

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—But why must we have recourse to the influence of habits

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

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

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

[In unhelpfully elaborate prose, Price now refers to the conflict between 'All virtue is benevolent' and 'Each of us cares only about his own interests'; and between 'All morality is a matter of asserting or denying the truth' and 'The moral status of truth-telling comes entirely from its relation to beneficence'. He responds to this pair of debates with a protest:] Why must there be in the human mind approval only of one sort of actions? Why must all moral good be

reduced to one particular species of it. . . .? Why mightn't we have an immediate liking for truth, for candour, sincerity, piety, gratitude, and many other kinds and principles_c of conduct?—If all our ideas of morality are to be derived from implanted attitudes, the attitudes towards candour, sincerity etc. are just as possible as the attitude towards benevolence; and, as I indicated earlier, securing the general welfare requires all of them as well as the benevolence one, so that one would *expect* that a good Being would give them to us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our pious man would wonder at this question, as well he might! It would seem to him to be like asking 'Why is twenty greater than two?'—Why shouldn't we admit here the

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

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

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

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

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

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

virtue. . . .as any other misbehaviour—can anyone seriously question that? If neglect and *ingratitude towards the Author of the world* doesn’t show great evil of character, what *could* do so? Why should impiety be less wicked than dishonesty?

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

But I must add that the persons who fall into the contrary extreme are in every way the most inexcusable and wicked. I’m talking about those who purport to be religious though they have neither benevolence nor honesty, who are zealously devout but at the same time envious, peevish, perverse, spiteful, and can cheat and trick, lie and slander. Nothing can be

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

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

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

indifferent to those who are truthful and righteous, and •who has infinite power and can cause all of nature to bless me with its provisions.’. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

(2) The second kind of virtue to be discussed [the first began on page 68] is the kind that has *ourselves* for its object. There

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

Clearly this provides another instance of right behaviour that doesn't come from •friendly feelings, and can't be explained in terms of any thoughts about •public utility or •sympathy with others. We have here •an indisputable proof that actions showing friendly feelings are not the only ones we approve of, namely •the fact that in many cases we approve of letting self-love prevail against friendly feelings for others, and are aware that in these cases it *should* thus prevail. Self-interest provides us with the fullest scope for virtue; the practice of this branch of duty is just as hard, and demands just as much resolution and zeal, as the practice of any other branch of duty. Our lower

principles_c and appetites are by no means always friendly to true self-love. They interfere with it almost as often as they interfere with benevolence. We continually see men, through the influence of their lower principles_c and appetites, acting in opposition to their own acknowledged interests as well as to the interests of others, and sacrificing to them their fortunes, healths, and lives.—Now, when a person is tempted by a clamorous appetite to forgo his own happiness, it really is as *praiseworthy* to •overcome the temptation and preserve a steady regard for his own interests as it is to •perform any acts of justice or to overcome temptations to be dishonest or cruel.

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

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

(3) Another part of rectitude is beneficence, i.e. care for the good of others. Public happiness is something that necessarily determines all minds to prefer and desire it. It is of essential and unchangeable value and importance, and there's nothing that appears to our thoughts in a brighter

or more evident manner, or of which we more undeniably have an intuitive perception, than that it is right to promote and pursue public happiness.—This is such an important part of virtue, and is so universally acknowledged, that a considerable debate has broken out over whether it is *the whole* of virtue.

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

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

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

Gratitude is only one of many areas of morality in which particular facts and circumstances make a difference to what conduct is right towards this or that person—facts

and circumstances that don't include anything about the conduct's consequences. There are countless cases where such moral differences come from differences in people's •moral qualifications, •degrees of nearness (of various kinds) to the agent, and •many details of their situations and characters, which make it right to prefer some of them to others. Some of these details matter so little in themselves that their moral effect can be cancelled by almost any appearance or possibility of greater good, though when there is no such appearance they have a full effect in settling what is right. I shall mention an example of this when I come to (6) justice [page 75].

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

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

The difference between •truth and •falsehood is the same as the difference between •something and •nothing. It's a much bigger difference than that between •realities and •illusions or fictions, because illusions have a real existence in the mind, and that gives them a possible existence in the outer world. . . .—Now, it's inconceivable that •what is real should be regarded by the mind in the same way as •what

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

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

We find that this view implies something that is impossible.

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

couldn't possibly take offence at being lied to or at anyone else's being lied to.

