

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 9:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It may be thought that there *could* be beings who were so constituted that:

When they come into existence their constitutions and circumstances are such that while they are advancing towards maturity of reason, and acquiring sufficient views of the nature and excellence of virtue to keep them steady in the practice of it, their inclinations and desires always coincide with •their duty, and they don't acquire habits that are unfavourable to •it.

For all I know, this *is* possible. And that is just one of many reasons why we have to admit that there's much in the present state of mankind that we can't explain. In fact, given where we stand in the universe and given the limitedness of our intellects, it would be very strange if we could explain all the facts about *any* object in nature, let alone the nature of mankind!—Be this as it may, it can't be wrong to make this

point: Given the natures and circumstances of men as they now are, if our desires and our duty always coincided we might have spent years behaving in an *objectively* virtuous manner without becoming *truly* virtuous in a grounded way; it could happen that ·during all those years of struggle-free virtuous behaviour· the moral principle_c was lying dormant in us, so that if the slightest temptation turned up we *would have* gone astray. ·As things are with mankind·, difficulties in doing our duty and particular desires drawing us away from it ·do us a good service: they· force us to exercise virtue in a more wary, attentive, and constant manner, which accelerates our progress in it and grounds our respect for it. Although early on the virtuous principle_c may be scarcely able to turn the balance in its own favour, every repeated instance, in which the inward spring of virtue thus exerts its utmost force and overcomes opposition, gives it new power. It has often actually happened that virtuous men have

- through a course of virtuous struggles and long practice of self-denial,
- through being accustomed to repelling temptations, restraining appetites and disregarding sufferings that their duty forced on them,

gradually strengthened the virtuous principle_c and established the sovereignty of conscience in themselves to such an extent that difficulties have in a manner vanished, and virtue has become easy and delightful. And bear in mind that although this is the period when the difficulties of such a person are *least*, it is also the period when his virtue is *greatest*. So the truth of the matter is that the difficulties a virtuous agent meets with are in general evidence only of the defects of his virtue. If he had a sufficient degree of virtue he wouldn't meet with *any* difficulties; and the more •virtue he has,

- the less effect any given degree of temptation has in turning him aside from virtue or disturbing his resolutions,
- the more he is master of every inclination within him,
- the less reluctance he feels in the discharge of his duty, and
- the more pleasure and eagerness he has in sticking to his duty.

How unreasonable it is, then, to •assert that human virtue exceeds that of angels because of the opposition it encounters, or to •think that the question ‘Would the excellence of God’s moral character be increased if he had within him some dispositions contrary to goodness?’ is hard to answer!—Can the very facts that are evidence for imperfection in virtue also add to its merit? [Price answers ‘No’, both regarding angels and regarding God. He is especially emphatic about God—‘His moral excellence consists in a degree of purity or holiness that makes him incapable of being tempted to evil.’ In the course of his long and unnecessary paragraph developing this line of thought, Price adds two footnotes:]

(i) What I am saying here can be illustrated by substituting •power for •virtue. . . . The power of a being is the same, whether or not it meets with opposition. The difficulties that the being finds in overcoming opposition only serve to show its weakness: the *greater* the power it has, the *less* difficulty it must find in producing any given effect; and when the power is supposed to be infinite, as God’s is, the very notion of difficulty and opposition becomes a contradiction. **(ii)** The way I am talking about God is suitable to our common ways of conceiving of his perfections, but it isn’t strictly proper. In fact, it is in general hardly possible to speak about God otherwise than improperly. . . .

This discussion shows that what I said about the extenuation of guilt by the strength of temptations must be understood with some restrictions. The strength of someone’s temptations may show only that his power of resistance is weak, that the spring of virtue (the contrary force in our minds that should repel temptations) is unwound or broken. ‘My temptations were strong’ is often pleaded as an *excuse* for vice—but what a wretched excuse it is! Temptations commonly owe their strength to strong evil habits that the guilty person has acquired and to the low and slack state of his moral powers. How absurd it is to make the lack of virtue an excuse for the lack of virtue, and to justify guilt by guilt!—However, . . . we can conceive of temptations so strong that no human virtue could overcome them. Although it’s only because our virtue is imperfect that we are vulnerable to being overcome by *any* temptations, . . . being overcome by some temptations may show much less defect of virtue than being overcome by some others. That is all that is meant by the plea of temptation as extenuating guilt. No-one, for instance, will say that a crime committed through fear of immediate tortures and death implies as much guilt as the same crime committed to avoid a slight inconvenience. [That completes **(1)**, which began on page 98.]

(2) This discussion of degrees of virtue and vice has little or no relation to the question of whether there are any different degrees of objective right and wrong in actions, and doesn’t imply anything concerning it. Even if there were no different degrees of right and wrong, so that the only way to apply them was in judgments of the form ‘This action is absolutely and totally right’ and ‘This action is absolutely and totally wrong’, there would still be just as much room for countless degrees of virtue and vice, of merit and guilt in *agents*, and also in *actions* considered (not in the absolute and abstract way, but) in relation to the intentions and views

of •the agents or as signs and effects of •their respect for absolute virtue.

That is how we most commonly consider •actions, and it is the true source and meaning of the different degrees of commendation and blame, of praise and censure, that we bestow on •them, and of the various words and phrases by which these are signified. . . .

(3) [Price now criticises Hutcheson's formula for computing the morality of actions. He thinks it is along the right lines except for its fundamental assumption that—in Price's words—'benevolence is the whole of virtue'.]

(4) It is sometimes said that some good actions are more amiable [see note on page 29] than others because they are *more free*; but that cannot be right. It is very improper to speak of *degrees of* natural liberty and necessity. There seems to be no conceivable intermediate case between being the cause of an effect and not being its cause, between determining ourselves and not determining ourselves, between agency and its contrary. Every act of the will that I am conscious of—if it really *is* my act—must be *entirely* mine, and can't be *more or less* mine. You may want to object: 'But two or three or any number of causes may work together to produce one single effect.' But that doesn't hold as an objection, because in the case you have envisaged each cause has its own individual *share* of the effect to produce, which this cause alone produces, and it would be absurd to say that this cause was 'helped' to produce that share.—Besides, voluntary determination is a simple effect, not a complex and compounded one; so it doesn't admit of more than one cause or principle_c, because it's a contradiction to suppose

that the determination of a being may be partly his and partly another's.

Setting that aside, let us turn our thoughts to the more intelligible suggestion that what is being said to lessen the merit of good actions must be not •natural necessity (which would take away the whole idea of action and will) but •moral necessity. This is the 'necessity' that arises from the influence on the mind of motives and feelings; it is said to be present when, given that the agent has such-and-such views, circumstances, and principles_c, it is *certain* that he will decide to do so-and-so. Now, it is undeniable that the very *greatest necessity of this sort* is consistent with—indeed it is *implied by*—the idea of the most perfect and meritorious virtue, so that it can't possibly *lessen* it!²⁰

The more confident we can be that a man will perform an action when he is convinced of its propriety, whatever obstacles may lie in his way—i.e. the more effective and unconquerable the influence of conscience is within him—the more amiable we must think him.—Similarly, the most abandoned and detestable state of wickedness implies the greatest necessity of sinning and the greatest degree of moral impotence. The most vicious man is the one who is most enslaved by evil habits, or in whom *appetite* has gained the upper hand, and the respect for virtue and duty is weakened, to such an extent that we can always foretell with certainty that he will do evil when tempted to it.—Arising from that, let me refer back to the issue of *liberty* discussed earlier. I want to remark in passing that an idea of liberty must be very erroneous if it •makes liberty inconsistent with the most absolute and complete certainty—i.e. with the

²⁰ When someone says that a virtuous action is more amiable the less 'necessary' it is, if he means that the action is more amiable the less the agent is urged to it by. . . any motives other than virtuous ones, this will be very true. But in that case what increases the virtue of the action is not the mere circumstance of its being less 'necessary' but its coming more from the influence of love of virtue; and that fits with what I said at the beginning of this chapter.

kind of ‘necessity’ I have been discussing—or if it •supposes necessity to overthrow all steadiness of character and conduct. The greatest influence of motives that can rationally be conceived can in no way affect liberty (taking it that a rational account of motives doesn’t involve the obvious and intolerable absurdity of treating motives as though they were physical causes—*pushes* in an almost literal sense·). It is surely *very* surprising that anyone should imagine that. . . .when a man does something with the full consent of his will, with the least reluctance and the greatest desire and resolution, he should *for this very reason* be suspected of not doing ·it· freely, i.e. not *doing* at all.

My account of the various degrees of virtue and merit in actions, and of how we estimate them, enables us to understand why it is that

- when we judge calmly and impartially, we form much the same judgment of good actions affecting strangers as we do of good actions affecting ourselves or friends, and also why

- if an agent has no opportunities to exercise his virtue, or if his good endeavours produce effects contrary to the ones he designed, our esteem for him is not lessened.

There’s no way to explain these facts if virtue is (as it must be if our ideas of it come from an implanted sense) merely a particular kind of agreeable feeling or sensation. There can be no doubt that our *feelings of pleasure* are lessened if the beneficiary of a good action is remote from us, or if well-intentioned conduct fails to have a good effect; so our *assignments of virtue* will also differ, if it’s true that virtue is merely an agreeable feeling. In contrast with this, the

account of virtue that I have presented provides us with a stable and fixed rule of judgment, and shows us that the object of such judgments—namely the merit or virtue of actions and characters·—is real and determinate in itself, unchangeably the same through all changes in our opinions or points of view. But the other notion of virtue that I have been criticising provides no basis for any rational estimate of virtue, leaves no fixed standard for it, and implies that all thoughts about it are equally sound because no-one can be mistaken about the morality or immorality of a particular action or character if all he is doing is to say what *he feels* about it.²¹ It’s true that he *can* err regarding how much good is produced, or regarding how exactly the agent felt when acting; but these are not the same as *virtue* according to the theory I am now criticizing. . . .

