sacrificing all the divine perfections to the single attribute of will, and even—while seeming to magnify God’s will—subverting it, making it impossible. For what is *it* founded on? Can there be power without possibles, or will without objects, i.e. without anything to be willed? ‘God’s will is his •power to actualize various •possibilities; in exercising it he •wills that •something-or-other be the case.’ The will presupposes these ‘possibilities and objects of the will’; are they nevertheless dependent on the will and derived from it?—Perhaps some people will think as I do that because •truth has a reference to •mind, •necessary truth and the eternal natures of things imply a •necessary and eternal mind, and force us to acknowledge the unoriginated, incomprehensible wisdom and intelligence of God.

(2) Again, when we ask ‘What is the foundation of virtue?’ we may mean ‘What . . . are the considerations that imply obligation in particular cases and make particular actions right?’ If I ask ‘Why *ought* this person to act in that way in those circumstances?’, it would be proper to reply ‘Because he has received benefits from others’ or ‘Because it will make him happy’ or ‘Because God commands it’. And

there will be as many ‘foundations’ of virtue (in this sense) as there are first principles of it. Those who say that the only foundation of virtue is private happiness are probably using ‘foundation’ in this sense. That is, they probably mean that nothing obliges, nothing ever makes an action fit to be performed, except some prospect of the agent’s obtaining happiness and avoiding misery. If we ask these people ‘What makes it right for us to promote our own good? How are we to explain its being the ‘proper’ object of our desires and efforts?’, they probably wouldn’t mind appealing to *truth* and the *natures of things*; and in that case they and I would be in agreement about ‘the foundation of virtue’ in the former sense of ‘foundation’, and would differ only about the subject-matter of virtue (as I called it when discussing it in chapter 7).—This must be what is meant by those who contend that virtue and obligation are created purely by the will of God (unless they are also claiming that God’s will is the only thing that makes *truth*). If they think carefully about the question ‘Why ought we to do the will of God?’ . . . they will find that they must either •treat this as a necessary self-evident truth or •explain it in terms of the power of God to make us happy (or miserable) if we obey (or disobey) him; the latter of those would turn their theory into the one that bases all virtue and obligation on self-love, and is vulnerable to my criticisms of that.

[In the third edition Price added an end-note, linked to this point in the text. It is a pained report on and criticism of some of the views expressed in William Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*.]

(3) Or the phrase ‘the foundation of virtue’ may mean ‘the motives and reasons that lead us to virtue and support the practice of virtue in the world’. This must be what is meant by those who want to unite the different theories and represent •God’s will, •self-interest, •the reasons of things,

and •the moral sense as distinct but coinciding ‘foundations of virtue’. It is indeed undeniable the joint force of these carries us to virtue. But if we are using ‘foundation’ only in its first sense, we’ll find that only the last two of that quartet can be the true ‘foundation of virtue’.

If you want to get a more detailed and precise view of this subject, and to avoid puzzles and confusion as much as possible, you should attend also to the various common meanings of the words ‘action’ and ‘virtue’. What I have called ‘the virtue of the agent’ or ‘practical virtue’ is to be understood quite differently from absolute virtue. But I think I said enough about that distinction in chapter 8.

My remaining task is to make some general remarks about the whole position that I have been defending in this treatise.

The most important thing is to point out how my account of morality helps us in our enquiries into the nature and character of •God as• the first cause, and in explaining and proving the facts of Natural Religion.

If it were certain that the origin of our moral perceptions is an implanted sense [see page 4], it wouldn’t follow from *our* having such perceptions that *God* has them too, any more than such conclusions could be drawn from other facts about our likes and dislikes or about our sensations of sight and hearing. If there were nothing in the natures and reasons of things to be a ground of a moral and righteous disposition in God’s mind, enabling us to say *why* he prefers happiness to misery, and approves of goodness, truth, and fairness rather than their contraries, it would be much harder than it is to learn about his will and character; indeed, I think it would be utterly inconceivable to us how he could have any moral character at all.—This is supported by my reasoning in chapter 1, section iii, and also by the following reasoning.

If in respect of **intrinsic** worth and goodness all rules and standards of conduct are alike, if no goal can appeal to God’s choice more than other goals because of something **in it**, if

in particular there is nothing **in the natures of things** to be the ground of his preference for happiness over misery, or his approval of goodness rather than cruelty, then his nature must be essentially indifferent alike to all goals; it was always as possible that he should be malevolent as that he should be benevolent; there is no explanation to be given of *why* he is one of these rather than the other; and therefore he can’t have any determinate character. It’s quite certain that whatever God is he is *necessarily*. The suggestion that there is something in his nature that he might have lacked, or that he could lose, is self contradictory.

[Price offers to ‘illustrate’ his reasoning with the example of a universe containing only one body, which is moving in a certain direction. The illustration isn’t well presented, and anyway doesn’t help much. After moving out of it, Price returns to his real topic:] It is absurd, among many states of will and character that are **in themselves** indifferent and equally possible, to suppose that some one of them is actual without some cause that makes it so.

I should add that if no rule of conduct for thinking beings follows from the natures of things, and is necessary, then there is *necessarily* no rule—the whole notion of such a rule is contradictory.

