

The Principles of Action

No. 3 of *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*

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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.—Other philosophers are referred to by surname only; Reid also gives their titles.—The frequency of extremely short paragraphs is Reid’s work.

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Glossary

amiable: This meant 'likable', 'lovable', 'very attractive'. A good deal stronger than the word's normal meaning today.

art: In Reid's time an 'art' was any human activity that involves techniques or rules of procedure. 'Arts' in this sense include medicine, farming, and painting.

bad: This very often replaces Reid's adjective 'ill', e.g. in the phrase 'good and ill'. See also **evil**.

basic: Most occurrences of this replace Reid's 'original', which can't now carry the meaning it had at his time. In calling a human power 'original' he means that it is basic, fundamental, not derived from (or explainable in terms of) something lying deeper in the human constitution.

belief: Many occurrences of this, including the title of Part II chapter 8, replace Reid's 'opinion'. For him the two are equivalent, whereas for us their flavours are slightly different. The phrase 'belief and opinions' on page 47 seems to presuppose a difference, but Reid nowhere explains what it is.

contemn: This is not obsolete; it means 'have contempt for'.

culture: As used repeatedly in the final chapter of this work, 'culture' is to be thought of in connection with 'horticulture', 'agriculture' etc. It has nothing to do with being artistically or intellectually or socially cultured; it is all about cultivation, taking care of plants, making a good job of feeding and watering and pruning.

dignity: Excellence.

disinterested: What this meant in early modern times is what it still means when used by literate people, namely 'not *self*-interested'.

epitome: A reduced-scale model. (It nearly rhymes with 'litany'.)

evil: This replaces Reid's 'ill' when that is used as a noun. It has become fairly standard in English-language philosophy to use 'evil' to mean merely 'something bad', e.g. 'pain is an evil', and 'the problem of evil' meaning 'the problem posed by the existence of bad states of affairs'. It's just an oddity of English that 'good' works well as adjective or noun while 'bad' works only as an adjective. Don't load 'evil' in this text with all the force it has in English when used as an adjective. See also **bad**.

faculty: Your faculty of seeing (for example) is either **(i)** your ability to see or **(ii)** whatever it is about you that *gives* you the ability to see. Reid's stress on our need to trust the 'testimony' of our faculties, he seems to adopt **(ii)**, a choice that is underlined when on page 63 he speaks of faculties as 'engines'.

injury: In Reid's usage here, to do someone an injury is to hurt him *wrongly, unjustly*. That is why you can't believe that someone has done you an injury unless you are equipped with moral concepts—see page 34, the paragraph starting 'The very notion. . . '.

intercourse: This is used on page 20 in a context where sex is under discussion, but its meaning is not sexual. It has a very general meaning that covers conversation, business dealings, any kind of social inter-relations; 'sexual intercourse' named one species, but you couldn't drop the adjective and still refer to it.

lot: 'What is given to a person by fate or divine providence; *esp.* a person's destiny, fortune, or condition in life.' (OED)

mean: Low-down, poor, skimpy etc., in literal and metaphorical uses. Reid uses it here as a kind of intensifier—‘mean or bad motives’ [page 31], ‘base or mean’ [page 42], ‘mean and despicable’ [page 54].

object: In early modern usage, anything that is aimed at, wanted, loved, hated, thought about, feared, etc. is an *object* of that aim, desire, love, etc. *Anything*: it could be a physical object, but is more likely to be a state of affairs, a state of mind, an experience, etc.

principle: Of this work’s 305 occurrences of ‘principle’, a few concern basic propositions—principles ‘of false religion’, ‘of solid geometry’, ‘of the Epicurean sect’, and so on. But the vast majority use ‘principle’ in a sense that was common then but is now obsolete, in which it means ‘source’, ‘cause’, ‘driver’, ‘energizer’, or the like. Reid sometimes speaks of a principle’s ‘impulse’ and sometimes of its ‘drawing’ the person in a certain direction. He seems not to have given any thought to this choice between push and pull.

reflection: Reid sometimes uses this in a sense popularised by Locke, meaning ‘looking in at the events in one’s own mind’. But quite often he uses it in a sense that comes more naturally to us, in which reflection is just calmly thinking things over.

sagacity: Lively intelligence.

sated: utterly satisfied, glutted, full.

science: In early modern times this word applied to any body of knowledge or theory that is (perhaps) axiomatised and (certainly) conceptually highly organised. That is why on page 61 Reid implies that there is a ‘science’ of morals.

second cause: For those with certain theological views, God is the first cause of everything that happens in the world; a ‘second cause’ is an ordinary down-to-earth cause such as

heat causing butter to melt. It is a ‘second’ cause because God causes the butter to melt *through* bringing heat to bear on it. In Reid’s single use of this phrase in the present work [page 67] he seems—a bit surprisingly—to be saying that the most fundamental aspects of the human constitution are produced by God *directly* and not through any manipulation of created mental or physical realities.

self-control: This replaces Reid’s ‘self-government’ throughout.

social: In contrast to ‘selfish’, meaning ‘motivated by a concern for the welfare of other people’.

speculative: This means ‘having to do with non-moral propositions’. Ethics is a ‘practical’ discipline, chemistry is a ‘speculative’ one. When Reid speaks of ‘speculation’ he means ‘disciplined study of some factual material that isn’t immediately concerned with how anyone should behave’.

sympathy: Literally ‘feeling with’, as applied to any feeling. Sympathy is at work not only when your sadness saddens me but also when your happiness makes me happy. When on page 65 Reid says that if your friend acts badly that will give you ‘a very painful sympathy indeed’ in the form of a feeling like that of guilt, he is evidently assuming that your friend knows he has acted badly and is ashamed, and it’s his shame that your sympathy locks onto.

uneasy: Locke turned this into a kind of technical term for some later writers, through his theory that every intentional human act is the agent’s attempt to relieve his state of ‘uneasiness’. It covers pain but also many much milder states—any unpleasant sense of something’s being wrong.

vice, vicious: Morally wrong conduct, not necessarily of the special kind that we reserve ‘vice’ for these days, or the different special kind that we label as ‘vicious’.