I added the restriction ‘when we judge calmly and impartially’ because it is perfectly obvious that the causes I have mentioned do often pervert and mislead our judgments. [Price devotes a page to elaborating this point. We are likely to give more moral credit to someone who succeeds in doing good to us than to someone who does good to people we don’t know or who tries but fails to do good to anyone. But we should guard against this ‘bias’.]

Having thus explained the general foundation of the different degrees of virtue and vice in *actions*, and stated the principles and rules by which we judge them, it will be useful next to get a clear view of what it takes for an *agent* to qualify as virtuous, i.e. for his character to be rightly labelled ‘virtuous’ rather than the contrary.

Anyone who has any idea of moral good must have an affection for it that can’t fail to have *some* influence on

²¹ ‘The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or unpleasure that results from encountering or thinking about the sentiment or character in question; and that pleasure or unpleasure has to be known to the person who feels it; from which it follows that there is just so much virtue or vice in any character as everyone places in it, and that we can’t possibly be mistaken about this.’ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, III.ii.8.

his actions and temperament.—It isn't conceivable that a creature who is capable of reasoning should **(i)** have *no* respect for reason and its dictates, having *no* notion of the distinction that we express when we say 'This is to be done' and 'That isn't to be done'. A perception of that distinction is essential to our nature, and so is always present with us; and it's not conceivable that this perception should ever become wholly ineffective in someone.—Nor, strictly speaking, can a being who is capable of reasoning **(ii)** have any tendencies within him that are *contrary* to rectitude. I mean: he can't dislike rectitude as such, or be inclined to do wrong because it is wrong.—To suppose **(i)** is to suppose the entire destruction of the being's powers of thought; and the very idea of **(ii)** is self-contradictory. There *can't* be a being so corrupt that the unreasonableness of an action—i.e. his seeing reason *against* it—will be for him a reason *for* doing it or not a reason *against* doing it. . . .

So **(i)** and **(ii)** aren't *possible*, and don't make any part of the idea of an evil character. This reminds us that the sources of all vice are our lower propensities and appetites. They are in themselves natural, innocent, and useful; but with us in our present state it is inevitable that they often interfere with reason and take over from it as influences on us—as much when they *can't* be lawfully gratified as when they *can*. [Our 'present state' is meant to distinguish us as we now are with what we might come to be like in the after-life.] That is how it comes about that •we often actually deviate from the path of rectitude, and that •how men differ in

•the strength of the reflecting principle_c in them
is not in any way correlated with how they differ in

•the strength of their instinctive powers and desires.
The rightful place of the reflecting principle_c in the mind is that of *superiority* to all these powers and desires, and of absolute dominion over them. As Butler has pointed out, it

is in the nature of that principle_c that

- it always has the role of examining, judging, deciding, directing, commanding, and forbidding, that
- it shouldn't ever let anything push it aside, that
- it ought to model and superintend our whole lives, and that
- every motion and thought, every affection and desire, should be subjected constantly and wholly to its inspection and influence.

Reason is so intimately built into men that a deliberate decision not to be governed by it is scarcely possible, and that even when men are urged by passion and appetite they can seldom openly contradict it, or ever break loose from its guidance, without the help of tricks and sophistry, without many painful blinkings at the light and hard struggles to escape the force of conviction, without earnestly searching for excuses and palliatives, and thus trying to throw a cloud before their own eyes, to reconcile themselves to the wrong they are doing, hide its ugliness, and deceive themselves into thinking that in their circumstances it isn't wrong after all. This shows plainly •how great the force of reason is, •how sovereign and insurmountable it is in its nature, •how it clings to us when we are trying to cast it off, and •what effect it will have in our minds, somehow, however much we do to obscure, abuse, or subvert it.

This essential pre-eminence of the reasoning faculty is what ought chiefly to be considered in settling the true idea of human nature. [At this place Price has a footnote, which is here raised into the main text.]

•START OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE•

The human mind would apparently have little order or consistency if it were only a system of passions and feelings that are continually drawing us different ways, without anything at the head of them to govern them, with the strongest

of them at any given moment necessarily determining our conduct. But this is far from being the mind's real state. It has a faculty that is essential to it, to which every other power within it is subjected; the special task assigned to this faculty is to reconcile the differences amongst all our particular feelings, to point out to us when and how far each one of them shall or shall not be gratified, and in all cases of competition to settle which is to give way. This faculty is our *moral faculty*; and what gives us the true idea of human nature is the subservience of all within us to this faculty. Its supremacy, I have remarked, is implied in the idea of it, but we have also a demonstration of it from fact. The least violation of this faculty at the behest of all our other powers in combination gives us pain and shame; whereas the greatest violation of our other powers at the behest of the moral faculty is approved by us; indeed, the more we contradict our other powers in compliance with it, and the greater sacrifice we make of their enjoyments and gratifications to it, the more pleased we are with ourselves, and the higher inward satisfaction and triumph we feel. [The footnote adds a reference to Butler as agreeing with this, and to Hutcheson. Price says that it is hard to reconcile Hutcheson's correct views on this matter with his other views about virtue, and continues at enormous length to explain why.]

·END OF FOOTNOTE·

It proves to us quite certainly that the basic, proper, and sound state of our natures is the state in which this faculty—our natures' distinguishing part—is indeed pre-eminent, and all the other powers and principles_c are obedient to it.—**Goodness** in mankind is this state restored and established. It is the power of reflection raised to its proper position of direction and sovereignty in the mind, conscience fixed and kept on the throne and governing all our passions. The least it implies is some predominance of good feelings,

and superiority of virtuous principles_c above all others.—**Wickedness**, on other hand, is the subversion of this basic and natural state of the mind, or the prevalence of the lower powers in opposition to the authority of reason. It implies that good principles_c are inferior to some others within us, gives us a greater attachment to some particular objects than to truth and righteousness, or makes our attitude to virtue so defective that it is consistent with knowingly acting wrongly. It is the violent and unnatural state of the mind, the deposition of reason, and the exaltation of appetite, the death of the man, and the triumph of the brute, slavery in opposition to liberty, sickness in opposition to health, and uproar and anarchy in opposition to order and peace. [That last sentence is verbatim Price.]

Thus, if we want to know our own characters, to find out which class of men we belong to, the good or the bad, we must compare

- our concern for everlasting truth and righteousness with our concern for friends, credit, pleasure, and life,
- our love of God and moral excellence with our love of inferior objects, and
- the dominion of reason over us with the force of appetite,

and find which *prevail*. Until the rational part gets the victory over the animal part and the heart is mainly turned towards virtue, until the principles_c of piety and goodness obtain in some degree the supremacy and the passions are compelled to give up their usurped power, we are within the confines of vice and misery.—There's reason to believe that many people deceive themselves into thinking that since they have many valuable qualities and feel the workings within them of good principles_c, since they love virtue and hate vice and do good in their roles or positions in life, they have little reason to distrust their characters. What they are overlooking is

the point I have been emphasizing, namely that they ought chiefly to attend to the place and degree of these principles_c *in comparison with others*. The people who are truly virtuous and worthy are not those who hate vice but those who hate it above pain, dishonour, or anything whatever; not those who love virtue but those who have a *supreme* concern for virtue, putting it ahead of anything that can compete with it. It is often said that it is the *ruling passion* that determines how someone's character should be described. The ruling love of power, fame, and distinction qualifies a man as 'ambitious', the ruling love of pleasure makes him 'a man of pleasure', the ruling love of money makes him a 'covetous' man. Well, similarly, the ruling love of God, of our fellow-creatures, and of rectitude and truth is what makes a man qualify as 'virtuous'.

'How can I know that the love of virtue is predominant in me? What are the marks and effects of the superiority of good feelings that you have said are essential to a good character?' This is a natural question to raise.

(1) The •predominant passion always pulls the thoughts after it, gives them their principal employment, and gives a touch of •itself to all our studies and deliberations. What we most love is what we think about oftenest and attend to the most. If we want to know whether virtue and conscience *rule* within us, therefore, we must examine which way the main current of our thoughts runs, what objects show up in them most frequently and unavoidably, what lies on them with the greatest weight, and what we dwell on most and take into consideration most when we are planning and deciding what to do.

Specifically, when you are deliberating about some project that you might undertake, do you think not so much about how it will affect your credit, fortune, or ease, as about what, all things considered, reason and right require of

you, what you would expect anyone else to do in the same circumstances, what good it may produce, how it will appear to you in retrospect, what effect it will have on God's favour to you, how well it fits with your interests on the whole, and how well it suits the dignity of a being with your faculties, your relationships, and your expectations? But,

(2) This predominance will mainly show up in actual practice, in how we live our lives. Our actions *always* show what stands foremost in our thoughts and feelings. The strength of inner feelings is always proportional to their effects on external conduct. When the intellectual and moral principle_c is the reigning one, therefore, it excludes everything irregular and immoral from the behaviour, all unreasonable courses of action are dropped, the whole of duty is faithfully attended to and carried out, no bad habits are spared, no wrong dispositions are given free rein, no known obligation is deliberately and openly neglected. [That sentence contains the first of several occurrences of a cognate of 'regular' used in a moral sense. On the basis of the word's etymology (Latin *regula* = 'rule'), conduct is 'irregular' if it breaks the moral rules, i.e. if it is morally wrong. Cognates of 'regular' in *our* everyday sense of it occur quite often up to page 34. On page 121 it seems to be used a couple of times in both senses at once.]