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

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

I include under 'veracity'

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

Some of those, though they belong to the division of rectitude I am now discussing, which is defined by its being aimed at *truth*, are not properly included in the meaning of 'veracity'.—But it should be understood that promise-keeping *is* a kind of veracity.—We must look into this with care, because the

¹⁸ See Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* III.ii.5.

nature of promises and the obligation to keep them have been said to be very difficult topics.¹⁸

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

So that's what it is to promise to do something; it is to *assert something whose truth depends on the promiser, with an*

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

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

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

The origin of the idea of *property* is the same as that of right and wrong in general. It stands for a relation that a particular person has to a particular object, implying that it is •fitting that he rather than anyone else should have this

object at his disposal, •and wrong to deprive him of it. This is what everyone means by calling a thing ‘his right’, or saying that it is ‘his own’.

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

(a) Writers on ethics are very well agreed in their answers to the first of these questions. It is obvious that an object will acquire the ‘is owned by’ relation to a person as a result of

- first possession,
- its being the fruit of his labour,
- donation [= his being given it],
- succession [= his inheriting it],

and many other ways that I needn’t list here. [In this context Price, like some other early modern writers, uses ‘possession’ to mean something like ‘having in one’s physical control’. I may take possession of a book by picking it up and walking away with it; possession doesn’t necessarily involve *ownership* or having the thing as one’s *property*.]

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

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

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

The object was previously possessed by someone else who *made* it and doesn’t consent to be deprived of it.

In that case my conduct is wrong, not merely because of its

consequences, but *immediately* wrong.—Taking to ourselves some means of enjoyment that is quite loose from our fellow-creatures, i.e. not related to them in any of the ways that create ownership, can’t be the same as doing this when the contrary is true; it’s not possible to give the same moral judgment on such an action in those different circumstances. ·There really is no mystery about this·.

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

is no harder to conceive than

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

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

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

someone else. If *that* was ever true, presumably it would also be true of the other kind of property—limbs, lives etc.—so that there was no-one had a right to anything. It would be hard to show that this didn't follow.

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

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

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

a state of absolute and eternal misery, provided that this was made up for by producing at the same time a greater number of beings in a greater degree happy. [The next part of the paragraph is hard to follow closely. In it Price credits his present opponent—the balance-of-happiness-over-misery theorist—with being committed to the following: There is no morally significant difference between these two:

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

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

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

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

of right and wrong. It is indeed hard to determine what degree of superior good would make up for the irreparable and undeserved ruin of one person, i.e. what overbalance of happiness would be great enough to justify the absolute misery of one innocent being. [In a footnote here, Price quotes Cicero as saying that ‘some actions are so foul that a good man would not do them to save his country’, and adds details.] Be these things as they may, the points I have made are at least enough to show that public happiness cannot be the sole standard and measure of justice and injustice. But I could set those arguments aside and let the whole issue rest on the answer that any impartial person will find he has to give to the following question:

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

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

What may have helped to mislead some writers is the visible general connection between •injustice and •cruelty; but even if •these were more inseparable than they are, we would still have no reason for running them together. A little reflection will show an unbiased person that the notion of an action’s being *unjust* is different from that of its being *cruel*, *inhuman*, or *unkind*. If they weren’t different, how could the guilt of a •cruel action always appear to be made worse by its also being •unjust? Someone may reply: ‘The injustice of an act of cruelty adds to the private damage it does a damage also to the public, and that makes it appear more cruel and

therefore more wrong.’ But how could anyone think that possible harms to the public in the distant future (many of which are not immediately discovered—even by those who *search* for them) are always thought of by the bulk of men? If they were, that would make simple and illiterate people in some cases better judges of what is just and unjust than those who are learned and studious! . . .

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

The particular rules of justice are various, and in many cases it’s hard to determine what justice requires. There’s no need for me to go into all that. But I do want to say this: although I can’t allow •public good to be the sole source of justice, •it undoubtedly has a great influence on it, and is one important factor in many of its maxims. •It gives to the rights of men a considerable additional force, and in some cases •it entirely creates those rights.—It is utterly obvious that the happiness of the world and the existence of society require that possessions be stable, and property sacred, and not liable to be violated except on very extraordinary occasions. When we are considering what the common interest requires in regard to some proposed action,

we have to take into account not only •the immediate effects of the action, but also what its longer-term consequences are likely to be—what it opens the way to, and what would actually happen if everyone acted in this way. If it is morally all right for *me* to take a man's property. . . . on the grounds that I am poorer than he is, or he doesn't need it, or I plan to give it to someone worthier than he is, then it is all right for *anyone* to act in this way in similar circumstances; and if that happened, the boundaries of *property* would be overthrown and the door opened to general anarchy, distrust and savageness.—But it is far from true that considerations of this kind are the sole guides to men in their sentiments about property and justice; indeed (I repeat) men usually don't think about such things *at all*. . . .