Part III: The Rational Principles of Action

Chapter 1: There are rational principles of action in man

Mechanical principles of action produce their effect without any will or intention on our part. We can by a voluntary effort block the effect; but if it isn't blocked by will and effort it is produced without them.

Animal principles of action require intention and will in their operation, but not judgment. The ancient moralists were right to call them 'blind desires'.

Having discussed these two classes, I now come to the third, the **rational** principles of action in man. They have that name because only beings endowed with reason can have them, and every exercise of them requires not only intention and will but also judgment or reason. [That 'or' is Reid's.]

The talent that we call 'reason', by which • sane adult men are distinguished from • brutes, idiots, and infants, has always been thought of—by the learned and the unlearned—as having two tasks: **(i)** to regulate our belief and **(ii)** to regulate our actions and conduct.

(i) Anything we believe we think to be agreeable to reason, which is why we give it our assent. Anything we disbelieve we think to be contrary to reason, which is why we dissent from it. So reason is accepted as being the principle by which our beliefs [see Glossary] and opinions ought to be regulated.

(ii) But reason has been just as universally regarded as a principle by which our actions ought to be regulated.

In all languages 'acting reasonably' is just as standard a phrase as 'judging reasonably'. We immediately approve of a man's conduct when it appears that he had good reason for

what he did. And when we disapprove of an action we think it unreasonable, or contrary to reason.

A way of speaking that is so universal among men—common to the learned and the unlearned in all nations and in all languages—must have a meaning! To suppose that it doesn't is to treat the common sense of mankind with undue contempt!

Taking it that this phrase does have a meaning, let us consider *how* reason might regulate human conduct so that some actions of men are to count as 'reasonable' and others as 'unreasonable'.

I take it for granted that there can be no exercise of reason without judgment, and no abstract and general judgment without some degree of reason.

So if the human constitution includes any principles of action that necessarily imply general judgments, we can call those principles 'rational', to distinguish them from animal principles, which imply desire and will but not judgment.

Every deliberate human action must be done either as • the means to some end to which it is subservient, or as • an end, done for its own sake without concern for anything beyond it.

No-one ever denied that it's a part of reason's job to determine what the proper means are to any end that we desire. But some philosophers, notably Hume, think that it is *no* part of work of reason to determine what ends we ought to pursue, or which of two ends we ought to prefer. This, he thinks, is to be done not by reason but by taste or feeling.

If this is right then reason oughtn't to be called a principle of action. Its job can only be to *serve* the principles of action

by discovering the means of their gratification. Accordingly Hume maintains that reason is no principle of action, and that it is and ought to be the servant of the passions.

I'll try to show that there are some ends of human actions that we couldn't even *think of* unless we had reason; and that as soon as we *do* think of them our constitution makes us respect them, this being not merely •one principle of action among many but •a leading and governing principle, to which all our animal principles are subordinate and to which they ought to be subject.

I shall call them 'rational principles', because •only beings endowed with reason can have them and because •acting from these principles is what has always been meant by acting 'according to reason'.

The ends of human actions that I have in mind are **(i)** What is good for us on the whole, and **(ii)** What appears to be our duty. They are strictly connected, lead to the same conduct, and cooperate with each other; which is why they have commonly been brought under the single label 'reason'. Each can occur without the other; they are really distinct principles of action; so I shall consider them separately.

Chapter 2: Concern for our good on the whole

It won't be denied that when a man comes to years of understanding he is led by his rational nature to have the thought of what is good for him on the whole.

I don't claim to know how early in life this general notion of good enters into the mind. It is one of the most general and abstract notions that we form.

Whatever makes a man happier or more perfect is good, and is an object of desire as soon as we are capable of thinking of it. The contrary is bad, and is an object of aversion.

In the first part of life we have many enjoyments of various kinds, but they are very similar to those of brute animals.

They consist in the exercise of our senses and powers of motion, the gratification of our appetites, and the exercise of our kind affections. These are interspersed with many evils of pain, fear, disappointment, and sympathetically sharing the sufferings of others.

But the goods and evils of this period of life are brief and soon forgotten. The child doesn't think about the past and doesn't care about the future, so that its only measure of good is the present desire, its only measure of evil the present aversion.

Every animal desire has some particular and present object, and doesn't look beyond that to its consequences or to the connections it may have with other things.

The choice is determined by the most attractive present object, the one that arouses the strongest desire, no matter what its consequences will be. The present evil that presses most is avoided even if it is •the road to a greater good to come or •the only way to escape a greater evil. This is how brutes act, and how men must also act until they come to the use of reason.

As we grow up to understanding, we extend our view both forward and backward. We reflect on what is past, and by the lamp of experience we see what will probably happen in time to come. We find that many things that we eagerly desired were too dearly purchased, and that things that are grievous at the time may be good for us in the outcome—such as nauseous medicines.

We learn to observe the connections of things and the consequences of our actions; and by taking an extended view of our existence—past, present, and future—we correct our first notions of good and bad, and form the conception of what is *good or bad on the whole*, which has to be calculated

not from the present animal desire or aversion but from a due consideration of its certain or probable consequences during the whole of our lifetime.

Something which, given all its discoverable connections and consequences, brings more good than bad is what I call ‘good on the whole’.

I see no reason to believe that brute animals have any conception of this good. And obviously man can’t have any conception of it until his reason has developed enough for him to reflect seriously on the past and take into account the future part of his existence.

So we find that the very conception of *what is good or bad for us on the whole* is the offspring of reason, and only beings endowed with reason can have it. And if this conception gives man any principle of action that he didn’t have before, that principle can very properly be called ‘rational’.

What I’m saying is not new; it’s what reason suggested to those who first thought about the philosophy of morals. [Reid then quotes in Latin a passage in which Cicero does indeed ‘express with his usual elegance the substance of what I have said’.]