To qualify as having good characters we must—above all—have virtue that is not *partial*; we must act in conformity with every relation in which we stand, however it is made known to us; we must attend not to one duty or one kind of right conduct to the neglect of others, but be equally concerned about every type of duty and the whole of moral rectitude. Someone who is just, kind, meek, and humble, but also an habitual drunkard, has no claim to genuine virtue. The same is true of •anyone who is sober and temperate but will deceive and cheat; of •anyone who prays and fasts, is exact in all the external parts of religion, and is zealous for

truth and piety, but lacks honesty, gentleness, meekness, veracity, and charity; of •anyone who is chaste, generous, friendly, and faithful, but lacks piety. . . . I gave part of the reason for this in chapter 7, and here I shall add one more: it is that someone who habitually breaks *one* divine law, or retains *one* cherished vice, demonstrates that if he had equal temptations to transgress in all other parts of virtue he would do it, and become totally abandoned. As long as any ·one· passion holds sway over us and remains rebellious and lawless, there's plainly something within us stronger than virtue, something that masters and subdues it; God and conscience don't have the throne; the mind still doesn't have the right balance, and its order and health are not recovered. Until we have an *equal and entire* affection for goodness, we don't have *any* affection for it that is truly acceptable or that can be of much account and value. [Price develops this line of thought in the language of love for a woman, ending with:] Her nature is such that she can't admit of any rival. He who doesn't love her above everything else doesn't love her at all.—A partial concern with rectitude is inconsistent and absurd. . . . If you want to be genuinely good, you must be consistently and thoroughly good. . . . If you aren't, then give up all claim to true virtue, and give up all hope of the happiness in reserve for it.

You'll see that I am not saying that we must be *perfect*. We are indeed quite incapable of that. . . . Some infirmities will cling to the best people, and it is impossible at present [= 'in this earthly life'] always to discipline our passions so strictly that they never surprise or hurry us into doing something that our hearts will disapprove of. But whenever this happens, it is essential to the character of a good man that this ·moral failure· is his greatest trouble, and that it makes him even more vigilant in future. His settled prevailing commitment in heart and life is to truth, piety,

and goodness, though unfortunately he may sometimes be misled. Conscience is uppermost, the sovereignty of reason is established, and bad habits are suppressed—though not so thoroughly that he will never be in danger of deviating. The enemies of his virtue will never find him off his guard.

(3) In order to discover whether the love of •virtue is predominant in us we should investigate what degree of *delight* we have in •it. Anything that gives to the soul its prevailing tone and direction and generates its chief pursuit will be agreeable to it. All acts arising from established habits are free, unconstrained and cheerful. What our hearts are most set on will make the principal part of our happiness. What we love most, or have the greatest esteem and liking for, must be the source of our greatest pleasures.—So a man should suspect himself of bad character if he finds that virtuous actions, the duties of piety, and the various exercises of love and goodness to which he may be called, are distasteful and burdensome to him. For every virtuous man,

- virtue is what chiefly gives him contentment,
- exercising virtue is his chief delight, and
- his consciousness of ·his own· virtue gives him his highest joy.

He ought always to be ready to do whatever it requires from him, never reluctant to do what he is convinced is his duty, and never more satisfied or happy than when he is doing it.

You may want to ask: 'These pleasures that are inseparable from virtue, especially the pleasures of the higher degrees of it—don't they tend to make virtue that much more self-interested and thus to lower its value?' I answer that this may indeed be the consequence, insofar as the pleasure that merely accompanies virtue can be the motive for virtuous conduct. But it is scarcely in our power (whatever we may think). . . . really to deceive ourselves in this manner.

[Price explains how self-deception comes into this. If you are to do A in order to get pleasure from the thought of having acted virtuously, you must be planning •to do A for that pleasure-seeking reason and •to *deceive yourself* into thinking that you have done A for a motive that makes this virtuous.]

(4) One further criterion of a good character must not be overlooked, namely the constant endeavour to *improve*. True goodness must be a growing thing. All habits gain strength through time and exercise. There can't be any question of someone's having sound principles_c of virtue in him if he isn't concerned about strengthening them to the utmost and ·thereby· getting a total victory over all the enemies of his happiness and perfection. Whoever has tasted the joys of benevolence and righteousness hopes to get more of them, and is grieved by the remains of moral imperfection in his character. ·If all he wanted was· to keep within the bounds of what is innocent or lawful, ·he might fully achieve his aim; but· he can't have so little zeal that *that* is all he wants! A person who thinks himself 'good enough' can be sure that he isn't good at all. When the love of virtue becomes the reigning affection ·in us·, it won't be possible for us to be satisfied with any degrees of it that we can acquire.—We find an analogue of this when any of our lower affections takes charge. Every passion, when it becomes uppermost, constantly urges us to provide new gratifications for it. A man whose prevailing passion is the love of power, or of money, or of fame, seldom thinks (however much he has) that he has acquired enough, but is continually grasping at more and working to add to his glory and treasures.—This fact about the passions, namely that when they pass their natural boundaries they can't be satisfied, •is a sad perversion of a disposition that is truly noble, and often •leads to unbearable misery. . . . One of the most pitiable spectacles in nature is a covetous, ambitious

or voluptuous person who, not contented with what he has, loses all the enjoyment it could give him and is tortured perpetually on the rack of wild and restless desire. But consider the good man who can't be satisfied with his present level of goodness, who is driven by the high and sacred ambition to grow wiser and better, to become more like God, and to move steadily towards perfection—how desirable and happy *his* state is!

. . . .The understanding has two branches, •moral and •speculative [see note on page 82]. Our speculative understanding is evidently capable of infinite improvement, so our moral understanding must be so as well. Why? Because these are the same faculty applied to different subject-matters, so they must be inseparably connected, and it's inconceivable that they don't influence each other. In a good person

- every improvement in his speculative knowledge,
- every advance he makes in the discovery of truth,
- every addition to the strength of his reason, and the extent and clarity of its perceptions,

must be accompanied by perceptions of •*moral* good that are correspondingly more extensive, with a clearer and better acquaintance with •its nature, importance and excellence, and consequently with more scope for practising •it and a more invariable direction of the will towards •it. This ·improvement of the understanding·, combined with the growing effects of habit and of constant exercise of the man's virtue, can gradually strengthen and exalt the practical principle_c of rectitude to such an extent that it absorbs every other principle_c in him, and annihilates every contrary tendency. In moral or intellectual improvement there is *no* point beyond which we can't go through hard work, attention, correct cultivation of our minds, and the help of proper advantages and opportunities. [Can •vice intensify without limit, as •virtue can? Price's answer has a puzzling

No-Yes-No form, but we can work out what his position is. A limitless diminution in the strength of the moral principle_c in someone leads to its being completely wiped out, and then—Price seems to say—he is throwing out reason and is no longer a being to whom moral categories apply. But short of that limit there is room for endless variety in how thoroughly the vicious man's moral principle_c is out-gunned by his other desires and passions.]

[Price offers an exclamatory page about the many moral frailties of human beings and the correspondingly many opportunities for moral improvement. Then:]

One question more on this subject can properly be raised here: 'In our idea of a *good character* should we include not only •the subordination to the faculty of reason of all our other powers but also •a correct ordering of those lower powers in relation to one another?' A sufficient answer to this •can be given briefly; it• is that the subordination to reason of the lower powers *implies* their due state, measure, and proportion in relation to one another. It may happen that some of them are stronger than they ought to be in comparison with others; but if reason is in charge the irregularity that would otherwise follow will be prevented, and the right balance will be gradually restored; the moral principle_c will strengthen the side that is too weak and restrain the one that is too strong.—I have remarked that when we increase the force of reason we correspondingly lessen the occasion for appetite and instinct. So there can't possibly be any drawbacks in any reduction of instinct if reason is *correspondingly* raised. But we men aren't in fact capable of improving our reason as much as that, so that in fact great evils would arise from taking away •our instincts and passions. •They were wisely, kindly given to us. . . .

•to be our only guides until reason becomes capable of taking over as our director,

and after that

- to enforce reason's dictates, and aid us in obeying them,
- to give vigour and spirit to our pursuits, and
- to be the sail and wind (so to speak) for the vessel of life.

What we should be concerned about, then, is not eradicating our passions (which would be a wicked thing to do, if it were possible) but keeping reason steadily vigilant at the helm, and making the passions more easily governable by it. . . .

The character and temperament of a man who naturally has the passion of *resentment* in a strong form, with little compassion to counter-balance it, will certainly degenerate into *malice* and *cruelty* if he is guided solely by instinctive principles_c. But if he is guided by reason and virtue, the excessiveness of his resentment will be checked; all that is hard, unfair, injurious, revengeful, or unkind will be excluded from his conduct; his temperament will be softened and humanized; the miseries of others will be duly regarded, and all that is proper will be done to ease their burdens and increase their joys.

The same thing holds for someone whose *self-love* and desire for *distinction* are naturally too high in relation to his *benevolence*, and who will become proud, selfish, and ambitious unless he is governed by reason. And similarly with all other cases of passions that aren't properly strength-related to one another.—A man's being virtuous rules out his allowing any excess in his feelings or any internal disorder that he is aware of or that he could discover and rectify. Neither anger, nor self-love, nor the desire for fame can be so powerful. . . .as to make him envious, gloomy, covetous, cowardly, self-neglectful, mean-spirited, or slothful. •Piety and •virtue consist in the proper regulation of the passions—no better definition can be given of •them. They signify nothing

more than

excluding whatever is inconsistent with true worth and integrity,
 making those who claim to have them better in every aspect of life, and
 making irritable people good-natured,
 making fierce and overbearing people gentle,
 making obstinate people compliant,
 making haughty people humble,
 making narrow and selfish people open and generous,
 making sensual people temperate, and
 making false and deceitful people faithful and sincere.

Reason is inconsistent with every kind of unreasonableness and irregularity. It is *essential* to it that as far as its command extends it directs the passions to their proper objects, confines them to their proper functions, and prevents them from disturbing our own peace or that of the world. . . .