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

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

This shows us what a defective and inconsistent thing *partial virtue* is—•e.g. for someone to have all the virtues except piety. The same law that requires piety also requires benevolence, veracity, temperance, justice, gratitude, and so on. All these rest on the same foundation, and are alike our indispensable duty. So someone who generally neglects some one of them is a rebel against reason and a deserter from the cause of righteousness and order, just as if he had neglected them all. The law's authority on one point is not different from its authority on another, and on all points. To break the law on one point (I mean: to do so habitually and wilfully) is therefore to throw off one's allegiance and to trample on the whole authority of the law. True and genuine virtue must be uniform and universal. Nothing short of an entire good character can help us to be accepted •by God on the day of judgment. As long as we retain any evil habit we can't be counted as loyal subjects of the divine government, we continue under the curse of guilt, slaves to vice, and not qualified for bliss. I'll have occasion to say more about this later.

Something else that helps to unite the types of virtue I have listed is that they often agree in requiring the same actions. An act of justice may be also an act of gratitude and beneficence, and any act of any of these kinds is also required for the virtue of piety towards God. If injustice, fraud, falsehood, and a neglect of private good were universally prevalent, what a dreadful state the world would be in! and how thoroughly the ends of benevolence would be defeated!—There are many virtues, but annihilating any *one* of them has the most pernicious consequences for all the others. This •unity of the virtues• can be seen in good measure in how things go in •the present state of things, but in •the final issue of things •in the after-life• the harmony between them will be found to be much more strict. Whatever

exceptions may now happen ·in our present life·, if we look forwards to the whole of our existence we'll find that the three great principles_c of the love of God, the love of man, and true self-love will always draw us the same way; and we have the strongest reason to assure ourselves that *eventually* no-one will be able to say that he has prospered because of some unjust action, or that although he has been less scrupulous than others he has been more successful and happy.

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

The difficulty of determining what is morally right or wrong in particular cases is created mainly by this interference between the different general principles of virtue.—The pursuit of the happiness of others is a duty, and so is the pursuit of one's own happiness; on the whole these two duties are inseparably connected, but in many particular instances one of them can't be pursued without giving up the other. When the public happiness is very great and the self-interest very inconsiderable, there is no problem. . . . But when the public happiness ·that is at stake· is lessened, and the private self-interest is increased to a certain degree, doubt arises and makes us entirely incapable of determining which we ought to choose. We have the most satisfactory perception that we ought to care for our own good, and within certain limits prefer it to that of anyone else; but where exactly are those limits? Who can tell us in all cases of opposition between the two types of duty where the boundaries are of right, of wrong, and of indifference [= 'neither required nor forbidden'] are to be found? [Price continues with other examples: the duty to seek one's own and the public good may clash with duties having to do with friendship,

gratitude, justice, and so on. Different bases for ownership may clash. Such conflicts as these confront us with difficulties that we often lack the skill to overcome. There's nothing remarkable about this, Price says; in non-moral matters also we are sometimes 'at a loss to know what is true, when the arguments for and against a proposition appear nearly equal'.]

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

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

That inference is like these:

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

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

These remarks may be useful in helping us to determine how far and in what sense morality is capable of demonstration [= 'logically rigorous proof']. There are certainly many moral principles and maxims that need only to be understood to

be assented to. I don't see why such propositions as these,

- Gratitude is due to benefactors,
- Reverence is due to our Creator,
- It is right to care for our own happiness,
- An innocent being ought not to be absolutely miserable,
- It is wrong to take from someone the fruit of his labour,

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

'morality can be demonstrated' in the sense Price adopted early in this paragraph.]