My next point is this: As soon as we have the conception of what is good or bad for us on the whole we are led by our constitution to seek the good and avoid the bad; and this becomes not only *a principle* of action but *a leading or governing principle* to which all our animal principles ought to be subordinate.

I’m much inclined to think, as Richard Price does, that in thinking beings the desire for what is good and aversion to what is bad is necessarily connected with their thinking nature; and that it’s a *contradiction* to suppose such a being to have the notion of good without the desire for it, or the notion of bad without aversion to it. There may be other necessary connections between ‘thinking or’ understanding

and the best principles of action—connections that our faculties are too weak to see. . . .

In the judgment of all men these preferences—

—preferring •a greater good in the future to •a lesser good right now,

—preferring •a lesser evil right now to •a greater evil (or the loss of a greater good) in the future

—are wise and reasonable. And when a man acts on the basis of a reversal of either of these preferences, everyone will agree that he’s acting foolishly and unreasonably. And it won’t be denied that in ever so many cases in common life our animal principles draw us one way, while a concern for what is good on the whole draws us in the opposite direction. . . . *In every conflict of this kind the rational principle ought to prevail, and the animal one ought to be subordinate*—that is too obvious to admit of a proof, and too obvious to need one!

So what we find, I think, is that to pursue what is good on the whole, and to avoid what is bad on the whole, is a rational principle of action, grounded on our constitution as reasonable creatures. And we find that there’s a good reason why the opposition between

(i) this principle and (ii) our animal principles has been described as the opposition between

•‘reason’ and •‘our passions’ in common speech down the centuries.

It’s not just that (i) operates in a calm and cool manner as reason does, but also it involves real judgment in all its operations. And (ii) the passions are blind desires for some particular object, without judging that—or even *wondering whether*—it will be good or bad for us on the whole.

We also find that the basic maxim of prudence and of all good morals, namely *That the passions ought always to be under the control of reason*, is not only self-evident when rightly understood, but is expressed according to the

common use and propriety of language.

The contrary maxim maintained by Hume can be defended only by a gross and obvious misuse of words. The misuse has two parts. •In order to defend his thesis Hume has to include in 'the passions' the very principle that has always in all languages been called 'reason', and has never been called a 'passion' in any language. •And from the meaning of the word 'reason' he must exclude the most important part of reason—the part by which we discover and pursue what appears to be good on the whole. And thus, including the most important part of reason under 'passion', and making the least important part of reason serve as the whole, he defends his favourite paradox, That reason is and ought to be the servant of the passions.

To judge concerning what is true or false in speculative [see Glossary] points is the job of speculative reason; and to judge concerning what is good or bad for us on the whole is the job of practical reason. There are no degrees of truth and falsity; but there are many •degrees of goodness and badness, and also many •kinds of each; and men are very apt to form erroneous beliefs concerning them—misled by their passions, by the 'authority' of the multitude, and by other causes.

All down the centuries wise men have regarded it as a chief point of wisdom to make a right estimate of the goods and evils of life. They have laboured to discover •the errors of the multitude on this important matter, and to warn others against •them.

The ancient moralists, divided though they were into sects, all agreed that beliefs have an enormous influence on what we commonly count as the goods and evils of life, to make them better or worse.

The Stoics carried this so far as to conclude that they—•goods and evils—•all depend on beliefs. . . .

We see indeed that the same condition of life that makes one man happy makes another miserable, and to a third is perfectly indifferent .i.e. doesn't affect his feelings either way. We see men miserable through life because of pointless fears and anxious desires, all based on nothing but false beliefs. We see men wear themselves out with laborious days and sleepless nights, in pursuit of some goal •that they never attain or •that gives little satisfaction—perhaps gives real disgust—when they attain it.

The evils of life. . . .have very different effects on different men. What sinks one into despair and absolute misery arouses the virtue and magnanimity of another, who bears it as the lot of humanity and as the discipline of a wise and merciful father in heaven. He rises above adversity, which makes him wiser and better and consequently happier.

So it is utterly important in the conduct of life to have sound beliefs regarding good and evil; and surely it is the task of reason to •correct false beliefs and •lead us into ones that are sound and true.

It is true that men's passions and appetites too often draw them to act contrary to their own cool judgment and belief about what is best for them. *Vide meliora proboque, deteriora sequor* is the case in every willful deviation from our true interest and our duty. [That was Latin meaning 'I see the better and approve it; I follow the worse' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*).]

When that happens, the man is self-condemned; he sees that he acted like a brute animal when he ought to have acted like a man. He is convinced that reason ought to have restrained his passion rather than letting it run at full gallop.

When he feels the bad effects of his conduct he blames himself for them, and would be stung with remorse for his folly even if he didn't have to report in to a superior being. He has sinned against himself, and brought on his own head the punishment that his folly deserved.

This shows us that this rational principle of a concern for our good on the whole gives us the conception of •right and •wrong in human conduct, or at least of •wise and •foolish. It produces a kind of self-approval when the passions and appetites are appropriately subjected to it, and a kind of remorse and regret when *it* is subjected to *them*.

In these respects this principle is so similar to the moral principle, i.e. conscience, and so interwoven with it, that both are commonly brought under the name 'reason'. This similarity led many of the ancient philosophers, and some moderns also, to analyse conscience (i.e. the sense of duty) into nothing but a concern for what is good for us on the whole.

When I come to discuss conscience in chapter 6 I'll take the opportunity to show that these are two distinct principles of action, though they lead to the same conduct in life.

Chapter 3: The effect of this principle

The wisest men in all ages have held that this principle of concern for our good on the whole leads, in a duly enlightened man, to the practice of every virtue.

This was acknowledged even by Epicurus; and the best moralists among the ancients derived all the virtues from this principle. For them the whole of morals came down to the question 'What is the greatest good?' or 'What course of conduct is best for us on the whole?'