[Price now writes ecstatically about the ‘tranquility and bliss’ that comes with great virtue, and the ‘contempt as well as pity’ that we must feel for ‘those who prefer shadows and tinsel to this first and highest good’.]

To conclude this chapter, let me remark that my account of the requirements for having a good character gives us a melancholy view of the condition of mankind. If my account is right, true goodness is by no means as common as we could wish, and the indifference and carelessness that we see in a great part of mankind is utterly inconsistent with it.—Many of the people who have good reputations, and whose behaviour is in the main decent and regular, may owe

this more to •the particular favourableness of their natural temperament and circumstances, or to •their never having had much opportunity or temptation to be otherwise, than to •any genuine and sound principles_c of virtue established within them and governing their hearts. Most people are not grossly wicked or eminently good—these two extremes are almost equally scarce—but they are as far from being *truly good* as they are from being *very bad*; they are lazy and unthinking, neglecters of God and immortality, wearers of the form of piety without the reality of it. They are, in short, blameworthy and guilty not so much because of what they *do* as because of what they *do not do*.

So we *all* have the greatest reason for being careful of ourselves, and for closely watching and examining our hearts and lives.—I suspect that it’s much too common for men to think that their duties are less onerous than they really are, and to expect. . . .that they may rise to bliss under the divine government as a matter of course, and without working at it very hard.—There isn’t indeed *anything* more necessary than to call on men to consider seriously the nature of the present state, the precariousness of their situation, and the danger they are in of remaining destitute of the virtuous character and temperament that are necessary qualifications for bliss. More than anything else, they need to be warned to save themselves from the evil of the world, and to be reminded, often, that if they want to escape future condemnation they must exercise vigilance, attention and zeal, and try to be better than mankind in general are.

Chapter 10

Using my account of morality to explain and support some of the principal doctrines of natural religion, particularly God's moral attributes, his moral government, and a future state of rewards and punishments

Before I embark on the announced topics of this chapter, bear with me while I recapitulate part of what I have already said in this work, and try to give you a clear, unified, over-all view of the state of the controversy about the foundation of virtue.

It is discouraging to think of the confusion that arises in most debates and enquiries from the ambiguous senses of words. If we could •understand one another's meaning precisely, •see in detail how our views differ, and •communicate our naked and genuine opinions to one another without risking their being more or less mistaken because of the imperfections of language, we would find that there are few if any points on which we disagree as much as we seem to. Many questions have been fiercely debated about down the centuries although the disputants on both sides have all along really meant pretty much the same, and been nearly agreed—as far as they had ideas. I say 'as far as they had ideas' because men in general lack ideas as much as they lack anything; and a controversy can become very tedious and voluminous while neither party have any definite opinions about the subject of it and both are zealously and quarreling over a set of *phrases*. . . .

Our present topic has suffered from a great many of the tangles caused by the ambiguity of words; and it seems that the word 'foundation', especially, can have various senses which, if they aren't attended to, are bound to produce

endless disputes. For how *could* we agree on a view about what the foundation of virtue is if we give different meanings to 'foundation' and therefore have different ideas about what the question *is*?

Let us, then, consider in careful detail what we mean when we investigate the 'foundation of virtue'. And let us stipulate that by 'virtue' we mean 'absolute virtue' or the rightness, propriety or fitness of certain actions; everyone attributes this to *some* actions, and the only way I can explain it is to ask you to reflect on what you are conscious of when you experience or think about those actions.

(i) When now we ask 'What is the foundation of virtue?', using 'virtue' in the sense I have just explained, we may mean 'What is the true explanation or reason that such-and-such actions are right, or appear to us under the notion of *right*?' And only two explanations of this can possibly be given. It may be said **(i)** that right is a species of sensation, like taste or colour, and therefore 'right' doesn't stand for anything absolutely true of the actions to which we apply it. This answer places the foundation of right entirely in God's will and good pleasure. It may instead be said **(ii)** that 'right' stands for a real characteristic of actions, something true of them, something necessary and unchangeable and independent of our perceptions, like equality, difference, proportion, or connection; so that there's nothing to be said about *why* such-and-such actions are right, any more than

about why the natures of things are what they are—e.g. why the opposite angles made by the intersection of two straight lines are equal, or why it is impossible that anything should exist without a cause.—It would be extremely unreasonable for anyone to demand more than this, asking ‘What is the foundation of truth?’ When we have traced a subject back to *the natures of things* we are always completely satisfied, and it is trifling and silly to want any further explanation. If someone seriously asked ‘Why is the whole greater than a part?’ or ‘Why is two different from twenty?’, would he deserve an answer? Wouldn’t we think he was out of his mind? It has been said that *the will of God is the foundation of truth*, but no-one can understand this. It is sacrificing all the divine perfections to the single attribute of will, and even—while seeming to magnify God’s will—subverting it, making it impossible. For what is *it* founded on? Can there be power without possibles, or will without objects, i.e. without anything to be willed? ‘God’s will is his •power to actualize various •possibilities; in exercising it he •wills that •something-or-other be the case.’ The will presupposes these ‘possibilities and objects of the will’; are they nevertheless dependent on the will and derived from it?—Perhaps some people will think as I do that because •truth has a reference to •mind, •necessary truth and the eternal natures of things imply a •necessary and eternal mind, and force us to acknowledge the unoriginated, incomprehensible wisdom and intelligence of God.

(2) Again, when we ask ‘What is the foundation of virtue?’ we may mean ‘What . . . are the considerations that imply obligation in particular cases and make particular actions right?’ If I ask ‘Why *ought* this person to act in that way in those circumstances?’, it would be proper to reply ‘Because he has received benefits from others’ or ‘Because it will make him happy’ or ‘Because God commands it’. And there

will be as many ‘foundations’ of virtue (in this sense) as there are first principles of it. Those who say that the only foundation of virtue is private happiness are probably using ‘foundation’ in this sense. That is, they probably mean that nothing obliges, nothing ever makes an action fit to be performed, except some prospect of the agent’s obtaining happiness and avoiding misery. If we ask these people ‘What makes it right for us to promote our own good? How are we to explain its being the ‘proper’ object of our desires and efforts?’, they probably wouldn’t mind appealing to *truth* and the *natures of things*; and in that case they and I would be in agreement about ‘the foundation of virtue’ in the former sense of ‘foundation’, and would differ only about the subject-matter of virtue (as I called it when discussing it in chapter 7).—This must be what is meant by those who contend that virtue and obligation are created purely by the will of God (unless they are also claiming that God’s will is the only thing that makes *truth*). If they think carefully about the question ‘Why ought we to do the will of God?’ . . . they will find that they must either •treat this as a necessary self-evident truth or •explain it in terms of the power of God to make us happy (or miserable) if we obey (or disobey) him; the latter of those would turn their theory into the one that bases all virtue and obligation on self-love, and is vulnerable to my criticisms of that.

[In the third edition Price added an end-note, linked to this point in the text. It is a pained report on and criticism of some of the views expressed in William Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*.]

(3) Or the phrase ‘the foundation of virtue’ may mean ‘the motives and reasons that lead us to virtue and support the practice of virtue in the world’. This must be what is meant by those who want to unite the different theories and represent •God’s will, •self-interest, •the reasons of things,

and •the moral sense as distinct but coinciding ‘foundations of virtue’. It is indeed undeniable the joint force of these carries us to virtue. But if we are using ‘foundation’ only in its first sense, we’ll find that only the last two of that quartet can be the true ‘foundation of virtue’.

If you want to get a more detailed and precise view of this subject, and to avoid puzzles and confusion as much as possible, you should attend also to the various common meanings of the words ‘action’ and ‘virtue’. What I have called ‘the virtue of the agent’ or ‘practical virtue’ is to be understood quite differently from absolute virtue. But I think I said enough about that distinction in chapter 8.

My remaining task is to make some general remarks about the whole position that I have been defending in this treatise.

The most important thing is to point out how my account of morality helps us in our enquiries into the nature and character of •God as• the first cause, and in explaining and proving the facts of Natural Religion.

If it were certain that the origin of our moral perceptions is an implanted sense [see page 4], it wouldn’t follow from *our* having such perceptions that *God* has them too, any more than such conclusions could be drawn from other facts about our likes and dislikes or about our sensations of sight and hearing. If there were nothing in the natures and reasons of things to be a ground of a moral and righteous disposition in God’s mind, enabling us to say *why* he prefers happiness to misery, and approves of goodness, truth, and fairness rather than their contraries, it would be much harder than it is to learn about his will and character; indeed, I think it would be utterly inconceivable to us how he could have any moral character at all.—This is supported by my reasoning in chapter 1, section iii, and also by the following reasoning.

If in respect of **intrinsic** worth and goodness all rules and standards of conduct are alike, if no goal can appeal to God’s choice more than other goals because of something **in it**, if in particular there is nothing **in the natures of things** to be the ground of his preference for happiness over misery, or his approval of goodness rather than cruelty, then his nature must be essentially indifferent alike to all goals; it was always as possible that he should be malevolent as that he should be benevolent; there is no explanation to be given of *why* he is one of these rather than the other; and therefore he can’t have any determinate character. It’s quite certain that whatever God is he is *necessarily*. The suggestion that there is something in his nature that he might have lacked, or that he could lose, is self contradictory.

[Price offers to ‘illustrate’ his reasoning with the example of a universe containing only one body, which is moving in a certain direction. The illustration isn’t well presented, and anyway doesn’t help much. After moving out of it, Price returns to his real topic:] It is absurd, among many states of will and character that are **in themselves** indifferent and equally possible, to suppose that some one of them is actual without some cause that makes it so.

I should add that if no rule of conduct for thinking beings follows from the natures of things, and is necessary, then there is *necessarily* no rule—the whole notion of such a rule is contradictory.