The distinction between necessary and contingent existence is the main foundation of all that we believe regarding the first cause. We perceive this distinction *intuitively*—i.e. we see it at a glance, and don’t have to be argued into grasping it. The objects of thought that suggest it to us *force* the idea of it onto our minds. Some things present themselves to us as *self-evidently* effects, unstable and arbitrary in their

natures, indifferent as between existence and non-existence, and capable of existing in any one of an infinity of different ways. So we know for sure that these things are derived, dependent, and produced by causes. Examples of this include: matter and motion, the form and order of the world, and all particular things that we can perceive through the senses. These items—and in general all imperfect and limited existents—are effects, and require a cause; and we see this as clearly as we see that there is such a thing as causation or productive power or dependence of one thing on another. In short, if it is conceivable that x doesn't exist then it is possible for x not to exist; and anything that could not-exist must, if in fact it does exist, have been caused to do so.—On the other hand, there are some things that we see intuitively not to be effects, not to need a cause, to be underived, self-existent, and unchangeable. We can see that to suppose any of them to be possibly non-existent is to suppose a contradiction. . . . Examples of this include space and duration and all abstract truths and possibilities.

[Now a brief paragraph in which Price repeats things that (as he admits) he has already said in chapter 5. Then:]

Reasonings of this kind plainly tend to show us that if the distinctions of right and wrong, and moral good and evil, are nothing in the natures of things, God cannot have any character. And this conclusion is contradicted by known facts: God's having some dispositions, some principle of action, some character, is clearly shown to us by the fact that he creates at all, and even more clearly by the purposes indicated by his acting with the uniformity and wisdom that we see in the constitution of nature. So the whole course of things—the world and everything that happens in it—shows the falsity of the premise that good and evil are not inherent in the intrinsic natures of things.

But although effects thus prove that God has some character (which is enough to refute the theory of morality I have been attacking), it may be doubted whether effects alone provide us with any undeniable proofs of God's having the particular character of goodness; because it seems not to be impossible to explain the effects on other suppositions. An unthinking agent cannot produce order and regularity; so wherever these appear they demonstrate design and wisdom in the cause. But it can't be said, in a parallel way, that happiness couldn't be caused by a selfish or capricious or even malicious agent; so the appearance of happiness in an effect can't be claimed to demonstrate the goodness of the cause. It has to be granted that good is greatly prevalent in what we see of the works of God, that everything we perceive of the world shows kind design, and that the primary direction of every law and regulation of nature is towards happiness; but still someone might say:

'Who knows what different scenes may have existed at earlier times, or may now exist in other districts of the universe? An evil being may sometimes cause good, just as a good being may sometimes cause suffering and pain. We see so little of nature! From what we observe at a point and in a moment what conclusions can we securely draw regarding the whole universe through all eternity? Concerning a plan of boundless extent, designed and carried out by an incomprehensible being, what can be learned from such a superficial and incomplete observation as we can make of a vanishingly small part of it? Can it be right to base a general conclusion on a single experiment, or to determine the character and views of a being that we have no independent experience of, from a few acts that can be interpreted in many different ways? If we had only effects to go by, and

nothing in necessary truth and reason to argue from, wouldn't it be natural to wonder, anxiously, about •whether great changes will happen in the world later on, •whether the principle<sub>c</sub> of action in the first Cause is not goodness but caprice or a love of variety, or •whether the world as we now see and feel it was designed to give a keener edge to future disappointment, the ultimate aim being universal misery?'

I leave it to you to decide what respect you think these objections deserve. I am far from thinking that they succeed in showing that effects, independently of all arguments from moral fitness [Price's seven-word phrase], can't provide us with sufficient arguments for the goodness of God.

When we first reflect that undoubtedly God has *some* will and character, and that it is inherently as possible and as credible that he should be good as that he should have any other character, our subsequent thoughts about the obvious marks of kindness and love that we see in his works inevitably incline us to think that he *is* good. When we have no more evidence for a proposition than against it, any •circumstance that tips the balance in its favour ought to determine our understandings and draw our assent •to the proposition• with a level of confidence proportional to •its apparent weight. As for the objections and suspicions expressed above, it can fairly be said that we should judge concerning what we *don't* see by what we *do* see, and not vice versa! Thus, as long as the over-all appearance of what we experience of God's works, though comparatively little, is clearly *as if* happiness were their end, we're entitled to conclude that this is indeed the truth. •And the point about

what a tiny proportion of the universe we know anything about cancels out•. We are considering the thesis that some principle<sub>c</sub> other than goodness influences the Author of the universe, so that *on the whole* the universe doesn't look as though goodness were behind it. Well, the more extensive we suppose the universe to be, the more improbable it was that we would be dropped into the 'vanishingly small' part of it where goodness *is* so much exerted.—But some writers (especially those who have a dismal idea of human life as being on the whole unhappy) are unlikely. . . .to be much influenced by this argument. This leads to questions of considerable importance that have often been well discussed: What are we to *make of* the appearances of evil in the world? Given those appearances, and the greater degrees of happiness that we *think* we see might have been given to us, don't we have reason to suspect that goodness is *not* the spring of action in the Deity?—In thinking about this, we should especially note •that the natural state of a being is always his sound and good and happy state, •that all the corruptions and disorders we observe are plainly unnatural deviations and excesses, and •that there are no examples in which ill as such [Price's phrase] is the genuine causal upshot of the basic constitution of things.<sup>26</sup>

If, while the voice of all nature (as far as we hear it) is providing us with these arguments, it appears to us that

- for a thinking being all ends are not the same, and
- that there is something *intrinsically* better in goodness, veracity, and justice than in their contraries, something morally different *in their natures*,

our confidence about God's moral attributes will be increased

<sup>26</sup> It might have been objected here that the most we can infer from effects is the *present* disposition of the Deity, and that even if they showed *this* to be benevolent we still have no evidence to prove the stability of God's character, i.e. that he always has been and always will between good. The full reply to such objections may be learnt from the observations on the *necessary* existence of the Deity that will be found at the end of this treatise. [This refers to a ten-page 'dissertation' that Price tacked onto to this work in its third edition; it is not included in this version.]

in the same degree that we think we have reason to believe this. And if it appears to us clear and certain that

- intellect implies the approval of beneficence, that
- the understanding is the power that judges concerning moral differences, and that
- the natures of things make it necessary that goodness rather than malice constitutes the disposition and end of every mind in proportion to the degree of its knowledge and perfection,

our confidence about the present point will become equally clear and certain.