To find the answer to this question they divided goods into three classes:

- the goods of the body;
- the goods of fortune, or external goods, and
- the goods of the mind, i.e. wisdom and virtue.

Comparing these different classes of goods, they argued

convincingly that the goods of the mind are in many respects superior to those of the body and of fortune, not only as •having more dignity and •being more durable and less exposed to the strokes of fortune, but primarily as •being the only goods that are in our power and depend wholly on our conduct.

Epicurus himself maintained that the wise man can be happy in the tranquility of his mind, even when racked with pain and struggling with adversity.

They—the ancient moralists—rightly held that the goods of fortune, and even those of the body, depend greatly on what one believes, and that when our beliefs about them are duly corrected by reason we'll find them of small value in themselves.

Someone who places his happiness in •things that it's not in his power to attain, or in •things which, once he has attained them, can be snatched away by an illness or a bit of bad luck—how can such a man be happy?

The value we put on things, and our uneasiness from the lack of them, depend on the strength of our desires; correct the desire and the uneasiness ceases.

The fear of the evils of body and of fortune is often a greater evil than the things we fear. Just as a wise man moderates his desires by temperance, so to real or imaginary dangers he opposes the shield of robust moral strength, which raises him above himself and makes him happy and triumphant in situations where others are most miserable.

These oracles of reason led the Stoics to the point of maintaining •that all desires and fears relating to things that aren't under our control ought to be totally eradicated; •that virtue is the *only* good; •that what we call the goods of the body and of fortune are really value-neutral, having no intrinsic goodness in themselves and capable of being good or bad depending on the circumstances; •that our sole

business ought to be to act our part well and to do what is right, without the least concern about things that aren't in our power, which we should be perfectly willing to leave to the care of him who governs the world.

This noble and elevated conception of human wisdom and duty was taught by Socrates, free from the extravagances that the Stoics later added to it. We see it in Plato's *Alcibiades*, from which Juvenal has taken it in his tenth Satire, and adorned it with the graces of poetry. [Reid now quotes 24 lines of Latin poetry, which do indeed express the moral position he has just been expounding and praising, followed by two lines from Horace.]

We can't help admiring the Stoic system of morals, even when we think that at some points it demanded more than human nature can supply. The virtue, the temperance, the robust moral strength of some who sincerely embraced it amidst all the flattery of sovereign power and the luxury of a court will be everlasting monuments to the honour of that system and to the honour of human nature.

The thesis we are addressing here is this:

A proper concern for what is best for us on the whole leads, in an enlightened mind, to the practice of every virtue.

As a basis for evaluating this, let us consider it in terms of what we think best for •those for whom we have the strongest affection and whose good we care about as though it were our own. If we approach it in terms of •ourselves, our passions and appetites will probably bias our judgment, but when we consider •others this bias is removed and we judge impartially.

Well, then, what is it that a wise man would wish as the greatest good for a brother, a son, or a friend?

Is it that he may spend his life in a constant round of the pleasures of sense, and eat lavish meals every day?

Surely not! We wish him to be a man of real virtue and worth. We may wish for him an honourable position in life, but only on condition that he performs honourably in it and earns a good reputation by being useful to his country and to mankind. We would a thousand times rather wish him honourably to undergo the labours of Hercules than to dissolve in pleasure with Sardanapalus.

That is what any man of understanding will wish for the friend whom he loves as he loves his own soul! So those are the things that he judges to be best for his friend on the whole; and if he judges otherwise for himself that's only because his judgment is perverted by animal passions and desires.

* * * * *

Summing up what I have said in these three chapters:

In men who are adult and in their right minds there's a principle of action that has all through the centuries been •called 'reason' and •set in opposition to the animal principles that we call 'passions'. The ultimate object of this principle is what we judge to be good on the whole. This is not the object of any of our animal principles, which are all directed to particular objects without comparing them with others or thinking about whether they are good or bad on the whole.

Without the use of reason we can't even have the *thought* of what-is-good-on-the-whole, so the latter can't be desired or pursued by beings that don't have any degree of reason.

As soon as we have the conception of this object—i.e. of what-is-good-on-the-whole—we are led by our constitution to desire and pursue it. It rightly claims precedence over any competing object of pursuit. In preferring it to any gratification that conflicts with it, or in submitting to any pain or humiliation that it requires, we are acting *according*

to reason; and every such action is approved by oneself and by mankind. Actions that go against this bring shame and self-condemnation in the agent and contempt—as foolish and unreasonable—in the spectator.

Applying this principle correctly to our conduct—i.e. acting in the ways that really *are* best on the whole—requires a broad view of human life and a correct estimate of the

- intrinsic worth and dignity,
- constancy and duration, and
- attainableness

of its goods and evils. It would take a *very* wise man to be able to perceive in every case—or even in every important case—what is best for him on the whole, if he had no other guide for his conduct. Perhaps there *can't* be such a man.

However, according to the best judgment that wise men *have* been able to form, this principle leads to the practice of every virtue. It leads **directly** to the virtues of prudence, temperance and fortitude. And then there are there two facts—

- We are social creatures whose happiness or misery is strongly connected with that of our fellow-men;
- Our constitution includes many benevolent affections the exercise of which makes a large part of our good and enjoyment

—by virtue of which this principle leads us by a different and **more indirect** route to the practice of justice, humanity, and all the social virtues.

It's true that a concern for our own good can't, all by itself, produce any benevolent affection. But if such affections are a part of our constitution, and if the exercise of them provides a chief part of our happiness, a concern for our own good ought to lead us to cultivate and exercise them, because every benevolent affection makes the good of others be our own good.

Chapter 4: Defects of this principle

Having explained the nature of this principle of action, and shown the general line of conduct to which it leads, I shall conclude my account of it by pointing out some of its defects if it is taken, as it has been by some philosophers, to be the *only* regulating principle of human conduct.