The distinction between necessary and contingent existence is the main foundation of all that we believe regarding the first cause. We perceive this distinction *intuitively*—i.e. we see it at a glance, and don’t have to be argued into grasping it. The objects of thought that suggest it to us *force* the idea of it onto our minds. Some things present themselves to us as *self-evidently* effects, unstable and arbitrary in their natures, indifferent as between existence and non-existence,

and capable of existing in any one of an infinity of different ways. So we know for sure that these things are derived, dependent, and produced by causes. Examples of this include: matter and motion, the form and order of the world, and all particular things that we can perceive through the senses. These items—and in general all imperfect and limited existents—are effects, and require a cause; and we see this as clearly as we see that there is such a thing as causation or productive power or dependence of one thing on another. In short, if it is conceivable that *x* doesn't exist then it is possible for *x* not to exist; and anything that could not exist must, if in fact it does exist, have been caused to do so.—On the other hand, there are some things that we see intuitively not to be effects, not to need a cause, to be underived, self-existent, and unchangeable. We can see that to suppose any of *them* to be possibly non-existent is to suppose a contradiction. . . . Examples of this include space and duration and all abstract truths and possibilities.

[Now a brief paragraph in which Price repeats things that (as he admits) he has already said in chapter 5. Then:]

Reasonings of this kind plainly tend to show us that if the distinctions of right and wrong, and moral good and evil, are nothing in the natures of things, God cannot have any character. And this conclusion is contradicted by known facts: God's having some dispositions, some principle of action, some character, is clearly shown to us by the fact that he creates at all, and even more clearly by the purposes indicated by his acting with the uniformity and wisdom that we see in the constitution of nature. So *the whole course of things*—the world and everything that happens in it—shows the falsity of the premise that good and evil are not inherent in the intrinsic natures of things.

But although effects thus prove that God has *some* character (which is enough to refute the theory of morality

I have been attacking), it may be doubted whether effects alone provide us with any undeniable proofs of God's having the particular character of *goodness*; because it seems not to be impossible to explain the effects on other suppositions. An unthinking agent cannot produce order and regularity; so wherever these appear they demonstrate design and wisdom in the cause. But it can't be said, in a parallel way, that happiness couldn't be caused by a selfish or capricious or even malicious agent; so the appearance of happiness in an effect can't be claimed to demonstrate the goodness of the cause. It has to be granted that good is greatly prevalent in what we see of the works of God, that everything we perceive of the world shows kind design, and that the primary direction of every law and regulation of nature is towards happiness; but still someone might say:

'Who knows what different scenes may have existed at earlier times, or may now exist in other districts of the universe? An evil being may sometimes cause good, just as a good being may sometimes cause suffering and pain. We see so little of nature! From what we observe at a point and in a moment what conclusions can we securely draw regarding the whole universe through all eternity? Concerning a plan of boundless extent, designed and carried out by an incomprehensible being, what can be learned from such a superficial and incomplete observation as we can make of a vanishingly small part of it? Can it be right to base a general conclusion on a single experiment, or to determine the character and views of a being that we have no independent experience of, from a few acts that can be interpreted in many different ways? If we had only *effects* to go by, and nothing in necessary truth and reason to argue from, wouldn't it be natural to wonder, anxiously, about

•whether great changes will happen in the world later on, •whether the principle_c of action in the first Cause is not goodness but caprice or a love of variety, or •whether the world as we now see and feel it was designed to give a keener edge to future disappointment, the ultimate aim being universal misery?’

I leave it to you to decide what respect you think these objections deserve. I am far from thinking that they succeed in showing that effects, independently of all arguments from moral fitness [Price’s seven-word phrase], can’t provide us with sufficient arguments for the goodness of God.

When we first reflect that undoubtedly God has *some* will and character, and that it is inherently as possible and as credible that he should be good as that he should have any other character, our subsequent thoughts about the obvious marks of kindness and love that we see in his works inevitably incline us to think that he *is* good. When we have no more evidence for a proposition than against it, any •circumstance that tips the balance in its favour ought to determine our understandings and draw our assent •to the proposition• with a level of confidence proportional to •its apparent weight. As for the objections and suspicions expressed above, it can fairly be said that we should judge concerning what we *don’t* see by what we *do* see, and not vice versa! Thus, as long as the over-all appearance of what we experience of God’s works, though comparatively little, is clearly *as if* happiness were their end, we’re entitled to conclude that this is indeed the truth. •And the point about what a tiny proportion of the universe we know anything about cancels out•. We are considering the thesis that some

principle_c other than goodness influences the Author of the universe, so that *on the whole* the universe doesn’t look as though goodness were behind it. Well, the more extensive we suppose the universe to be, the more improbable it was that we would be dropped into the ‘vanishingly small’ part of it where goodness *is* so much exerted.—But some writers (especially those who have a dismal idea of human life as being on the whole unhappy) are unlikely. . . .to be much influenced by this argument. This leads to questions of considerable importance that have often been well discussed: What are we to *make of* the appearances of evil in the world? Given those appearances, and the greater degrees of happiness that we *think* we see might have been given to us, don’t we have reason to suspect that goodness is *not* the spring of action in the Deity?—In thinking about this, we should especially note •that the natural state of a being is always his sound and good and happy state, •that all the corruptions and disorders we observe are plainly unnatural deviations and excesses, and •that there are no examples in which ill as such [Price’s phrase] is the genuine causal upshot of the basic constitution of things.²²

If, while the voice of all nature (as far as we hear it) is providing us with these arguments, it appears to us that

- for a thinking being all ends are not the same, and
- that there is something *intrinsically* better in goodness, veracity, and justice than in their contraries, something morally different *in their natures*,

our confidence about God’s moral attributes will be increased in the same degree that we think we have reason to believe this. And if it appears to us clear and certain that

²² It might have been objected here that the most we can infer from effects is the *present* disposition of the Deity, and that even if they showed *this* to be benevolent we still have no evidence to prove the stability of God’s character, i.e. that he always has been and always will between good. The full reply to such objections may be learnt from the observations on the *necessary* existence of the Deity that will be found at the end of this treatise. [This refers to a ten-page ‘dissertation’ that Price tacked onto to this work in its third edition; it is not included in this version.]

- intellect implies the approval of beneficence, that
- the understanding is the power that judges concerning moral differences, and that
- the natures of things make it necessary that goodness rather than malice constitutes the disposition and end of every mind in proportion to the degree of its knowledge and perfection,

our confidence about the present point will become equally clear and certain.

But if we reject these principles, and accept instead that all our ideas of worth and virtue, of morality and excellence, have no foundation in truth and reality, we'll have to settle for much inferior evidence on very important points. —If •our approval of goodness comes from intellectual perception, it *demonstratively* [= 'rigorously'] implies the goodness of God; but if •it comes solely from an arbitrary structure of our minds, all it shows is that...the plan of the universe, whatever it is, required that what is *here* and *now* should carry the appearance of benevolence. . . .

Indeed, on the principles I have defended in this treatise it is very easy to establish the moral perfections of the Deity.—As I showed in chapter 3, the true explanation for why we want and prefer our own *private* happiness is •the *nature* of happiness. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that •this is also the true explanation for why we want and prefer *public* happiness. And if that is right then we immediately see that God must be benevolent.—In short, if there is a rule of right •arising from the differences and relations of things and •extending as far as all the possible effects of power, a rule which (to the degree that it is known) compels the respect and affection of all reasonable beings, and which •in• its own nature constitutes the proper, supreme, and eternal guide and measure of all the decisions those beings make,

it follows rigorously that the first Intellect—i.e. God—must be under the direction of this rule more than any other being is. How much more? As much more as his understanding is higher than theirs and his knowledge more perfect. He is in fact the living independent spring of this rule. He can't contradict •it without contradicting •himself. It is a part of the idea of reason, so it must be absolutely sovereign in the *self-existent infinite reason*, •i.e. in God•.

So there's no difficulty about discovering the principle_c of action in the Deity. It is obvious that the seat of •infinite power must be the seat of •infinite knowledge, and this makes it equally evident that it must be also the seat of •absolute rectitude; and these qualities—thus implying one another and being essentially •not three but• *one*—constitute the idea of *Deity*, and exhibit the Deity to us in the most awe-inspiring and glorious light. Among the various possible schemes of creation and ways of ordering the series of events there is a *best* one, and this is the rule and goal of God's conduct, and it isn't possible that he should deviate from it, given that he sees it to be his rule and that he doesn't have any *difficulty* about •abiding by it or about• doing anything. . . .

[Price goes on about that at some length: God isn't subject to any of the factors that might lead someone to act wrongly—ignorance, error, passion, and so on. Before all that, he has remarked on our good fortune in living in a universe governed by a wise, good Deity—'as certainly as God exists, all is well'.]

Before we leave this topic I should say—so as to prevent a misunderstanding—that whenever I say that what explains God's rectitude is *necessity*, or speak of goodness as *essential* to him, I am talking about the *principle_c* of rectitude, not the *exercise* of it. It would be absurd to suppose that God •acts by the same kind of necessity by which he •exists, or

that •his uses of his power are necessary in the same sense •of ‘necessary’• as •his power is. . . . All voluntary action is free—that’s part of what ‘voluntary’ means—and this implies the physical possibility of not performing the action [see note on ‘physical’ on page 88]. What this ‘possibility’ means is not in the least inconsistent with its being utterly certain that the action will be performed, or with the impossibility—in *another sense of ‘impossibility’*—that the action should be omitted. Consider these two:

- (i) God will never do wrong.
- (ii) The wisest created being won’t do something that is destructive to him without being even slightly *tempted* to do it.

Of course we can depend on the truth of (ii); well, can depend *infinitely more* on the truth of (i). And now consider these:

- (i) He who is the abstract of all perfection will deviate into imperfection in his conduct.
- (ii) Infinite reason will act unreasonably.
- (iii) Eternal righteousness will act unrighteously.
- (iv) Infinite knowledge will make a mistake.
- (v) Infinite power will be conquered.
- (vi) Something that exists necessarily will cease to exist.