But if we reject these principles, and accept instead that all our ideas of worth and virtue, of morality and excellence, have no foundation in truth and reality, we'll have to settle for much inferior evidence on very important points. —If •our approval of goodness comes from intellectual perception, it *demonstratively* [= 'rigorously'] implies the goodness of God; but if •it comes solely from an arbitrary structure of our minds, all it shows is that...the plan of the universe, whatever it is, required that what is *here* and *now* should carry the appearance of benevolence. . . .

Indeed, on the principles I have defended in this treatise it is very easy to establish the moral perfections of the Deity.—As I showed in chapter 3, the true explanation for why we want and prefer our own *private* happiness is •the *nature* of happiness. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that •this is also the true explanation for why we want and prefer *public* happiness. And if that is right then we immediately see that God must be benevolent.—In short, if there is a rule of right •arising from the differences and relations of things and •extending as far as all the possible effects of power, a rule which (to the degree that it is known) compels the respect and affection of all reasonable beings, and which •in• its own nature

constitutes the proper, supreme, and eternal guide and measure of all the decisions those beings make, it follows rigorously that the first Intellect—i.e. God—must be under the direction of this rule more than any other being is. How much more? As much more as his understanding is higher than theirs and his knowledge more perfect. He is in fact the living independent spring of this rule. He can't contradict •it without contradicting •himself. It is a part of the idea of reason, so it must be absolutely sovereign in the *self-existent infinite reason*, •i.e. in God•.

So there's no difficulty about discovering the principle<sub>c</sub> of action in the Deity. It is obvious that the seat of •infinite power must be the seat of •infinite knowledge, and this makes it equally evident that it must be also the seat of •absolute rectitude; and these qualities—thus implying one another and being essentially •not three but• *one*—constitute the idea of *Deity*, and exhibit the Deity to us in the most awe-inspiring and glorious light. Among the various possible schemes of creation and ways of ordering the series of events there is a *best* one, and this is the rule and goal of God's conduct, and it isn't possible that he should deviate from it, given that he sees it to be his rule and that he doesn't have any *difficulty* about •abiding by it or about• doing anything. . . .

[Price goes on about that at some length: God isn't subject to any of the factors that might lead someone to act wrongly—ignorance, error, passion, and so on. Before all that, he has remarked on our good fortune in living in a universe governed by a wise, good Deity—'as certainly as God exists, all is well'.]

Before we leave this topic I should say—so as to prevent a misunderstanding—that whenever I say that what explains God's rectitude is *necessity*, or speak of goodness as *essential* to him, I am talking about the *principle<sub>c</sub>* of rectitude, not

the *exercise* of it. It would be absurd to suppose that God •acts by the same kind of necessity by which he •exists, or that •his uses of his power are necessary in the same sense •of ‘necessary’ as •his power is. . . . All voluntary action is free—that’s part of what ‘voluntary’ means—and this implies the physical possibility of not performing the action [see note on ‘physical’ on page 88]. What this ‘possibility’ means is not in the least inconsistent with its being utterly certain that the action will be performed, or with the impossibility—in *another sense of ‘impossibility’*—that the action should be omitted. Consider these two:

- (i) God will never do wrong.
- (ii) The wisest created being won’t do something that is destructive to him without being even slightly *tempted* to do it.

Of course we can depend on the truth of (ii); well, can depend *infinitely more* on the truth of (i). And now consider these:

- (i) He who is the abstract of all perfection will deviate into imperfection in his conduct.
- (ii) Infinite reason will act unreasonably.
- (iii) Eternal righteousness will act unrighteously.
- (iv) Infinite knowledge will make a mistake.
- (v) Infinite power will be conquered.
- (vi) Something that exists necessarily will cease to exist.

These are *equally* impossible; but what rules out (i)–(iii) is a different *kind* of impossibility from the one that (iv)–(vi) have.—It may be really impossible for someone in his right mind and to drink poison when he no motive to do so, and really impossible that he won’t die if he does drink the poison; but can’t everyone see that these ‘impossibilities’ are totally different in meaning? What good reason can there be against calling the one a ‘moral impossibility’ and the other a ‘natural impossibility’?

Many people are unwilling to acknowledge this distinction, but I think it is of great importance. Perhaps the following illustration will help.

[In what follows, the original doesn’t mention particular numbers; they are added for clarity, and don’t affect the points that are being made.] Suppose that we have a die with a million faces, and that I, who have no special skill, and want on my first throw to bring up the number 397,515; we’ll say that it is *certain* that I’ll fail; we often use ‘certain’ for things that are less sure than that! How about my throwing 397,515 on *each* of my first one *million* throws? Most people would say that that’s *impossible*. This impossibility, however, is plainly very different from absolute physical impossibility; for if it is *physically* possible to succeed on the first throw (as it undoubtedly is), then it’s just as possible (*physically*) to succeed on the second, the third, and all the subsequent throws; and therefore it is, in *this* sense of ‘possible’, as possible to throw that number a million times in a row as to throw it the first time.—[Price now expands the example: a million dice, each having a million faces, are each thrown a million times and each throw with each of them comes up 745,001. This will strike people as even more ‘impossible’, but it is perfectly naturally or physically possible that this should happen. He continues:] If you *still* don’t see the distinction, compare that last outcome with this: throwing a six with a die that has no numbers stamped on it!