On that supposition it **(i)** wouldn't be a sufficiently *plain* rule of conduct; **(ii)** wouldn't it raise the human character to the level of perfection that it is capable of; and **(iii)** wouldn't provide as much real happiness as it does or could when it is joined with another rational principle of action, namely a disinterested respect for *duty*. A brave soldier who exposes himself to danger and death is driven not by a cold calculation of the good and the bad but by a noble and elevated sense of military duty.

(i) To apply this principle correctly one would need a broader view of human life and a sounder judgment of good and evil than most people can ever attain

Juvenal's authority carries weight on this point: 'There are few who can distinguish true blessings from their opposites, putting aside the mists of error' [Reid quotes this in Latin]. For most of mankind their •ignorance collaborates with •the strength of their passions to lead them into error on this most important matter.

Every man in his calm moments wants to know what is best for him on the whole, and wants to do it. But the difficulty of discovering clearly what it is, amidst such a variety of beliefs and the pressure of present desires, tempts men to give up the search and give way to their present inclination.

Though philosophers and moralists have worked hard and laudably to correct mankind's errors on this matter, most people don't know this work, and those who do know

it aren't much influenced by it. . . . It has too little force on their minds to resist the sophistry of the passions. They are apt to think that even if such rules are good in general, there may be exceptions so that what is good for most people may be bad for some because of their particular circumstances.

•Speculative [see Glossary] discoveries gradually spread from the knowledgeable to the ignorant, and flow out over everyone, so that with regard to •them we can hope that the world will go on growing wiser. But errors about what is truly good or bad, after being discovered and refuted in every age, are still prevalent.

Men need a more precise pointer to their duty than a dubious view of distant good. There is reason to believe that •a present sense of duty often has a stronger influence than •a belief about distant good would have on its own. And it can't be doubted that a sense of guilt and demerit is a sharper critic than the bare knowledge that we have mistaken our true interest.

In short: if we had no plainer rule to direct our conduct in life than a concern for our greatest good, most people would be fatally misled, not even knowing the road to it.

(ii) Though a steady pursuit of our own real good will produce, in an enlightened mind, a kind of virtue that is entitled to some degree of approval, it can't produce the noblest kind of virtue that claims our highest love and esteem.

We count someone as a wise man if he is wise for himself; and if he works towards this goal—namely what is good on the whole for him—through difficulties and temptations that lie in his way, his character is far superior to that of anyone who with the same goal is continually drawn off the road to it by his appetites and passions, repeatedly doing things that he knows he will heartily repent •later on•.

Yet this wise man is not someone whom we cordially love

and esteem, because his thoughts and cares are all centered on himself—he exercises even his social affections only with a view to his own good.

Like a cunning merchant, he carries his goods to the best market and watches for every opportunity to sell them at the best price. He is acting well and wisely. But it is for himself. We don't *owe* him anything on account of this behaviour of his. Even when he does good to others he means only to serve himself, so he has no proper claim to their gratitude or affection.

If this is virtue, it is surely not the noblest kind, but rather a low and mercenary type of virtue. It can't. . . attract the esteem and love of others.

Our cordial love and esteem is due only to the man

- whose soul is not contracted within itself, but embraces a larger object,
- who loves virtue not only for her dowry but for her own sake,
- whose benevolence is not selfish, but generous and disinterested,
- who is forgetful of himself and has the common good at heart, not only as a means but as the end,
- who loathes anything base even if he were to gain from it, and loves everything that is right even if he suffers through it.

We regard such a man as a perfect man; compared with him, the man who has no other aim but good for himself is a mean and despicable character.

Disinterested goodness and rightness is the glory of God's nature, without which he might be an object of fear or hope but not of true devotion. And it's the image of this divine attribute in the human character that is the glory of man.

I don't think that human nature will let us rise to the level of serving God and being useful to mankind without

any concern for our own good and happiness. But to serve God and be useful to men *solely* as to obtain good or avoid evil for ourselves is servility, and not the liberal service that true devotion and real virtue require.

(iii) One might think that the best chance for happiness goes to the man whose only goal in his deliberate actions is his own good; but a little consideration will convince us that this is not so.

A concern for our own good is not a principle that provides any enjoyment just in itself. On the contrary, it is apt to fill the mind with fear, care, and anxiety. And these concomitants of this principle often give pain and uneasiness that outweigh the good they have in view.

Let us compare the present happiness of two imaginary characters—here given the names ‘One’ and ‘Two’:

- One has no other ultimate goal in his deliberate actions except his own good. He has no concern for virtue or duty except as means to that end.
- Two does care about his own good, but he has another ultimate goal that is perfectly consistent with that, namely a disinterested •love of virtue for its own sake, or a •concern to duty as an end.

I want to give all possible advantage to the selfish principle, so I shall suppose that One, who is driven solely by it, is enlightened enough to see that it’s in his interests to live soberly, righteously, and piously in the world, so that his actual behaviour isn’t different from that of Two, who acts in a great measure—or anyway in some measure—from a sense of duty and rightness.

I put it like that so that these two persons may differ not in what they do but in the motive from which they do it; and I don’t think there can be any doubt that Two, the man who acts from the noblest and most generous motive, will have more happiness in his conduct.

One labours only for hire, without any love for the work. Two loves the work, and thinks it the noblest and most honourable work he could do. To One the humiliation and self-denial that the course of virtue requires is a grievous task, which he performs only through necessity. To Two it is victory and triumph in the most honourable warfare.

And there’s another point. Wise men have concluded that virtue is the only road to happiness, but this conclusion is based mainly on men’s the natural respect for virtue, and for the good or happiness that is intrinsic to it and arises from the love of it. If we suppose a man like One, who is entirely without this principle and regards virtue *only* as a means to another end, there’s no reason to think he will ever see it as the road to happiness; instead, he’ll wander for ever seeking happiness where it isn’t to be found.

The road of duty is so plain that the man who seeks it with an upright heart can’t stray from it much. But the road to happiness, if that is taken to be the only goal our nature leads us to seek, will be found dark and intricate, full of snares and dangers, and therefore not to be trodden without fear, care, and perplexity. [Note ‘of duty’, ‘to happiness; that difference is Reid’s, not an artifact of this version.]