These are *equally* impossible; but what rules out (i)–(iii) is a different *kind* of impossibility from the one that (iv)–(vi) have.—It may be really impossible for someone in his right mind to drink poison when he has no motive to do so, and really impossible that he won’t die if he does drink the poison; but can’t everyone see that these ‘impossibilities’ are totally different in meaning? What good reason can there be against calling the one a ‘moral impossibility’ and the other a ‘natural impossibility’?

Many people are unwilling to acknowledge this distinction, but I think it is of great importance. Perhaps the following illustration will help.

[In what follows, the original doesn’t mention particular numbers; they are added for clarity, and don’t affect the points that are being made.] Suppose that we have a die with a million faces, and that I, who have no special skill, and want on my first throw to bring up the number 397,515; we’ll say that it is *certain* that I’ll fail; we often use ‘certain’ for things that are less sure than that! How about my throwing 397,515 on *each* of my first one *million* throws? Most people would say that that’s *impossible*. This impossibility, however, is plainly very different from absolute physical impossibility; for if it is •physically• possible to succeed on the first throw (as it undoubtedly is), then it’s just as possible (•physically•) to succeed on the second, the third, and all the subsequent throws; and therefore it is, in *this* sense of ‘possible’, as possible to throw that number a million times in a row as to throw it the first time.—[Price now expands the example: a million dice, each having a million faces, are each thrown a million times and each throw with each of them comes up 745,001. This will strike people as even more ‘impossible’, but it is perfectly naturally or physically possible that this should happen. He continues:] If you *still* don’t see the distinction, compare that last outcome with this: throwing a six with a die that has no numbers stamped on it!

To push on further with this example: Remember that the improbability of throwing any particular face of a die is always proportional to how many faces the die has; so when the number of faces is *infinite* the improbability of the outcome—say, the improbability of throwing the number that is equal to 498,053,999,145,011⁹⁸⁵⁵, or throwing the number 7—is infinite; and we describe something that is infinitely improbable as being ‘**impossible**’, in a sense of that word like the sense that is involved when we say ‘It is **impossible** that a wise man should, knowingly and without temptation, do something that will destroy him’. But some

number has to come up, and each number has the same chance of being thrown as any other; so it is **possible** that this number may be thrown, in the sense in which it is **possible** that a wise man will etc., etc., meaning that he has it in his power to etc., etc. [At this point Price switches from the improbability that x will happen to the certainty that x won't happen. We'll follow him in this; but it's just a stylistic variation and doesn't affect the argument.] The certainty C_2 that a particular face of an infinite die won't be thrown twice in a row is infinitely greater than the certainty C_1 that it won't be thrown the first time; and the certainty C_x that in an infinity of throws of this die that number won't come up every time is greater than C_1 in the same proportion that infinity raised to the infinitieth power is greater than infinity. But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that the impossibility of that outcome is still *not* a physical impossibility. But there is more excuse for confusing *these* two kinds of impossibility (or necessity) in this context than there would be for confusing them when comparing the outcomes of free choices with the outcomes of the operation of blind and unthinking causes. The former kind of 'impossibility' is a matter of degree, while the latter kind is not. The necessity by which twice two is not twenty, or a mass of matter doesn't stay still when pushed by another, is always the same, and can't be even slightly increased or lessened.

Connecting the die-throwing illustration with what I was saying about the different kinds of necessity, or senses of 'necessary', that are involved in 'Necessarily God always acts well' and 'Necessarily God exists and is perfectly good': The necessity of the eternal conformity of all God's actions to the rules of wisdom and righteousness is comparable

with the certainty that an infinite number of dice, each with an infinite number of faces and thrown all together an infinite number of times, would not always bring up the number equal to $659,555,816,451,110^{79443}$. The latter outcome, though it's infallibly true that it *won't* happen, nevertheless 'could' happen, in a sense not very unlike that in which God 'could' deviate from rectitude, e.g. creating a miserable world, or destroying the world after promising not to—namely, the sense in which it means that God has the power to do such things.²³

That is enough of that subject. Let us now take the account I have given in this treatise of the nature and subject-matter of morality, and apply it to another question of considerable importance regarding the Deity. I mean the question 'Are all God's moral attributes reducible to benevolence? Does his benevolence *include* the whole of his character?' [Price's discussion of this seems to equate benevolence with goodness. There are hints of that elsewhere in the work, and also hints that point the other way.]

I have shown that the answer No is correct for inferior beings, and in general that virtue is by no means reducible to benevolence. If I have been right about that, our present question is immediately answered. Absolute and eternal **rectitude** (i.e. a concern for what is in all cases most fit and righteous) is properly the ultimate principle_c of God's conduct, and the sole guide of his power. The first and chief component in this is **goodness**; but goodness and rectitude, however much they may coincide, are far from being identical. . . . So, faced with the question

If there were ever some kind of conflict between rectitude and goodness in a particular case, which of

²³ If you don't like the word 'infinite' as used here, replace it by 'indefinite', which serves my purpose just as well. The die-throwing analogy that I have presented here gives me a way of making my points with great exactness; so I hope you'll forgive me if it strikes you as containing anything unsuitable to the dignity of the divine subject to which it is applied.

the two would stand first in God's mind and which would give way?',

one would think that there couldn't be any controversy about the answer. Would *anyone* say that it is not because it is right that God promotes the happiness of his creatures? Or that he would promote such happiness in cases where—or in a manner in which—it would be *wrong* to promote it? . . .

[Price develops this line of thought through four book-pages [= two in the format of this version] whose main content—as he admits—has already been provided in earlier chapters. A few notable episodes from this material are given in the present paragraph.] Happiness is an object of essential and eternal value. It was because it was *right* to confer happiness that God created the universe in the first place. It was for this that the world was produced, and for this it is continued and governed. . . . But while we find it necessary to conclude that *goodness* is the principle_c from which God created, we ought. . . . never to forget that this principle_c is founded in reason and guided by reason. . . . It would be a very dangerous error to consider goodness in God as not being exercised under the direction of justice. Divine benevolence is a disposition to bring happiness to the faithful, the pious, the upright—not to make everyone indiscriminately happy in every possible way. . . . There is nothing unreasonable in believing that falsehood and deceit could often be as likely to produce happiness as truth and faithfulness are. Supposing that such a case occurred in the world, it is surely beyond doubt that God would prefer the latter—the route to happiness through truth and faithfulness. If this is denied, if it is indeed true that there's nothing right in one or wrong in the other apart from their consequences, what can we depend on? How are we to know that God hasn't actually chosen the methods of falsehood and general deception? We are in a very bewildered state if we have •to

wait for a satisfactory solution of such doubts, •to wait until we discover that the circumstances of our state and of the world are such that it can never be equally advantageous to us to deceive us—especially given our experience of countless cases where a given end *can* be achieved, often most quickly and efficiently, by deviating from truth!—Although we are to conceive of God as just and true as well as good, it's clear that •justice and •truth could never lead him to create •the world in the first place. •They presuppose that there already exist beings who have reason and moral capacities; •they are a certain manner of acting towards such beings. . . . I think you'll see that I am not guilty of an inconsistency when I say •that the moral attributes of God are not all resolvable into benevolence and also •that happiness is the goal—and probably the only goal—for which he created and governs the world.—Happiness is the goal of his government, but (I repeat) it is happiness in subordination to rectitude; it is the happiness of the virtuous and worthy rather than of others; it is happiness obtained consistently with justice and veracity. . . .

One last point: Although it is proper, and often unavoidable, to speak of goodness, justice, and veracity as different attributes of the Deity, they are different only as •different views, effects, or manifestations of •one supreme principle, which includes the whole of moral perfection, namely everlasting rectitude or reason. That complete what I have to say about the character of the Deity.

I shall now proceed in the same manner to examine the other principles and facts of natural religion, and to point out the special evidence for them that comes from my account of the nature and foundation of morals.

[The three book-pages on the topic of God's 'moral government' consist mainly of variants on the argument that the absolute rectitude of God's character, and his perfect

knowledge of moral truth, make it stand to reason that rectitude will be at the heart of his government of the world. For example: 'It is self-evident that virtue *ought to* be happier than vice, and we can be very confident that if something *ought to* be, the universal governing mind will ensure that it *will be*.' Given the difference between virtue and vice, we can be sure of God's attitude to virtuous people and vicious ones, namely 'that God is *for* the one and *against* the other, i.e. that the administration of the world is strictly moral and righteous'. On this note, Price modulates into his next topic:]

If it should appear that in the present world virtue and vice are not distinguished in the manner that these observations require, the unavoidable consequence must be that *there is a future state*. Let us look carefully into the question of how this matter stands, and what the force is of this inference. [In this context, Price talks about our life on earth as mortals using the expressions '(at) present', 'this present state', 'now', 'this life', 'this scene', 'here', 'here below' and 'temporal' (Price sometimes says 'temporary', in a now obsolete sense of that word). The underlying thought was that God doesn't exist in time, and that in our life after death we won't be in time either; so it's a special feature of our 'present' life that it is temporal.]

On the one hand, it must be granted that in general virtue is the present good of men, and vice the present ill of men, and that we see enough in our present state, without needing any abstract arguments, to •convince us that God favours the virtuous, and to •point out to us the beginnings of a moral government.—But it is equally evident that we now perceive only the *beginnings* of such a government, and that it is nowhere near as thorough as we have reason to expect.