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

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

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

These considerations may help us to form a judgment about the different sentiments and practices, in several areas of morality, that have held sway in different countries and ages. All men at all times have agreed in accepting the general principles that I have listed. It can't be shown that there have *ever* been human beings with no ideas of property and justice, or of the rightness of veracity, gratitude, benevolence, prudence, and religious worship. The only disagreements have concerned particular usages and practices; and it is inevitable that different people will have different ideas about these, according to their various opinions •about how these practices relate to the universally acknowledged

moral principles, or •about their purposes, connections, and consequences.—Those who plead for passive obedience and non-resistance—•holding that it is *never* right to resist the power of the king—•think that divine command or public good requires something that others, with more reason, think to be a reproach to human nature and destructive of the very purpose of magistracy and government.—The nations where people accepted the customs of *exposing* children and aged persons—•leaving them out in the wilds to die of starvation or cold or animal predation—•approved of these customs because they believed them to be •conducive to the general advantage and •friendly to the sufferers themselves.—Self-murder [Price's term] among some of the ancients was justified and applauded because they thought of it as a method of extricating themselves from misery, one that only brave men could use, rather than seeing it as what it truly is, namely an act of very criminal discontent and unwillingness to put up with suffering, a desertion of the place assigned to us by Providence, and a cowardly flight from the duties and difficulties of life.—As far as anyone has ever approved persecution, it could only have been because they thought they were serving God, inflicting his wrath upon his enemies, justly punishing obstinacy and impiety, and. . . preventing the propagation of anything that tends to subvert true religion and ruin the souls of men.—The most superstitious practices and ridiculous rites of worship have gained credit and support merely because they were thought to be •pleasing to God, •means of procuring his favour, and •proper expressions of homage and adoration.

[In the next sentence and some later ones, the line between 'speculative' and 'practical' can be equated with the line between 'not having to do with morality' and 'having to do with morality'. In this early modern sense of the word, 'speculative' doesn't mean anything about guess-work, as 'speculate' does today.] In these and countless other instances of

the same sort, men's practical errors have clearly arisen from their speculative errors—mistaking facts, or not knowing all the relevant facts—which has the result that they often think to be right practices that they would unavoidably condemn if they had sounder beliefs on matters of fact. The rules by which to judge are universally the same; those who approve and those who disapprove are applying the same principles, and differ only in *how* they apply them. When they are in error, the error consists in thinking that something belongs to a particular species of virtue when really it doesn't. It is just as reasonable to expect disagreement •here as in •the application of agreed principles of knowledge and assent in general. The inference

•Men are diverse in their speculative opinions; therefore they don't have speculative reason,
is no more extravagant than this:

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

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

[In Price's day 'education' had a somewhat broader meaning than it does today, so that it could often be replaced by 'upbringing'.] Bear in mind also some questions that arise about the influence of custom, education, and example. •To what extent can they alter our natural sentiments? To what extent can they give us an undue attachment to some qualities, and vivacity to some ideas above others? •How much depravity and

blindness can they introduce into our moral and intellectual powers? ·Reflecting a little on the third question·: through the influence of custom etc. the most stupid notions may come to be rooted in our minds beyond the possibility of being eradicated, we may be made hostile to things that are naturally very agreeable, and our very sensations may be perverted.

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

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

The sources of error and disagreement that I have been discussing would produce very considerable effects even if all the particulars of duty and rightness were in themselves plain and easy to discover. Something that was so plain that differences about it wouldn't be caused by educations, temperaments, views, and degrees of wisdom as different as those of mankind, or by inattention, prejudices, and

corruptions as great as those that prevail among men—that would have to be very plain indeed!—But if we remember the things I have said about interference between the principles of morality, and about the impossibility of a complete and scientific deduction of what we ought to do and what we ought to avoid in particular circumstances, we'll accept that *the subject itself* is often wrapped in real darkness and accompanied by insurmountable difficulties that produce even greater and more unavoidable disagreements. What I have said •seems to account well enough for the diversity of men's sentiments concerning moral matters, and •makes it reasonable to expect that they should be no less various than their sentiments concerning anything else.

One last point: Even if all men in all cases judged *rightly* what is virtue and right behaviour, the moral practices in different ages and countries would still vary considerably. The reason is obvious. In different ages and circumstances of the world, the same practices don't always have the same connections, tendencies, and effects. The state of human affairs is perpetually changing, and is very different in different

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

Chapter 8

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

From what principle_c or motive does a virtuous agent act?

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

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

The phrase 'abstract virtue', when used properly, stands for a quality of an external action or event. It stands for a property that an action can have independently of what the agent thinks about it. An abstractly virtuous action is one that is right, in itself and absolutely, for the agent to perform; it is what such-and-such an agent in such-and-such circumstances *should* do—what he would judge, if he judged truly, that he ought to do. *Practical* virtue, on the other hand, is essentially tied to what the agent thinks about his actions. It signifies what he ought to do given that he has such-and-such sentiments.—A distinction something like this is the line some writers have drawn between *materially good* actions and *formally good* actions [This distinction is mentioned again on page 95].—Moral agents are apt to •be mistaken about the circumstances they are in, and thus to •form wrong judgments about their own obligations. This presupposes that these obligations do really exist independently of their judgments. But when they are in any way mistaken, it

doesn't follow that then nothing remains obligatory, because there is a sense in which the following is true:

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

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

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

The magistrate has certainly done what is right in one sense, though it is just as certainly wrong in another sense—it is practically right, abstractly wrong.