To push on further with this example: Remember that the improbability of throwing any particular face of a die is always proportional to how many faces the die has; so when the number of faces is *infinite* the improbability of the outcome—say, the improbability of throwing the number that is equal to 498,053,999,145,011<sup>9855</sup>, or throwing the number 7—is infinite; and we describe something that is infinitely improbable as being **impossible**, in a sense of

that word like the sense that is involved when we say ‘It is **impossible** that a wise man should, knowingly and without temptation, do something that will destroy him’. But some number has to come up, and each number has the same chance of being thrown as any other; so it is **possible** that this number may be thrown, in the sense in which it is **possible** that a wise man will etc., etc., meaning that he has it in his power to etc., etc. [At this point Price switches from •the improbability that x will happen to the •certainty that x won’t happen. We’ll follow him in this; but it’s just a stylistic variation and doesn’t affect the argument.] The certainty  $C_2$  that a particular face of an infinite die won’t be thrown twice in a row is infinitely greater than the certainty  $C_1$  that it won’t be thrown the first time; and the certainty  $C_x$  that in an infinity of throws of this die that number won’t come up every time is greater than  $C_1$  in the same proportion that infinity raised to the infiniteth power is greater than infinity. But we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that the impossibility of that outcome is still *not* a physical impossibility. But there is more excuse for confusing *these* two kinds of impossibility (or necessity) •in this context than there would be for confusing them •when comparing the outcomes of free choices with the outcomes of the operation of blind and unthinking causes. The former kind of ‘impossibility’ is a matter of degree, while the latter kind is not. The necessity by which twice two is not twenty, or a mass of matter doesn’t stay still when pushed by another, is always the same, and can’t be even slightly increased or lessened.

•Connecting the die-throwing illustration with what I was saying about the different kinds of necessity, or senses of ‘necessary’, that are involved in ‘Necessarily God always

acts well’ and ‘Necessarily God exists and is perfectly good’: The necessity of the eternal conformity of all God’s actions to the rules of wisdom and righteousness is comparable with the certainty that an infinite number of dice, each with an infinite number of faces and thrown all together an infinite number of times, would not always bring up the number equal to  $659,555,816,451,110^{79443}$ . The latter outcome, though it’s infallibly true that it *won’t* happen, nevertheless ‘could’ happen, in a sense not very unlike that in which God ‘could’ deviate from rectitude, e.g. creating a miserable world, or destroying the world after promising not to—namely, the sense in which it means that God has the power to do such things.<sup>27</sup>

That is enough of that subject. Let us now take the account I have given in this treatise of the nature and subject-matter of morality, and apply it to another question of considerable importance regarding the Deity. I mean the question ‘Are all God’s moral attributes reducible to benevolence? Does his benevolence *include* the whole of his character?’ [Price’s discussion of this seems to equate benevolence with goodness. There are hints of that elsewhere in the work, and also hints that point the other way.]

I have shown that the answer No is correct for inferior beings, and in general that virtue is by no means reducible to benevolence. If I have been right about that, our present question is immediately answered. Absolute and eternal **rectitude** (i.e. a concern for what is in all cases most fit and righteous) is properly the ultimate principle<sub>c</sub> of God’s conduct, and the sole guide of his power. The first and chief component in this is **goodness**; but goodness and rectitude, however much they may •coincide, are far from

<sup>27</sup> If you don’t like the word ‘infinite’ as used here, replace it by ‘indefinite’, which serves my purpose just as well. The die-throwing analogy that I have presented here gives me a way of making my points with great exactness; so I hope you’ll forgive me if it strikes you as containing anything unsuitable to the dignity of the subject to which it is applied.

being •identical. . . . So, faced with the question

‘If there were ever some kind of conflict between rectitude and goodness in a particular case, which of the two would stand first in God’s mind and which would give way?’,

one would think that there couldn’t be any controversy about the answer. Would *anyone* say that it is not because it is right that God promotes the happiness of his creatures? Or that he would promote such happiness in cases where—or in a manner in which—it would be *wrong* to promote it?. . . .

[Price develops this line of thought through four book-pages [= two in the format of this version] whose main content—as he admits—has already been provided in earlier chapters. A few notable episodes from this material are given in the present paragraph.] Happiness is an object of essential and eternal value. It was because it was *right* to confer happiness that God created the universe in the first place. It was for this that the world was produced, and for this it is continued and governed. . . . But while we find it necessary to conclude that *goodness* is the principle<sub>c</sub> from which God created, we ought. . . . never to forget that this principle<sub>c</sub> is founded in reason and guided by reason. . . . It would be a very dangerous error to consider goodness in God as not being exercised under the direction of justice. Divine benevolence is a disposition to bring happiness to the faithful, the pious, the upright—not to make everyone indiscriminately happy in every possible way. . . . There is nothing unreasonable in believing that falsehood and deceit could often be as likely to produce happiness as truth and faithfulness are. Supposing that such a case occurred in the world, it is surely beyond doubt that God would prefer the latter—the route to happiness through truth and faithfulness. If this is denied, if it is indeed true that there’s nothing right in one or wrong in the other apart from their consequences,

what can we depend on? How are we to know that God hasn’t actually chosen the methods of falsehood and general deception? We are in a very bewildered state if we have •to wait for a satisfactory solution of such doubts, •to wait until we discover that the circumstances of our state and of the world are such that it can never be equally advantageous to us to deceive us—especially given our experience of countless cases where a given end *can* be achieved, often most quickly and efficiently, by deviating from truth!—Although we are to conceive of God as just and true as well as good, it’s clear that •justice and •truth could never lead him to create. •They presuppose that there already exist beings who have reason and moral capacities; •they are a certain manner of acting towards such beings. . . . I think you’ll see that I am not guilty of an inconsistency when I say •that the moral attributes of God are not all resolvable into benevolence and also •that happiness is the goal—and probably the only goal—for which he created and governs the world.—Happiness is the goal of his government, but (I repeat) it is happiness in subordination to rectitude; it is the happiness of the virtuous and worthy rather than of others; it is happiness obtained consistently with justice and veracity. . . .