So the happy man is not the one whose happiness is his only care, but the one who is perfectly willing to leave the care of his happiness to God, while he eagerly pursues the road of his duty.

This gives to his mind an elevation that is real happiness. Instead of care, fear, anxiety, and disappointment, it brings joy and triumph. It enhances the pleasure of every good he enjoys, and brings good out of evil. . . .

And so we find, I think, that although a concern for our ·individual· good on the whole is a rational principle in man, if it were the *only* regulating principle of our conduct it would be a more uncertain rule, giving much less perfection

to the human character and much less happiness than it does when joined with another rational principle, namely a concern for duty.

Chapter 5: The notion of duty, rectitude, moral obligation

A being that had only the animal principles of action might be capable of being •trained for certain purposes by discipline, as we see many brute animals are, but he would be utterly incapable of being •governed by law.

To be subject to law, a being must have the conception of *a general rule of conduct*, and he can't have that unless he has some degree of reason. He must also have a sufficient inducement to obey the law even when his strongest animal desires draw him in a different direction.

This inducement may be a sense of interest, or a sense of duty, or both working together.

These are the only principles I can think of that can *reasonably* induce a man to regulate all his actions according to a certain general rule or law. So it's right to call them 'the rational principles of action', since they can't occur except in a being endowed with reason, and since it is only through them that man is capable either of political or of moral government.

Without them human life would be like a ship at sea with no crew, left to be carried by winds and tides as they happen. It belongs to the rational part of our nature to intend a certain port as the end of life's voyage, and to take the advantage of winds and tides when they are favourable and to bear up against them when they are unfavourable. [An elegant pun. Colloquially, to 'bear up' under something is to put up with it bravely, strongly; and as a nautical technical term, to 'bear up' is to deal in a certain way with an opposing wind.]

Self-interest may induce us to do this when a suitable reward is offered. But the constitution of man contains a nobler principle, yielding a rule of conduct that is often clearer and more certain than anything mere self-interest would provide. It's a principle without which man wouldn't be a moral agent.

A man is prudent when he consults his real interest, but he can't be virtuous if he has no concern for duty.

I shall now discuss this concern for duty as a rational principle of action in man—the only principle that makes him capable either of virtue or vice.

I start with some observations about the general notion of •duty and its contrary, or of •right and wrong in human conduct, and then consider how we come to judge and decide of certain things in human conduct that they are right and of others that they are wrong.

With regard to the notion or conception of duty, I take it to be too simple to admit of a logical definition.

[A paradigm 'logical definition' would be

'square' means 'plane & four-sided & closed & equal-sided & rectangular';

what this definition does is to open up the *complexity* of the meaning of 'square'. A meaning that doesn't have that kind of complexity is 'simple' and therefore not definable in that manner.]

We can define it only by synonymous words or phrases, or by properties that necessarily go with it, as when we say that it is •what we ought to do, •what is fair and honest, •what is approvable, •what every man claims is the rule of his conduct, •what all men praise, and •what is in itself praiseworthy whether or not anyone actually praises it.

The notion of duty can't be analysed in terms of the notion of •self-interest or what is best for our happiness.

You'll agree with this if you attend to your own conceptions, and the language of all mankind shows it. When I say

'This is in my interests' I mean one thing; when I say 'This is my duty' I mean something different. A single course of action may. . . be both my duty and in my interests, but the conceptions are very different. Both are reasonable motives to action but they are quite distinct in their nature.

I presume it will be granted that in every man of real worth there is a principle of honour, a concern for what is honourable or dishonourable, that is quite distinct from a concern for his interests. For a man to disregard his interests is •folly, but to do what is dishonourable is •baseness. The first may move our pity, or in some cases our contempt, but the second provokes our indignation.

These two principles are different in their nature, and can't be analysed as different versions of some one principle. And the principle of honour is evidently superior in dignity to the principle of •self-interest. If a man explained that his •self-interest if what led him to do something that he admitted was dishonourable, no-one would accept that he was a man of honour; but to sacrifice •self-interest to honour never costs a blush.

It will also be agreed by every man of honour that this principle doesn't come down to a concern for our reputation among men; for if that were right, the man of honour wouldn't deserve to be trusted in the dark. He would have no difficulty in lying, cheating or playing the coward when he had no fear of being caught at it.

So I take it for granted that every man of real honour feels a revulsion from certain actions because they are in themselves *base*, and feels an obligation towards certain other actions because they are in themselves what honour requires, with this having nothing to do with any consideration of •self-interest or reputation.

This is an immediate moral obligation. This principle of honour that is accepted by all men who claim •to have

decency of character is the same thing, under another name, as what we call a regard for duty, for rectitude, for rightness of conduct. It's a moral obligation that obliges a man to do certain things because they are right, and not to do other things because they are wrong.

Ask the man of honour 'Why do you think you are obliged to pay a debt of honour?' The very question shocks him. To suppose that he needs any inducement to do it other than the principle of honour is to suppose that he has no honour, no worth, and deserves no esteem.

So there is in man a principle that gives him a consciousness of worth when he acts according to it, and a sense of demerit when he acts contrary to it.

Because of all the differences of education, of fashion, of prejudices, and of habits, men may differ greatly in their beliefs about the range of this principle—about *what* it commands and *what* it forbids; but the *concept* of it. . . is the same in everyone: it is •the concept of *that which gives a man real worth and is the object of moral approval*.

Men of rank call it 'honour', and too often confine it to certain virtues that are thought most essential to their rank. The vulgar call it 'honesty', 'probity', 'virtue', 'conscience'. Philosophers have given it the names 'the moral sense', 'the moral faculty', 'rectitude'.