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

breaks the most important engagements, hurts his best friends, or bestows his bounty on the most worthless objects,
 if through religious zeal and blind superstition he commits the most shocking barbarities, thinking that in this way he is serving God,
 and if through a belief in their lawfulness he engages in violence and deceit,
 there is *no* sense in which his conduct 'contradicts rectitude', or in which it can be truly said that 'he acts wrongly'. Thus the difference between an enlightened conscience and an erroneous one would vanish, no moral mistake would be possible, all the fancies of men concerning their duty would be equally sound, and the most ignorant people would be as well informed about the subject-matter of virtue as the most knowing!—But there's really no need for me to go on about this—the point is obvious. . . .

From knowledge of •a person's nature and capacities, •his relations, connections, and dependencies, and •the consequences of his actions, it is possible for us to work out the whole of what he *ought to do* in the first sense—i.e. as a matter of abstract virtue—without paying the least attention to his private judgment. But to decide what he *ought to do* in the second sense—i.e. as a matter of practical virtue—we do have to know about his judgment, what he actually thinks about what he is doing at the time of doing it; and that is the *only* thing we have to take into account. Abstract virtue requires a great variety of circumstances to be taken into account, and we can't possibly know it for sure on every occasion, any more than we can always know for sure the whole truth about anything else. Practical virtue, on the other hand, involves few difficulties. The greatest degree of doubt about the abstract morality of an action may leave us with no hesitation at all about its practical morality.

Our rule is to take care to *inform* •our consciences in the best manner we can, and then to follow •them steadily and faithfully; and when in doubt to take the safer option, i.e.

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

and, on the other hand,

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

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

I have applied the adjectives 'real' and 'absolute' to the first kind of virtue, for an obvious reason, but don't get the idea that the second kind isn't also in a different sense 'real' virtue. It is ·really and· truly and absolutely right that a person should do what the reason of his mind—his perhaps *misinformed* mind—requires of him, or what according to his best judgment he is convinced is the will of God. If he doesn't do this he will necessarily and justly come to dislike

himself, and will forfeit all claims to integrity. [At this point Price has a long footnote which is here raised into the main text.]

·START OF THE LONG FOOTNOTE·

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

Forgive me if I work in an extra point here. It is the fact that we have something very close to a *demonstration* [= 'a logically rigorous proof'] that God will not and cannot **(a)** grant to any particular man or set of men a power to direct the faith and practices of others in religious matters without at the same time **(b)** making them infallible and impeccable. For if he did **(a)** without **(b)**, what would the **(a)** amount to? It would

be simply a grant of power to mislead and deceive! We *know* what errors, what corruptions, what desolation have been actually produced when **(a)** this power has been claimed by men who did not have **(b)** those qualifications!—It is a part of the special good fortune of this nation that principles of this kind have been so well explained here and are now so widely accepted here. May they be still more widely accepted and better understood, and may our constitution and laws, already the best in the world, grow to a perfect conformity to them! As for those who favour giving up their liberty and independence and submitting to human authority in religious matters, may their number continually decrease. and may the joyful time soon come when all slavish principles are detested and held in contempt by everyone!

·END OF THE LONG FOOTNOTE·

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

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

[Price is about to make heavy use of 'determine' and its cognates. Its uses can be seen as having two strands: **(i)** In the phrase 'acting and determining', it means something like 'deciding', but not in the sense of 'deciding to do A next week'. To say that I 'determine to do A' is to say that I actively set myself to do A right now; an act of determining was sometimes called 'an act of the will' or 'a volition'. **(ii)** In the phrase 'not

necessarily determined', it means something like 'caused'. The common meaning that ran through both uses was that of 'settle', 'fix', 'pin down' or the like. If I determine to do A I *settle* the question of what I am about to do. If an explosion determines the outbreak of a fire, it *settles* the question of whether there will soon be a fire. So there was no outright ambiguity in 'determine'; and for Price and some others there weren't even two clearly separate strands in its use, because in their view when you actively set yourself to do something—i.e. when you determine to do it—you do literally *cause* yourself to do it.]