One last point: Although it is proper, and often unavoidable, to speak of goodness, justice, and veracity as different attributes of the Deity, they are different only as •different views, effects, or manifestations of •one supreme principle, which includes the whole of moral perfection, namely everlasting rectitude or reason. That complete what I have to say about the character of the Deity.

I shall now proceed in the same manner to examine the other principles and facts of natural religion, and to point out the special evidence for them that comes from my account of the nature and foundation of morals.



[The three book-pages on the topic of God's 'moral government' consist mainly of variants on the argument that the absolute rectitude of God's character, and his perfect knowledge of moral truth, make it stand to reason that rectitude will be at the heart of his government of the world. For example: 'It is self-evident that virtue *ought to be* happier than vice, and we can be very confident that if something *ought to be*, the universal governing mind will ensure that it *will be*.' Given the difference between virtue and vice, we can be sure of God's attitude to virtuous people and vicious ones, namely 'that God is *for* the one and *against* the other, i.e. that the administration of the world is strictly moral and righteous'. On this note, Price modulates into his next topic:]

If it should appear that in the present world virtue and vice are not distinguished in the manner that these observations require, the unavoidable consequence must be that *there is a future state*. Let us look carefully into the question of how this matter stands, and what the force is of this inference. [In this context, Price talks about our life on earth as mortals using the expressions '(at) present', 'this present state', 'now', 'this life', 'this scene', 'here', 'here below' and 'temporal' (Price sometimes says 'temporary', in a now obsolete sense of that word). The underlying thought was that God doesn't exist in time, and that in our life after death we won't be in time either; so it's a special feature of our 'present' life that it is temporal.]

On the one hand, it must be granted that in general virtue is the present good of men, and vice the present ill of men, and that we see enough in our present state, without needing any abstract arguments, to •convince us that God favours the virtuous, and to •point out to us the beginnings of a moral government.—But it is equally evident that we now perceive only the *beginnings* of such a government, and that it is nowhere near as thorough as we have reason to expect.

Virtue *tends to* produce much greater happiness than it now *actually* produces, and vice to produce much greater misery. These contrary tendencies don't and *couldn't* ever produce their full effects during the short period of this life, and they are often prevented from taking the effect that they could and generally do take, by many obstacles arising from the wickedness of mankind and other causes of a plainly temporal kind that can't be regarded as natural or necessary. We can reasonably presume that tendencies thus interrupted and opposed, though they are inseparable from virtue and vice and essential to the constitution of things, will at some time or other lead to their genuine effects. They clearly tell us of the purpose of him who made the world what it is. Can we think that this purpose will be defeated?

Though virtue always tends to happiness, and though it is the nature of it to advance our happiness and to better our condition, in proportion to the degree in which we possess it, yet such is the state of things here below that the event sometimes proves otherwise. It is impossible to survey the world, or to recollect the history of it, without being convinced of this. There is not the least probability that all men are constantly and invariably more or less happy, as they are more or less conscientious and upright. So often virtue has been oppressed and persecuted while vice has prospered and flourished. Good men may **(1)** get themselves into •tangles because they are *so* rigid about moral correctness, or into •lowness of spirits and melancholy, and in consequence of this may be rendered ignorant of their own characters, and live in perpetual distrust and terror; or they may **(2)** have false notions of religion and the Deity, which give them great trouble and rid them of many of the joys that would otherwise have come with their integrity. And then there are men who, perhaps through faults of their parents or of their upbringing, **(3)** have diseased bodies, and spend

their lives burdened by pain and sickness, and ones who (4) are harrassed and defamed *because of* their virtue, driven away from all that is dear to them and compelled to spend their days in poverty or in an inquisition [Price's phrase, perhaps meaning 'spend their days being investigated']. These four kinds of people are less happy than many others have been spared such hardships without being more vituous. Indeed, they are less happy than many vicious people who

- swim with the current of the world and comply with its customs,
- deny themselves nothing that they want and can get without hurting their reputations,
- are born into wealth and privilege,
- enjoy health and vigour of body, and naturally easy and gay temperaments,
- never give a thought to what may happen to them **hereafter**, or have opinions that fill them with false hopes about this, and at last
- die without concern or remorse.

[From here on Price will refer often to the life we shall have after our biological death, using such expressions as 'future', '**hereafter**' or 'beyond this world'.] *Of course* there have been instances of this kind! It certainly happens sometimes that the very honesty of people subjects them to special difficulties and drawbacks, while lying and dishonesty help them on their way to ease, and honour, and plenty!

Indeed, all things considered, this world seems to be more like a school for developing virtue than a position of honour for it; the course of human affairs is favourable to virtue more by •exercising it than by •rewarding it! Other things being equal, virtue always has a great advantage over vice,

and is alone sufficient to outweigh many large drawbacks; but it would be very extravagant to claim •that it is at present always completely its own happiness, •that it is sufficient on its own to outweigh all possible evils of body, mind, and financial condition, or •that (for example)

a man who has become wealthy by vicious but private methods, and afterwards enjoys his wealth for many years with discretion and a good reputation

has less pleasure than

a man whose benevolence or integrity has brought him to a dungeon or to the stake, or who lives in perplexity, labour, self-denial, torture of body, and melancholy of mind.