It's obvious that this principle is to be found in **all** men who have grown up to years of understanding and reflection. The words that express it, the names of the virtues that it commands and vices that it forbids, the 'ought' and 'ought not' that express its dictates, are an essential part of **every** language. The natural affections of

- respect for worthy characters,
- resentment of injuries,
- gratitude for favours, and
- indignation against the worthless

are parts of the human constitution that presuppose a right and a wrong in conduct. Many transactions that are found necessary in the most primitive societies proceed on the same supposition. In all testimony, in all promises, and in all contracts, there is necessarily implied •a moral obligation on one party and in the other •a trust based on this obligation.

The variety among people's beliefs on points of morality is, I think, not •greater but •much less than on speculative [see Glossary] points; and facts about the common causes of error enable us to explain the moral variety as easily as the speculative variety; so that there being a real distinction between true and false in matters of speculation is no more obvious than there being a real distinction between right and wrong in human conduct.

Hume's authority, if there were any need for it, carries weight in this matter, because he wasn't given to taking vulgar beliefs lightly. He says:

'Those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions can be counted among the dishonest disputants who really don't believe the opinions they defend, but engage in the controversy from. . . a spirit of opposition or from a desire to show wit and ingenuity superior to the rest of mankind. It's not conceivable that any human creature could ever seriously believe that all characters and actions were equally entitled to the respect and affection of everyone.

'However insensible [= 'numb in his feelings'] a man is, he must often be touched with the images of right and wrong; however obstinate his prejudices, he must observe that others are apt to have similar impressions. So the only way of convincing an antagonist of this kind is to leave him to himself. When he finds that nobody keeps up the controversy with him, it's likely that he will eventually, unprompted, from mere

weariness, come over to the side of common sense and reason.'

What we call 'right' and 'honourable' in human conduct was called *honestum* by the ancients. Cicero explained it 'what we correctly maintain merits praise, even if no-one praises it' [Reid gives this in Latin]. All the ancient sects except the Epicureans distinguished the *honestum* from the *utile* [= 'useful'], as we distinguish what is a man's duty from what is in his interests. [Reid adds a paragraph which we can safely neglect; it's about the Latin term *officium*, which he says is usually mistranslated.]

The most ancient philosophical system concerning the principles of action in the human mind, and (I think) the one that best fits the facts, is the system we find in some fragments by the ancient Pythagoreans. It was taken over by Plato, and explained in some of his dialogues.

According to this system, the soul has a leading principle which, like the supreme power in a commonwealth, has authority and right to govern. They called this leading principle 'reason'. It is what distinguishes adult humans from brute animals, idiots and infants. The subordinate principles, which are under the authority of the leading principle, are our passions and appetites, which we share with the brute animals.

Cicero adopts this system, and expresses it well in few words [Reid gives the Latin]:

'Now we find that the essential activity of the spirit is twofold: one force is appetite. . . ., which impels a man this way and that; the other is reason, which teaches and explains what should be done and what should be left undone. The result is that reason commands, appetite obeys.'

This division of our active principles can hardly count as a discovery of philosophy, because people—even the

unlearned—have always had it. Ordinary human common sense seems to dictate it.

What I want to point out now regarding this common division of our active powers is that the leading principle, the one called ‘reason’, includes both a concern for what is right and honourable and a concern for our happiness on the whole.

Although these are *two* principles of action, it’s very natural to bring them under *one* name, because •both are leading principles, •both presuppose the use of reason, and when they are rightly understood •they lead to the same course of life. They are like two fountains whose streams unite and run in the same channel. . . .

If we examine the abstract notion of *duty* or *moral obligation*, it appears not to be a •quality of the action considered by itself or of the agent considered in himself, but a certain •relation between the agent and the action.

When we say ‘He ought to do x’, the ‘ought’ that expresses the moral obligation relates •to the person who ought and •to the action that he ought to do. Those two correlates are essential to every moral obligation; if you take away either, it has no existence. Where is moral obligation located among the categories? In the category of *relation*.

There are many relations of which we have very clear concepts without being able to define them logically. *Equality* and *proportion* are relations between quantities that everyone understands but no-one can define.

Moral obligation is a relation of its own kind, which every man understands though it may be too simple to admit of logical definition. [These days we would say that in Latin: it’s a relation that is *sui generis*; but the Latin phrase hadn’t entered English at the time when Reid wrote.] Like all other relations, it can be changed or annihilated by a change in either of the related things—the agent and the action.

I’ll sketch the circumstances in the action and the agent that are necessary to constitute •moral obligation. Everyone agrees about these, which shows that everyone has the same notion of •it.

With regard to the action, it must be a voluntary action. . . .of the person who has the obligation, and not of someone else. A man can’t be morally obliged to be six feet tall; and I can’t be under a moral obligation that you should do such-and-such. . . .

I need hardly mention that a person can be under a moral obligation only to do things that are within the sphere of his natural power.

Obviously, an inanimate thing can’t have a moral obligation. To speak of a stone or a tree as morally obliged is ridiculous, because it contradicts everyone’s notion of moral obligation.

The person with the obligation must have •understanding and •will and some degree of •active power. As well as the natural faculty of understanding he must have the means of knowing that he has this obligation. If he *can’t* know this, then he isn’t under any moral obligation.

What the agent believes when he performs the action gives it its moral status. If he does a materially good action without believing that it is good—doing it for some other reason—then considered as his action it’s not good. And if he does it while believing that it is bad, then it is a bad action of his.

Thus, if a man gives his neighbour a drink that he believes will poison him but which turns out to do him good, the man counts morally as a poisoner, not a benefactor. . . .

Chapter 6: The sense of duty

Our next topic is: how we learn to judge and determine that this is right and that is wrong.

The abstract notion of moral good and evil would be no use in directing our lives if we weren't able to apply it to particular actions and discover what is morally good and what is morally bad.

Some philosophers, with whom I agree, attribute this to a basic human power or faculty which they call 'the moral sense', 'the moral faculty', 'conscience'. Others think that our moral sentiments can be explained without supposing any basic sense or faculty specially for that purpose; and they go into very different systems to account for them.