Virtue *tends to* produce much greater happiness than it now *actually* produces, and vice to produce much greater misery. These contrary tendencies don't and *couldn't* ever produce their full effects during the short period of this life,

and they are often prevented from taking the effect that they could and generally do take, by many obstacles arising from the wickedness of mankind and other causes of a plainly temporal kind that can't be regarded as natural or necessary. We can reasonably presume that tendencies thus interrupted and opposed, though they are inseparable from virtue and vice and essential to the constitution of things, will at some time or other lead to their genuine effects. They clearly tell us of the purpose of him who made the world what it is. Can we think that this purpose will be defeated?

Though virtue always tends to happiness, and though it is the nature of it to advance our happiness and to better our condition, in proportion to the degree in which we possess it, yet such is the state of things here below that the event sometimes proves otherwise. It is impossible to survey the world, or to recollect the history of it, without being convinced of this. There is not the least probability that all men are constantly and invariably •happy precisely to the extent that they are •conscientious and upright. So often virtue has been oppressed and persecuted while vice has prospered and flourished. Good men may **(1)** get themselves into •tangles because they are so rigid about moral correctness, or into •lowness of spirits and melancholy, and in consequence of this may be rendered ignorant of their own characters, and live in perpetual distrust and terror; or they may **(2)** have false notions of religion and the Deity, which give them great trouble and rid them of many of the joys that would otherwise have come with their integrity. And then there are men who, perhaps through faults of their parents or of their upbringing, **(3)** have diseased bodies, and spend their lives burdened by pain and sickness, and ones who **(4)** are harassed and defamed *because of* their virtue, driven away from all that is dear to them and compelled to spend their days in poverty or in an inquisition [Price's phrase, perhaps

meaning 'spend their days being investigated']. These four kinds of people are less happy than many others have been spared such hardships without being more virtuous. Indeed, they are less happy than many vicious people who

- swim with the current of the world and comply with its customs,
- deny themselves nothing that they want and can get without hurting their reputations,
- are born into wealth and privilege,
- enjoy health and vigour of body, and naturally easy and gay temperaments,
- never give a thought to what may happen to them **hereafter**, or have opinions that fill them with false hopes about this, and at last
- die without concern or remorse.

[From here on Price will refer often to the life we shall have after our biological death, using such expressions as 'future', '**hereafter**' or 'beyond this world'.] *Of course* there have been instances of this kind! It certainly happens sometimes that the very honesty of people subjects them to special difficulties and drawbacks, while lying and dishonesty help them on their way to ease, and honour, and plenty!

Indeed, all things considered, this world seems to be more like a school for developing virtue than a position of honour for it; the course of human affairs is favourable to virtue more by •exercising it than by •rewarding it! Other things being equal, virtue always has a great advantage over vice, and is alone sufficient to outweigh many large drawbacks; but it would be very extravagant to claim •that it is at present always completely its own happiness, •that it is sufficient on its own to outweigh all possible evils of body, mind, and

financial condition, or •that (for example)

a man who has become wealthy by vicious but private methods, and afterwards enjoys his wealth for many years with discretion and a good reputation

has less pleasure than

a man whose benevolence or integrity has brought him to a dungeon or to the stake, or who lives in perplexity, labour, self-denial, torture of body, and melancholy of mind.

It is indeed true that virtue even in the most distressed circumstances is *preferable to* vice in the most prosperous circumstances, and that being burned to death *ought to be* chosen rather than the greatest wages of iniquity.²⁴ This doesn't mean that in distressed circumstances virtue is more profitable than vice (i.e. accompanied by more pleasure), but that it •is intrinsically excellent and obligatory, •is to be chosen for itself independently of its utility, and •remains more desirable and amiable than anything else we could aim at, even when it is stripped of every reward and is in the greatest degree afflicted and oppressed.

[Price now embarks on two book-pages developing the theme that a person who is fairly virtuous but has some elements of vice in his make-up, or a vicious person who is starting to reform himself, is likely to suffer more than someone who is thoroughly virtuous and more than someone who is 'thoroughly wicked'. This is woven in with some other points about ways in which 'in the present world' virtue sometimes leads one into suffering that could otherwise have been avoided. Then:]

[The ensuing questions are really disguised assertions, but in this case the interrogative device works well enough for us, and is therefore

²⁴ Anyone who thinks this assertion to be in any degree inconsistent or extravagant must be someone who holds that virtue is good and eligible and obligatory *only as a means to private pleasure*, and that nothing but pleasure can be an object of desire and preference. With *that* view as a basis, the very notion of parting with life (or giving up an enjoyment) for the sake of virtue implies a contradiction. . . .

allowed to stand. See example and note on page 2.] Don't such observations point out to us a future state, and prove that this life is connected with another—a life after our animal death? Rather than accepting this conclusion, shall we retreat to *atheism* and deny that a perfectly reasonable being governs all things? Or must we maintain that his being righteous himself doesn't imply that he approves of righteousness and will support it, distinguishing those who do his will and imitate his goodness from those who do not? If •nothing is to be expected beyond this world, •no suitable provision is made for many differences in how men are constituted, •no remarkable evidence is seen of the divine holiness, and •the noblest and best of all objects (that on which the welfare of the creation depends, and which raises beings to the nearest resemblance to God) seems to be left without any adequate support—is *this possible under the Divine government?* Can it be conceived that the wisdom and fairness of providence should fail in just this one respect, i.e. in respect of virtue? . . . But if we accept that this scene is related to a future more important one, all is clear, every difficulty is removed, and every irregularity vanishes. We are now presented with a plain explanation of all the strange phenomena in human life. It's not important how much virtue suffers and vice triumphs •here, if •hereafter there will be a just distinction between them and all the inequalities will be set right. Indeed, it may sometimes be *right* that a vicious man is permitted to enjoy the world, and also that a good man is made to struggle with difficulties. . . .

A moral plan of government must be implemented gradually and slowly, through a series of steps and stages. Before retribution there must be probation and discipline. Before anyone *receives* reward (or punishment), he must be given sufficient opportunities to *deserve* reward (or punishment)—to form and display his character—and during that time

there have to be many occasions when the person's choice of virtue or vice will make no difference to the immediate outcome. If every single action were immediately followed by its proper reward or punishment, . . . •the characters of men couldn't be formed, •virtue would be become •self-interested and mercenary, •some of the most important branches of virtue couldn't be practised at all, •adversity (which is often its best friend) would never have access to it, and •there wouldn't be any of the trials that are needed to train virtue up to maturity and perfection. This would disturb the regular [here = 'orderly *and* morally correct'; see note on page 105] process of a moral government, and defeat its purposes. And so the very facts that are regarded •by some• as objections to •the thesis that there is such a moral government• turn out to be *required for* such government, given how mankind are now constituted. . . .

If we accidentally discovered a piece of workmanship—a product of skill—that was entirely new to us, no-one would doubt that it was made to be used in a particular way, if its design and structure were plainly appropriate for such a use, and the supposition of this use of it •explained everything in it that would otherwise be disproportioned and inexplicable, and •made it appear regular and beautiful throughout. Think how *perverse* it would be to •deny obstinately that it was intended for such a use, and in consequence of this to •ignore the undeniable marks of the most masterly hand in various parts of it, and •maintain it to be the work of some bungling craftsman who lacked either the knowledge or the power needed to make it more perfect!

Another example: We find a particular passage in a book that at first seems strange to us, but then we see an obvious and natural sense of it that fits with the phrasing of the passage itself and also makes it fit in with •the wisdom apparent in other parts of the book, and with •what previously we

had the best reason to believe concerning the character and abilities of the author. Given all of this, how *unreasonable* it would be to insist that the passage is nonsense or blasphemy!

I thought I needed to make these points as an aid to those who don't want to allow *anything* irregular in the present distribution of happiness and misery, because they are afraid that such an admission would imply that we don't have sufficient evidence for a perfect order in nature, and for the wisdom and fairness of providence.²⁵

It would indeed hardly be possible to avoid atheism if the assertions of some writers on this subject were true. We say:

From the view that we have of the constitution and order of the divine government, why can't we infer what will take place hereafter under that government? In many other cases we infer what is unknown from what is known, e.g. inferring the whole meaning of what someone said from hearing only a part of it.

There are those who would reply to us as follows:

In that last case our inference is based on a previous acquaintance with the speaker, with language, and with the general manner in which men use it to express their sentiments. If we didn't have such acquaintance, even if we understood the meanings of the particular words we heard we couldn't infer anything from them beyond the ideas that they immediately conveyed, or see the least reason to suspect any

further intention in the speaker. Similarly, because we have no previous acquaintance with the divine nature and government, we can't know anything about them beyond what is directly signified to us by the state of things around us; we can have no reason to think that the created world has any order greater than what we at the present moment observe, or to conclude that the First Cause has any powers and qualities in a higher degree than they are actually exhibited to us in the world as we experience it. It may be further argued that because this visible universe is an object wholly singular to us—not one instance of a *kind* of which we have experienced other instances—we can't draw *any* conclusions from it, or determine *anything* about the nature, designs, and properties of its cause, or even know that it has a cause. Trying to reach such conclusions from the basis that we have is like trying to work out what the speaker means when we haven't had the experiences needed to let us have any idea of what any words mean, so that for us the speaker's words are just noises. [Price refers to one of Hume's essays as a source for some of this line of thought, but his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are better. They were published after Hume's death, more than 20 years after the first edition of the present work, though a few years before its third edition.]

²⁵ By 'anything irregular' I mean anything that *would be* irregular if this life were not related to another life 'after death'. Something that is perfectly right and just when considered in its relations to the whole to which it belongs can look quite unjust when it is considered by itself, detached from the rest. How strange it is that anyone should overlook this obvious truth! Bear in mind that the points I have been making here don't show anything about the *nature* of the future state, except that that in it the rewards and punishments begun in this life will be made adequate. But it's perfectly obvious that this could happen and yet all mankind eventually perish, 'so that in *these* arguments there is no promise of eternal life'. **Reason**, therefore, leaves us much in the dark on this subject. All we are sure of is that the after-life will on the whole be better or worse for each person in proportion as *he* has been morally better or worse in his conduct and character. [The footnote continues at considerable length, making two points. •Any virtuous person must have a good enough sense of his own *unworthiness* to feel that he doesn't *deserve* any notable reward in the after-life. •The Christian **revelation** offers the prospect of 'a new life of complete happiness that will never end'.]