The liberty I am talking about here is the power of *acting* and *determining*; and it is self-evident that if anyone lacked that power he could have no moral capacities. When someone *acts* he must himself be the cause of the action, and therefore not necessarily determined to act. Let anyone try to find for the expressions 'I will', 'I act', a sense that is consistent with supposing that the volition or action does not come from *myself*. [In that sentence, 'I will' means 'I perform an act of the will'; it is present-tense, not an auxiliary verb in the future tense as in 'I will visit you tomorrow'.] Virtue presupposes determination, and determination presupposes a determiner, and 'a determiner who doesn't determine himself' is an obvious contradiction. Determination requires a cause. If this cause is the person himself, that's all I ask for. If not, then it is no longer *his* determination, i.e. the determiner is no longer *him* but rather the motive—or whatever else anyone will say is the cause of the determination. When you are told that a certain person did A, to ask 'What brought about the determination to do A?' is to ask 'Who did A?' Surely everyone can feel the absurdity of saying that *my* volitions are produced by an *outside* cause, i.e. are not *mine*; or saying that I determine *voluntarily* and yet *necessarily*! And such denials of liberty, as well as being absurd, fly in the face of experience.—We have a constant and necessary awareness of our liberty, on a par with our awareness that

we think, choose, will, or even *exist*. Whatever anyone may say to the contrary, no-one can possibly •think in earnest that he has no active, self-moving powers and isn't the cause of his own volitions, or •fail to ascribe to himself things that he must be aware of thinking and doing.

This question about liberty has been enormously much darkened by fallacious reasonings, and creates much danger of falling into a confusion of ideas; and I don't want to go much further into all that. I merely point out that it is hard to say what virtue and vice, commendation and blame, *mean* if they don't presuppose agency, free choice, and an absolute dominion over our decisions.—It has always been the general sense of mankind. . . .that they can't be accountable for anything that they have no power to avoid. Applauding or reproaching ourselves for events that *we* didn't cause any more than we caused our own existence, and that we couldn't have prevented any more than we could prevent the returns of the seasons or the revolutions of the planets—nothing can be more glaringly absurd than *that!* The whole language of men, all their practical sentiments and schemes, and the whole structure and order of human affairs, are based on the notion of liberty and are utterly inconsistent with the supposition that. . . .our purposes and determinations are not subject to our own command, but are rather the result of physical laws that can't be resisted. [That's Price's first use of 'physical' in this work. (Previous occurrences in this version are all tagged as editorial.) At his time and earlier, 'physical' bore traces of its origin in the ancient Greek trilogy—Logic/Ethics/Physics, what-must-be/what-ought-to-be/what-is. Thus, 'physical laws' are just causal laws governing what goes on in the world, what actually happens; with no implied restriction to matter or body.]

If any of the advocates of the doctrine of necessity should find that what **they** mean by 'necessity' is consistent with the ideas of agency and self-determination, there won't be

much left to argue about: the liberty that **I** insist on as essential to morality will be admitted, and we won't have to pay much attention to any difficulties relating to the nature of that influence we commonly ascribe to motives.¹⁹

2. Intelligence—i.e. the ability to think—is also required for practical morality. Some degree of this is necessary for the perception of moral good and evil, and without this perception there can be no moral agency. Doesn't liberty include or imply the ability to think? No! All the lower orders of beings possess true liberty. Self-motion and activity of some kind are essential to every conscious living being. There seems to be no difference between •having no spontaneity and •being entirely inanimate. [At Price's time 'animate' often meant not 'living' but, more narrowly, 'breathing'; so plants were 'inanimate'.]—But though liberty doesn't presuppose intelligence, yet intelligence plainly presupposes liberty. For what I have just said about all creatures that can *feel* is much more strictly true of creatures that can *think*. A thinking, designing, reasoning being that has no liberty, no inward, spontaneous, active, self-directing principle, is something that no-one can form any idea of. That's a measure of how unreasonable are all objections to the making of free creatures, and how absurd it is to ask why men were made free. But,

3. The main point now to be insisted on is that an agent can't be rightly called 'virtuous' unless he acts •from a consciousness of rectitude, and •with a regard to it as his

rule and purpose. This seems to me to be undoubtedly true and of great importance, but I know that there are many who'll be hard to convince of it; so I should make a special point of trying to explain and prove it.