It is indeed true that virtue even in the most distressed circumstances is *preferable to* vice in the most prosperous circumstances, and that being burned to death *ought to be* chosen rather than the greatest wages of iniquity.<sup>28</sup> This doesn't mean that in distressed circumstances virtue is more profitable than vice (i.e. accompanied by more pleasure), but that it •is intrinsically excellent and obligatory, •is to be chosen for itself independently of its utility, and •remains more desirable and amiable than anything else we could aim at, even when it is stripped of every reward and is in the greatest degree afflicted and oppressed.

[Price now embarks on two book-pages developing the theme that a person who is fairly virtuous but has some elements of vice in his make-up, or a vicious person who is starting to reform himself, is likely to suffer more than someone who is thoroughly virtuous and more than someone who is 'thoroughly wicked'. This is woven in with some other points about ways in which 'in the present world' virtue

<sup>28</sup> Anyone who thinks this assertion to be in any degree inconsistent or extravagant must be someone who holds that virtue is good and eligible and obligatory *only as a means to private pleasure*, and that nothing but pleasure can be an object of desire and preference. With *that* view as a basis, the very notion of parting with life (or giving up an enjoyment) for the sake of virtue implies a contradiction. . . .

sometimes leads one into suffering that could otherwise have been avoided. Then:]

[The ensuing questions are really disguised assertions, but in this case the interrogative device works well enough for us, and is therefore allowed to stand. See example and note on page 2.] Don't such observations point out to us a future state, and prove that this life is connected with another—a life after our animal death? Rather than accepting this conclusion, shall we retreat to *atheism* and deny that a perfectly reasonable being governs all things? Or must we maintain that his being righteous himself doesn't imply that he approves of righteousness and will support it, distinguishing those who do his will and imitate his goodness from those who do not? If •nothing is to be expected beyond this world, •no suitable provision is made for many differences in how men are constituted, •no remarkable evidence is seen of the divine holiness, and •the noblest and best of all objects (that on which the welfare of the creation depends, and which raises beings to the nearest resemblance to God) seems to be left without any adequate support—is *this possible under the Divine government?* Can it be conceived that the wisdom and fairness of providence should fail in just this one respect, i.e. in respect of virtue? . . . But if we accept that this scene is related to a future more important one, all is clear, every difficulty is removed, and every irregularity vanishes. We are now presented with a plain explanation of all the strange phenomena in human life. It's not important how much virtue suffers and vice triumphs •here, if •hereafter there will be a just distinction between them and all the inequalities will be set right. Indeed, it may sometimes be *right* that a vicious man is permitted to enjoy the world, and also that a good man is made to struggle with difficulties. . . .

A moral plan of government must be implemented gradually and slowly, through a series of steps and stages. Before

retribution there must be probation and discipline. Before anyone *receives* reward (or punishment), he must be given sufficient opportunities to *deserve* reward (or punishment)—to form and display his character—and during that time there have to be many occasions when the person's choice of virtue or vice will make no difference to the immediate outcome. If every single action were immediately followed by its proper reward or punishment, . . . •the characters of men couldn't be formed, •virtue would be become •self-•interested and mercenary, •some of the most important branches of virtue couldn't be practised at all, •adversity (which is often its best friend) would never have access to it, and •there wouldn't be any of the trials that are needed to train virtue up to maturity and perfection. This would disturb the regular [here = 'orderly *and* morally correct'; see note on page 105] process of a moral government, and defeat its purposes. And so the very facts that are regarded •by some• as objections to •the thesis that there is such a moral government• turn out to be *required for* such government, given how mankind are now constituted. . . .

If we accidentally discovered a a piece of workmanship—a product of skill—that was entirely new to us, no-one would doubt that it was made to be used in a particular way, if its design and structure were plainly appropriate for such a use, and the supposition of this use of it •explained everything in it that would otherwise be disproportioned and inexplicable, and •made it appear regular and beautiful throughout. Think how *perverse* it would be to •deny obstinately that it was intended for such a use, and in consequence of this to •ignore the undeniable marks of the most masterly hand in various parts of it, and •maintain it to be the work of some bungling craftsman who lacked either the knowledge or the power needed to make it more perfect!

Another example: We find a particular passage in a book that at first seems strange to us, but then we see an obvious and natural sense of it that fits with the phrasing of the passage itself and also makes it fit in with •the wisdom apparent in other parts of the book, and with •what previously we had the best reason to believe concerning the character and abilities of the author. Given all of this, how *unreasonable* it would be to insist that the passage is nonsense or blasphemy!

I thought I needed to make these points as an aid to those who don't want to allow *anything* irregular in the present distribution of happiness and misery, because they are afraid that such an admission would imply that we don't have sufficient evidence for a perfect order in nature, and for the wisdom and fairness of providence.<sup>29</sup>

It would indeed hardly be possible to avoid atheism if the assertions of some writers on this subject were true. We say:

From the view that we have of the constitution and order of the divine government, why can't we infer what will take place hereafter under that government? In many other cases we infer what is unknown from what is known, e.g. inferring the whole meaning of what someone said from hearing only a part of it.