... This line of thought can have no effect on anyone who is sure, 'as I am', that these difficulties are based on a wrong account of how our minds operate. However much the human understanding is 'preceded by sense-experience, and 'supplied by it with its first opportunities to exert itself, it is a faculty infinitely superior to all the powers of sense, and a most important source of our ideas. Our understanding enables us, independently of experience, to demonstrate countless truths concerning many items of which we otherwise could never have known anything.—It is the special advantage of the principles I have maintained that they provide us with direct and demonstrative proofs of the truths of natural religion, and particularly of God's righteousness and goodness, at the same time that they aid and support all reasonings from experience. [Because 'demonstrative' means 'logically rigorous', Price is here making a very strong claim. In this work he seldom claims to (be able to) 'demonstrate' significant philosophical results. The clearest cases where he does are both about demonstrating what the moral structure of the after-life will be. The other is back on page 43 ('prove with the evidentness of a demonstration what supreme reason will do').]

[Price closes the chapter with an emotionally colourful account, supposedly drawn from his conclusions in this book, of the wonderfulness of virtue and the dreadfulness of vice. He writes of virtue as something we can carry with

us into the after-life and that will 'make God our friend', but he doesn't openly say anything about divine *rewards* for virtue. He concludes the virtue part of this by saying: 'Secure this, and you secure *everything*. Lose this, and *all* is lost.' In the vice part, Price depicts the havoc caused in the world by vice, and also hammers away at 'what it is to set up our own wills against *Reason* and *the Divine will*'. One gets the impression that in this context the divine will is uppermost in his mind. This is how the chapter ends:] The effects of vice in the present world, however shocking, may be nothing compared with those that may take place hereafter, when 'the evil and the good will no longer be blended, when 'the natural tendencies of things will no longer be interrupted in their operation, when 'the moral constitution of the universe will be perfected, and when 'everyone will get what he deserves. It may be impossible for us to imagine what the punishment will be that will then overtake vice. When we seriously consider what vice *is* and what it can *do*, our ideas about the dreadful loss we may suffer through it can hardly be exaggerated, and we can't be *too* concerned to remove all the remains of it from our temperaments and to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and the danger with which it threatens us.

Conclusion

Having completed my design in this work, I will close by offering an argument for the *practice* of virtue. I think it deserves to be considered by everyone, and especially by people who are disposed to scepticism and infidelity.

I have presented in chapter 10 some proofs of the principal facts of natural religion, especially of •a perfect moral government in nature and •a future state of rewards and punishments. There is a great deal of other evidence that wasn't on the path I was following. Above all, the Christian revelation confirms for us everything we can learn through reason on these subjects, and promises to the virtuous *eternal life—a happy immortality*.

But I am now going to suppose that the whole of this evidence is so insufficient that it creates only a chance, overbalanced by contrary chances, for such a reward for virtue; and I shall argue on that basis that our obligations will still be the same, and that not practising virtue—indeed not sacrificing to it all present advantages and gratifications—is utterly foolish.—To get started on the argument, consider what any given chance for *such* a good must be worth.

An even chance for any given stake is worth one half of that stake; if the chance is only a third (or a tenth) of all the chances, its value will be a third (or a tenth) of the whole stake, and so on. So if the good that is at stake is the future reward of virtue, and its value is reckoned to be •equal to the value of all present good, •not more than that, then it will be right to sacrifice for it a half (a third, a tenth) of all present good, according as the chances for obtaining it are a half (a third, a tenth) of all the chances for and against obtaining it.

If the value of the future reward of virtue is supposed greater than the value of all present good, it will be right

to give up for it a proportionally greater part of present good; and the future good might be so great as to make *any* chance for it worth more than *all* that can be enjoyed in this life.—The same is true of the value of any means of avoiding a future evil. Though we suppose the evil to be enormously improbable, its nature and duration and intensity may be so great that something that saves us from the tiny danger of it may be worth more than anything we can sacrifice in order to get it.

In other words: Any given chance for a given good is worth *something*. The same chance for a greater good is worth *more*, and consequently when the good is infinite the value of any chance for it must be likewise *infinite*. Given that the future good that is promised to virtue is infinite, and the loss of it with which vice threatens us is therefore an infinite evil, it follows that any suspicion that religion *may* be true, or the bare *possibility* that virtue and vice will have the consequences that Christianity has taught us to expect, has the same implications for practice as if we were *sure* of its truth.

Even if we think that (through some strange confusion in the affairs of the world, or an extravagant mercy in God) vice *also* gives us a chance of happiness hereafter, if we accept that virtue is to *any* degree more likely to lead to happiness than vice is, it will still be *mad* not to adhere to virtue and avoid vice, at all costs. What is the value of a small increase in the chance of obtaining a good? Obviously, its value depends on the value of the good; and if the good is infinite then *any* increase in the chance of getting it has an infinite value.

I don't think anyone can escape this conclusion unless he asserts that it is *certain* that

Christianity is false and there is no future state, or if there is such a state virtue gives *no* better chance for happiness in it than vice does.

It would be inconsistent for a sceptic to assert this, and surely no man in his right mind will assert it. However, let us consider the situation of someone who *does* assert it. It would still be prudent of him to be sufficiently unsure of his atheism to take the precaution of living in such a way that he has nothing to fear if the worst were to happen and his confidence were to turn out to be wrong. [That is, if Christianity were to turn out to be true, this being 'the worst' from the point of view of the atheist.] But someone whose disbelief in Christianity falls short of this extreme certainty is guilty ·not of mere •imprudence but· of •unspeakable folly if he is loose and careless in his life, or ever consents to any wrong action or omission in the interests of getting some benefit in this world.

Indeed, anyone who fairly examines the evidence for religion must see that it deserves great regard.—Someone who thinks about how *reasonable* it is to presume that

- infinite goodness will communicate infinite happiness, that
- the creator of everything designs his creatures for such a happiness by allowing those who are qualified for this to live for ever, improving under his eye and care, and that
- virtuous men, if there are any, have most reason to expect to be favoured in this way;

someone who reflects on

- the many ways in which our minds have been shaped in favour of virtue,
- the accountableness of our natures,

- our unavoidable fears and hopes regarding the after-life,
- the malignant and detestable nature of vice,
- the views of mankind in general concerning a future state and reckoning [here = 'rewards and punishments'], and
- the spotless holiness of the Deity, which the sacred writings assert and display, and some conviction of which naturally forces itself on everyone,

—that person really can't avoid having uneasy suspicions about what may happen in the after-life, and be led to consider with deep concern

- how awful the future displays of divine justice *may* turn out to be,
- how greatly we may be involved in the incomprehensible scheme of providence,
- how much may depend on what we now are, and
- how necessary it is for us to do everything we possibly can to keep ourselves safe.

—We have a great deal of reason to believe that at some time or other present inequalities will be set right, and a greater difference than we *now* see between what comes to the virtuous and what comes to the vicious. As for what *kind* or *degree* of difference the counsels and ends of the divine government may require—who can be sure about that? We see enough in the present state of things, and sufficiently experience what can happen given how this world is run, to alarm our fears and start us giving serious thought to what greater differences between human beings than we now observe are likely in a future state, and what greater happiness or misery than we now feel—or can have any ideas of—*may* await us in the future endless duration through which it is at least credible that we are going to exist.

And however little respect some people may have for such considerations, it must be past dispute among impartial people who have enquiring minds that the arguments that have been used to prove natural and revealed religion, when taken all together, produce some degree of real evidence—and if that's so, those arguments lay a sufficient foundation for the above reasoning.

What makes it all the more appropriate for us to attend to this reasoning is the fact that it's a kind of reasoning that we are continually using in the common course of life, and because it explains to us the principles and reasons that we act on in almost all our temporal concerns. Sceptical people ought to be forced to think about the fact that our nature and condition are such that they *make* us, in the daily course of life, act on evidence much lower than what is commonly called 'probable', and that there are countless instances in everyday life where a man would be regarded as in a literal sense *distracted* if he refused to act, and with great application too, on something for which the probability was greatly against his succeeding ['. . . in a literal sense *distracted*'—colloquially 'he is out of his mind', literally 'he has lost his way'].

Men will often take great precautions against dangers that are remote and imaginary, but they neglect an easy and reasonable precaution against the worst and greatest of all dangers! They become eager and restless adventurers,

taking great trouble and running great risks where there's any prospect of getting money, power, or fame—these being objects with little intrinsic value, objects that it would be our greatest dignity and happiness to despise! Yet they are unwilling to take any trouble or run any risks in order to obtain blessings of incalculable value and to secure a chance for eternal bliss. . . . By living as virtue and piety require, we can in general lose nothing and may gain infinitely; by a careless ill-spent life we can get nothing, or at best (come what may) next to nothing and may lose infinitely? When will these indisputable truths that imply so much about our interests sink deeply enough into our hearts? It would be very unfair to my argument if I didn't make this last point. You will have noticed that the argument has been based on the supposition that •there is a very great probability against religion and future retribution, and that •virtue requires us to sacrifice to it all our present enjoyments. The reverse of both these suppositions appears in reality to be the truth. There is not only an even chance but a great probability for the truth of religion. There is nothing to be got by vice, and the best part of present good is commonly lost by it. What virtue requires us to give up is not the happiness of life but our follies, diseases, and miseries. Given that this is how things stand, how foolish is a vicious choice! How shocking is the infatuation that makes us capable of it!