Liberty and reason constitute the *ability* to be virtuous; what makes a person's character *actually* virtuous is the intention with which he acts.—Don't forget the distinction that I drew at the start of this chapter. To mere theoretical virtue—i.e. the abstract reasons and fitnesses of things—praiseworthiness is not applicable. The object of our praise and esteem is the actual conformity of moral agents' wills to what they see or believe to be the fitnesses of things. We could reasonably label one of these as 'the virtue of the action' and the other as 'the virtue of the agent'. No particular intention is required for virtue of the action, because what is objectively right can be done from any motive, good or bad; so someone's doing something objectively right doesn't confer any merit on him—indeed, it is consistent with the greatest guilt. On the other hand, in assessing the virtue of the agent the most essential thing is the agent's intention. When the intention is good, that confers virtue on the agent, whatever is the objective moral status of the action, for it often happens that an agent is entitled to commendation for some objectively wrong action that he performs.

It may help us to think more clearly about this matter if we take the position that very strictly speaking the only thing that an agent *does* is what he *intends to do*. What

¹⁹ •Not that these 'difficulties' amount to much. When we say that someone's motives 'determine him', all we mean is that he •chooses to follow his judgment and desires, or that he •actually does what he is inclined to do. There is not much mystery in *that!* In saying this, we don't mean that the man's motives are involved in causing his determination, or that his judgment and views are physically connected with the actions consequent upon them. It would be *absurd* to say that our inclinations act on us, or compel us, that our desires and fears put us into motion or produce our volitions, i.e. are agents! But it is perfectly conceivable that they may be the *occasions* of our putting ourselves into motion.—There's no need for me to *prove* that the idea of an •efficient cause—a cause that *makes* something happen—is essentially and totally different from an •explanation (Price's word is 'account') or •occasion. If ball x strikes y, the location of y on the billiard table is the occasion or explanation of the collision—i.e. it is a background condition, and is part of the explanation of the collision—but it's senseless to say that y's location is the efficient cause of its motion. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

These questions need not be answered. They don't deserve to be answered.

So, as I pointed out earlier, instincts aren't needed for the choice of ends. The nature of any being that can think is its own law. It has within itself a spur to action and a guide of action that it can't suppress or reject. Rectitude is itself an end, an ultimate end, an end superior to all other ends; it governs directs and limits all the other ends, and its existence and influence don't depend on anything arbitrary [see note on page 4]. It presides over everything. Every appetite and faculty, every instinct and will, and all nature

are subjected to it. To act from •affection for rectitude is to act with light, conviction, and knowledge, whereas acting from •instinct is acting in the dark and following a blind guide. Instinct •drives and precipitates, but reason •commands. We can resist the impulses of instinct without doing violence to ourselves. Our highest merit and perfection often consist in doing just that. But we can never contradict the dictates of reason without a sense of shame, and without giving to our beings a wound in their most essential and sensitive part. Our experience of the operations of instincts ·in us· is evidence of our imperfection, and meanness, and low rank. The perception of rectitude prevails most in the higher ranks of beings. God's chief glory is that he is removed infinitely from the possibility of any other principle_c of action.

(2) With two things now made clear—that •our judgment concerning the nature of actions as morally good or bad prompts a motive to do or avoid them; and that •this judgment (although it often doesn't prevail) is always the first, the proper, and the most natural and intimate spur and guide of the actions of reasonable beings—let us now explore a further question. Is a reasonable being's judgment about right and wrong the *only* spur to his action that can qualify him as morally good and worthy? Is such a judgment the *only* principle_c from which flow all the actions that lead us to esteem the agents? In short, is virtue itself *the* thing that a virtuous agent aims at?

Remember that the only things that are strictly *done by* an agent are things that he designs to do, and that something that wasn't in any way an object of his design is not strictly *his*, or at least can't give him any claim to merit or praise. It follows from this that someone can't be properly said to *practise virtue* if he doesn't design to practise it, if it is of no importance to him, or if he doesn't think about it at all. It seems utterly evident that an action that is under no

influence or direction from a moral judgment can't be 'moral' in the practical sense, i.e. that when virtue isn't pursued or intended there is no virtue in the agent: morally good intention, without any idea of moral good, is a contradiction. To act virtuously is to obey or follow reason—and you can't do *that* without knowing and intending it!

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

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

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

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

If a person can be virtuous and praiseworthy although he never thinks about virtue and isn't ever motivated by it, then intelligence [still = 'the ability to think'] certainly isn't required for moral agency, and the lower animals are just as capable of virtue and moral merit as we are.—By this standard, couldn't a person be regarded as 'public spirited'

just because he makes a discovery that enriches his country, even if he did this accidentally and without any view to public good? Mightn't a course of behaviour count as 'ambitious' even if it didn't arise from the love of honour and power? or as 'selfish' even if it didn't aim at private interest? or as 'friendly' even if it wasn't associated with any friendly intention?