There are those who would reply to us as follows:

In that last case our inference is based on a previous acquaintance with the speaker, with language, and

with the general manner in which men use it to express their sentiments. If we didn't have such acquaintance, even if we understood the meanings of the particular words we heard we couldn't infer anything from them beyond the ideas that they immediately conveyed, or see the least reason to suspect any further intention in the speaker. Similarly, because we have no previous acquaintance with the divine nature and government, we can't know anything about them beyond what is directly signified to us by the state of things around us; we can have no reason to think that the created world has any order greater than what we at the present moment observe, or to conclude that the First Cause has any powers and qualities in a higher degree than they are actually exhibited to us in the world as we experience it. It may be further argued that because this visible universe is an object wholly singular to us—not one instance of a *kind* of which we have experienced other instances—we can't draw *any* conclusions from it, or determine *anything* about the nature, designs, and properties of its cause, or even know that it has a cause. Trying to reach such conclusions from the basis that we have is like trying to work out what the speaker means when we haven't had the experiences needed to let us have any idea

<sup>29</sup> By 'anything irregular' I mean anything that *would be* irregular if this life were not related to another life •after death•. Something that is perfectly right and just when considered in its relations to the whole to which it belongs can look quite unjust when it is considered by itself, detached from the rest. How strange it is that anyone should overlook this obvious truth!

Bear in mind that the points I have been making here don't show anything about the *nature* of the future state, except that that in it the rewards and punishments begun in this life will be made adequate. But it's perfectly obvious that this could happen and yet all mankind eventually perish, •so that in *these* arguments there is no promise of eternal life•. Reason, therefore, leaves us much in the dark on this subject. All we are sure of is that the after-life will on the whole be better or worse for each person in proportion as *he* has been morally better or worse in his conduct and character. [The footnote continues at considerable length, making two points. •Any virtuous person must have a good enough sense of his own *unworthiness* to feel that he doesn't *deserve* any notable reward in the after-life. •The Christian revelation offers the prospect of 'a new life of complete happiness that will never end'.]

of what any words mean, so that for us the speaker's words are just noises.[Price refers to one of Hume's essays as a source for some of this line of thought, but his posthumously published *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* are better.]

... This line of thought can have no effect on anyone who is sure, 'as I am', that these difficulties are based on a wrong account of how our minds operate. However much the human understanding is •preceded by sense-experience, and •supplied by it with its first opportunities to exert itself, it is a faculty infinitely superior to all the powers of sense, and a most important source of our ideas. Our understanding enables us, independently of experience, to demonstrate countless truths concerning many items of which we otherwise could never have known anything.—It is the special advantage of the principles I have maintained that they provide us with direct and demonstrative proofs of the truths of natural religion, and particularly of God's righteousness and goodness, at the same time that they aid and support all reasonings from experience. [Because 'demonstrative' means 'logically rigorous', Price is here making a very strong claim. In this work he seldom claims to (be able to) 'demonstrate' significant philosophical results. The clearest cases where he does are both about demonstrating what the moral structure of the after-life will be. The other is back on page 44 ('prove with the evidentness of a demonstration what supreme reason will do').]

[Price closes the chapter with an emotionally colourful account, supposedly drawn from his conclusions in this

book, of the wonderfulness of virtue and the dreadfulness of vice. He writes of virtue as something we can carry with us into the after-life and that will 'make God our friend', but he doesn't openly say anything about divine *rewards* for virtue. He concludes the virtue part of this by saying: 'Secure this, and you secure *everything*. Lose this, and *all* is lost.' In the vice part, Price depicts the havoc caused in the world by vice, and also hammers away at 'what it is to set up our own wills against *Reason* and *the Divine will*'. One gets the impression that in this context the divine will is uppermost in his mind. This is how the chapter ends:] The effects of vice in the present world, however shocking, may be nothing compared with those that may take place hereafter, when •the evil and the good will no longer be blended, when •the natural tendencies of things will no longer be interrupted in their operation, when •the moral constitution of the universe will be perfected, and when •everyone will get what he deserves. It may be impossible for us to imagine what the punishment will be that will then overtake vice. When we seriously consider what vice *is* and what it can *do*, our ideas about the dreadful loss we may suffer through it can hardly be exaggerated, and we can't be *too* concerned to remove all the remains of it from our temperaments and to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and the danger with which it threatens us.

## Conclusion

Having completed my design in this work, I will close by offering an argument for the *practice* of virtue. I think it deserves to be considered by everyone, and especially by people who are disposed to scepticism and infidelity.

In chapter 10 I have presented some proofs of the principal facts of natural religion, especially of •a perfect moral government in nature and •a future state of rewards and punishments. There is a great deal of other evidence that wasn't on the path I was following. Above all, the Christian revelation confirms for us everything we can learn through reason on these subjects, and promises to the virtuous *eternal life—a happy immortality*.

But I am now going to suppose that the whole of this evidence is so insufficient that it creates only a chance, overbalanced by contrary chances, for such a reward for virtue; and I shall argue on that basis that our obligations will still be the same, and that not practising virtue—indeed not sacrificing to it all present advantages and gratifications—is utterly foolish.—To get started on the argument, consider what any given chance for *such* a good must be worth.

An even chance for any given stake is worth one half of that stake; if the chance is only a third (or a tenth) of all the chances, its value will be a third (or a tenth) of the whole stake, and so on. So if the good that is at stake is the future reward of virtue, and its value is reckoned to be •equal to the value of all present good, •not more than that, then it will be right to sacrifice for it a half (a third, a tenth) of all present good, according as the chances for obtaining it are a half (a third, a tenth) of all the chances for and against obtaining it.

If the value of the future reward of virtue is supposed greater than the value of all present good, it will be right

to give up for it a proportionally greater part of present good; and the future good might be so great as to make *any* chance for it worth more than *all* that can be enjoyed in this life.—The same is true of the value of any means of avoiding a future evil. Though we suppose the evil to be enormously improbable, its nature and duration and intensity may be so great that something that saves us from the tiny danger of it may be worth more than anything we can sacrifice in order to get it.

