

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_c’, suggesting ‘principle = cause’. A ‘principle’ without the subscript is a proposition.

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Contents

Preface	1
Introduction	2
Chapter 1: The origin of our ideas of right and wrong	3
i: What <i>is</i> the question concerning the foundation of morals?	3
(ii): The origin of our ideas in general	6
iii: The origin of our ideas of moral right and wrong	20
Chapter 2: Our ideas of the beauty and ugliness of actions	29

Chapter 3: The origin of our desires and affections	36
Chapter 4: Our ideas of good and ill desert	41
Chapter 5: How morality connects with God's nature. The reliability of our faculties. The grounds of belief	44
Chapter 6: Fitness and moral obligation. Other accounts of obligation. How rightness relates to obligation. How other writers have expressed themselves when explaining morality	52
Chapter 7: What are the main <i>kinds</i> of virtue?	66
Chapter 8: The nature and essentials of virtue in practice as distinct from absolute virtue. From what principle, or motive does a virtuous agent act?	85
Chapter 9: What does it mean to say that some actions and characters are <i>more</i> 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	97
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	110
Conclusion	124

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_c 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_c 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_c'—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 he can't care about having the approval of others? Does *nothing* in the good opinion and esteem of his fellow-beings 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' 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 that God *chose* to give our minds, 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_c 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_c of •certain *feelings* that come from the arbitrary [= contingent] part of our nature. And the same is true of our other rational principles_c 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_c: 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_c 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_c 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_c 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 disfavouring 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 pun-

ishment 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_c 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 quotes from Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 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?¹⁰

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 *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

¹⁰ 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.

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.¹¹

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 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

¹¹ •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.

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 these things',

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

•'I am sure of these 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?¹²

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, 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],¹³ much less

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.

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 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 sub-

ject, 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.¹⁴—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 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

¹⁴ 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.

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.¹⁵

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 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 disapprove of his not performing it. But this isn’t perfectly accurate, and here is why. Although

•obligation to act, in one sense, •does always accompany reflex approval and disapproval and •both 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. [Price attached a footnote to the phrase ‘in one sense’ in the above indented passage. Here it is, raised into the main text.]

¹⁵ 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.]

·START OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE·

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'.]

·END OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE·

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 be used in common speech.¹⁶

(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**

¹⁶ I notice that William Adams in his excellent sermon on *The Nature and Obligation of Virtue* agrees with me in his account of obligation. [Price gives three quotations from the sermon that confirm this. He winds up:] 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.

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 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_c 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_c. 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 I think is the true account of the nature and foundation of moral good and evil and of moral obligation, I 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.¹⁷

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 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 mentioned 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

¹⁷ 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?

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 unequal-

ity. 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.]