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

You may ask: 'Isn't *benevolence* a virtuous principle_c? And don't we approve all actions that come from it?' I answer by repeating my earlier point [pages 32 and 39] that benevolence is of two kinds, rational and instinctive. *Rational* benevolence entirely coincides with rectitude, and the actions coming from it coincide with actions coming from a concern for rectitude. And the same is to be said of all those feelings and desires that would arise in a thinking nature just because it was capable of thought. Could it ever be the case that efforts to achieve an end which we as reasonable

beings can't help loving and choosing were not approved by reason? Could it be the case that something that is necessarily desirable to all beings is not also something that it is necessarily right to pursue? No, neither of those is possible!

But *instinctive* benevolence is not a principle_c of virtue, and actions motivated by it alone are not virtuous. To the extent that you are influenced by instinctive benevolence, you are influenced by something other than reason and goodness, and that detracts from the moral worth of your action and of your character. This observation agrees perfectly with how ordinary people commonly think and feel and decide. When we know that a person's conduct comes from mere natural temperament or inclination, we may indeed *love* the person—as we commonly love lower animals that we find to be gentle and easily managed—but we won't have any tendency to regard to him as a virtuous agent. A soft and simple-minded man, however compliant, generous and good-tempered he is, never stands high in our esteem because we see his character as coming less from any influence of reason and moral good than from an agreeable instinct and turn of temperament that he was born with. Similarly, the tenderness of parents for their offspring, a fond mother's risking her life to save her child, and all actions motivated by the nearer attachments of nature, seem to have their *moral* value lessened in proportion as they •come more from natural instinct and •are less accompanied by reflection on their reasonableness and fitness. In the absence of this reflection, it makes no *moral* difference what sort of feeling an action comes from. . . .—But bear in mind that such reflection will usually accompany friendly and benevolent actions, and is certain to have some part in producing them—you *can't* experience or think about such actions without approving of them. And, •more generally•,

some ideas of right and wrong are always present with all men, and must have *some* influence on almost everything they do. We have an inescapable awareness of *rightness* in relieving misery, in promoting happiness, and in every service of love and good-will towards others. This is what consecrates kindness and humanity, elevating them to the level of *virtues*.

Think about your attitude to

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

and to

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

Everyone regards the actions in (i) as more virtuous and amiable than the actions in (ii). Why? Because in (i) the operations of instinct have less effect and are more subdued, and the attention to what is morally good and right is more open and forceful. If we were prompted to the acts of universal benevolence in the same ·heated and urgent· way that parents are prompted to the care of their children, that wouldn't lead us to think of those acts as more virtuous. These facts can't be explained consistently with the theory that virtue consists in

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

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

especially, should we regard

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

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

These remarks are also applicable to self-love. Reasonable and calm self-love, as well as the reasonable and calm love of mankind, is an entirely virtuous principle_c. They are both parts of the idea of virtue. Where virtue is greatest there will be the most ardent and active benevolence, and likewise the greatest degree of *true prudence*, i.e. the highest concern about bettering ourselves to the utmost, and the most effective and constant pursuit of private happiness and perfection, in opposition to whatever hindrances and temptations to neglect them may be thrown in our way.

Our natural desires carrying us to our own self-interest are very strong, and our ·pursuit of our own interests is more likely to arise from these desires without any rational reflection or help from moral judgment than is our ·pursuit of public good; and that is one reason why the former pursuit is not considered as *virtue* to the extent that the latter is. Avoiding a *present* danger or securing a *present* good for ourselves isn't often regarded as at all virtuous; but the same can't be said of trying to prevent a *future* danger or to secure a *future* good. The reason for this is that we are drawn towards what is *present* with a greater degree of instinctive desire ·and therefore with less input from moral thinking·. [At this point Price has a footnote, which is here raised into the main text:]

·START OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE·

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

·END OF THE FOOTNOTE·

The present makes itself felt more strongly than the future does, and strikes our minds more forcibly. Yet, in some circumstances where particular passions are opposed to reason, and where different pleasures compete with one another, it can be really virtuous to act with the motive of securing some *present* good. And quite generally, the more

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

power of whatever prejudices or passions tend to warp our minds and are inconsistent with the coolness, honesty, and impartiality that are absolutely essential for anyone trying to discover what is true and right.

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

A respect for God's will is a principle_c of virtuous conduct that isn't reducible to the desire for virtue.

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