In other words: Any given chance for a given good is worth *something*. The same chance for a greater good is worth *more*, and consequently when the good is infinite the value of any chance for it must be likewise *infinite*. Given that the future good that is promised to virtue is infinite, and the loss of it with which vice threatens us is therefore an infinite evil, it follows that any suspicion that religion *may* be true, or the bare *possibility* that virtue and vice will have the consequences that Christianity has taught us to expect, has the same implications for practice as if we were *sure* of its truth.

Even if we think that (through some strange confusion in the affairs of the world, or an extravagant mercy in God) vice *also* gives us a chance of happiness hereafter, if we accept that virtue is to *any* degree more likely to lead to happiness than vice is, it will still be *mad* not to adhere to virtue and avoid vice, at all costs. What is the value of a small increase in the chance of obtaining a good? Obviously, its value depends on the value of the good; and if the good is infinite then *any* increase in the chance of getting it has an infinite value.

I don't think anyone can escape this conclusion unless he asserts that it is *certain* that

Christianity is false and there is no future state, or if there is such a state virtue gives *no* better chance for happiness in it than vice does.

It would be inconsistent for a sceptic to assert this, and surely no man in his right mind will assert it. However, let us consider the situation of someone who *does* assert it. It would still be prudent of him to be sufficiently unsure of his atheism to take the precaution of living in such a way that he has nothing to fear if the worst were to happen and his confidence were to turn out to be wrong. [That is, if Christianity were to turn out to be true, this being 'the worst' from the point of view of the atheist.] But someone whose disbelief in Christianity falls short of this extreme certainty is guilty ·not of mere •imprudence but· of •unspeakable folly if he is loose and careless in his life, or ever consents to any wrong action or omission in the interests of getting some benefit in this world.

Indeed, anyone who fairly examines the evidence for religion must see that it deserves great regard.—Someone who thinks about how *reasonable* it is to presume that

- infinite goodness will communicate infinite happiness, that
- the creator of everything designs his creatures for such a happiness by allowing those who are qualified for this to live for ever, improving under his eye and care, and that
- virtuous men, if there are any, have most reason to expect to be favoured in this way;

someone who reflects on

- the many ways in which our minds have been shaped in favour of virtue,
- the accountableness of our natures,

- our unavoidable fears and hopes regarding the after-life,
- the malignant and detestable nature of vice,
- the views of mankind in general concerning a future state and reckoning [here = 'rewards and punishments'], and
- the spotless holiness of the Deity, which the sacred writings assert and display, and some conviction of which naturally forces itself on everyone,

—that person really can't avoid having uneasy suspicions about what may happen in the after-life, and be led to consider with deep concern

- how awful the future displays of divine justice *may* turn out to be,
- how greatly we may be involved in the incomprehensible scheme of providence,
- how much may depend on what we now are, and
- how necessary it is for us to do everything we possibly can to keep ourselves safe.

—We have a great deal of reason to believe that at some time or other present inequalities will be set right, and a greater difference than we *now* see between what comes to the virtuous and what comes to the vicious. As for what *kind* or *degree* of difference the counsels and ends of the divine government may require—who can be sure about that? We see enough in the present state of things, and sufficiently experience what can happen given how this world is run, to alarm our fears and start us giving serious thought to what greater differences between human beings than we now observe are likely in a future state, and what greater happiness or misery than we now feel—or can have any ideas of—*may* await us in the future endless duration through which it is at least credible that we are going to exist.

And however little respect some people may have for such considerations, it must be past dispute among impartial people who have enquiring minds that the arguments that have been used to prove natural and revealed religion, when taken all together, produce some degree of real evidence—and if that's so, those arguments lay a sufficient foundation for the above reasoning.

What makes it all the more appropriate for us to attend to this reasoning is the fact that it's a kind of reasoning that we are continually using in the common course of life, and because it explains to us the principles and reasons that we act on in almost all our temporal concerns. Sceptical people ought to be forced to think about the fact that our nature and condition are such that they *make* us, in the daily course of life, act on evidence much lower than what is commonly called 'probable', and that there are countless instances in everyday life where a man would be regarded as in a literal sense *distracted* if he refused to act, and with great application too, on something for which the probability was greatly against his succeeding ['. . . in a literal sense *distracted*'—colloquially 'he is out of his mind', literally 'he has lost his way'].

Men will often take great precautions against dangers that are remote and imaginary, but they neglect an easy and reasonable precaution against the worst and greatest of all dangers! They become eager and restless adventurers,

taking great trouble and running great risks where there's any prospect of getting money, power, or fame—these being objects with little intrinsic value, objects that it would be our greatest dignity and happiness to despise! Yet they are unwilling to take any trouble or run any risks in order to obtain blessings of incalculable value and to secure a chance for eternal bliss. . . . By living as virtue and piety require, we can in general lose nothing and may gain infinitely; by a careless ill-spent life we can get nothing, or at best (come what may) next to nothing and may lose infinitely? When will these indisputable truths that imply so much about our interests sink deeply enough into our hearts? It would be very unfair to my argument if I didn't make this last point. You will have noticed that the argument has been based on the supposition that •there is a very great probability against religion and future retribution, and that •virtue requires us to sacrifice to it all our present enjoyments. The reverse of both these suppositions appears in reality to be the truth. There is not only an even chance but a great probability for the truth of religion. There is nothing to be got by vice, and the best part of present good is commonly lost by it. What virtue requires us to give up is not the happiness of life but our follies, diseases, and miseries. Given that this is how things stand, how foolish is a vicious choice! How shocking is the infatuation that makes us capable of it!