I shan't at present say anything about the latter systems, because the thesis that I mentioned first seems to me to be the truth, namely that by a basic power of the mind, when we come to years of understanding and reflection, we not only •have the notions of right and wrong in conduct but •perceive certain things to be right and others to be wrong.

The label 'moral sense', though more frequently given to conscience since Shaftesbury and Hutcheson wrote, is not new. The *sensus recti et honesti* [Latin = 'sense of right and duty'] is a fairly common phrase among the ancients, and 'the sense of duty' is common enough with us.

No doubt it came to be called a 'sense' because it is thought to have some analogy to the external senses. And if we think clearly about the work of the external senses we'll have no trouble seeing the analogy. I see no reason to take offence, as some have done, at the label 'the moral sense'.

Why have some philosophers taken offence at this name? It seems to be because philosophers have degraded the ·external· senses too much, depriving them of the most important part of their work.

We are taught that all we get through the senses are certain ideas that we couldn't have otherwise. The senses are represented as powers by which we •have sensations and ideas, not as powers by which we •judge.

This *very lame* notion of the senses contradicts what nature and careful reflection teach concerning them.

A man who has totally lost the sense of seeing may still have very distinct notions of the various colours, but he can't *judge* concerning colours because he has lost the sense that he needs to be able to do that. By my eyes I don't just have the ideas of a square and a circle but I *perceive* that this surface is square and that one circular.

By my ears I don't just have the idea of sounds that are loud or soft, sharp or mellow, but I immediately *perceive* and *judge* that this sound is loud and that soft, that this is sharp and that mellow, and two or more sounds at the same time I *perceive* to be concordant or discordant.

These are **judgments of the senses**. That's what they have always been called, and how they have always been classified, by people whose minds are not tainted by philosophical theories. They are nature's immediate testimony through our senses; and we are so constituted by nature that we *must* accept their testimony simply because it is given to us by our senses.

Sceptics try in vain to overturn this evidence by metaphysical reasoning. Even if we can't answer their arguments, we still believe our senses and base our most important concerns on their testimony.

If this is the right way to think about our external senses, as I believe it is, there's nothing wrong with calling our moral faculty 'the moral sense'. It has a dignity that certainly puts it above every other power of the mind; but it resembles the external senses in the following ways.

(a) By our external senses we have not only the basic conceptions of the various qualities of bodies, but also the basic judgments that this body is spherical, that that one is blue, and so on. And by our moral faculty we have not only the basic conceptions of right and wrong in conduct of merit and demerit in characters, but also the basic judgments that this action was right and that one wrong, that this character has worth and that one has demerit.

(b) The testimony of our moral faculty, like that of the external senses, is the testimony of nature, and we have the same reason to rely on it.

(c) The truths immediately testified by the external senses are the first principles from which we reason regarding the material world, and from which all our knowledge of it is deduced. The truths immediately testified by our moral faculty are the first principles of all moral reasoning, from which all our knowledge of our duty must be deduced.

By 'moral reasoning' I mean: all reasoning that is brought to prove that some item of conduct is •right and deserving of moral approval, or that it is •wrong, or that it is •indifferent, i.e. in itself neither morally good nor morally bad.

I think that anything we can properly call a 'moral judgments' will amount to one or other of these, because every human action is either good or bad or indifferent.

I know the term 'moral reasoning' is often used by good writers in a broader sense in which it covers anything relating to intentional human action. But the reasoning I am now discussing is of a special kind that separates it from all others, so it ought to have a separate name of its own; and I take the liberty of limiting the name 'moral reasoning' to this kind. . . .

All reasoning must be based on first principles. This holds for moral reasoning as for all the other kinds. So morals have the same need that every other science [see Glossary] has for

first or self-evident principles on which all moral reasoning is based. . . . From such self-evident principles, conclusions can be drawn synthetically with regard to the moral conduct of life; and particular duties or virtues can be traced back to such principles analytically. [This use of those two puzzling adverbs seems not to connect with any of the meanings that 'analytic' and 'synthetic' standardly had in early modern times.] But trying to establish any conclusion in morals without having such principles would be like trying to build a castle in the air.

I shall illustrate this with a couple of examples.

(i) It is a first principle in morals that *we ought not to do to anyone else something that we would think it wrong for anyone to do to us in similar circumstances*. If a man can't perceive this in his cool moments when he reflects seriously, he •isn't a moral agent and •can't be convinced of it by reasoning.

How can you start reasoning with such a man? You might convince him by reasoning that it's in his interests to conform to this rule, but that isn't convincing him that it is his duty. To reason about justice with a man who sees nothing to be just or unjust, or about benevolence with a man who doesn't see in benevolence anything to make it preferable to malice, is like reasoning with a blind man about colour or with a deaf man about sound.

(ii) A question in morals that can be reasoned about is this: Is it the case that by the law of nature a man ought to have only one wife?

We reason about this by balancing the advantages and disadvantages to the family, and to society in general, that naturally flow from monogamy and from polygamy. If it can be shown that the advantages are greatly on the side of monogamy, we think that that settles it.

But if a man doesn't perceive that he ought to have a concern for the good of society and of his wife and children,

the reasoning can't have any effect on him because he denies the first principle on which it is based..

Or we might instead reason for monogamy from the intention of nature, revealed by the proportion of males and of females that are born—a proportion that corresponds perfectly with monogamy but not with polygamy. This argument can't carry weight with a man who doesn't perceive that he ought to respect nature's intentions.

Thus we'll find that all moral reasonings rely on one or more first principles of morals whose truth is perceived immediately—without reasoning—by all men who have reached years of understanding.

And this holds for every branch of human knowledge that deserves to be called a 'science' [see Glossary]. Each science must have its own first principles, by which the whole superstructure is supported.

The first principles of all the sciences must be the *immediate* dictates of our natural faculties—we can't possibly have any other evidence of their truth. And in different sciences the faculties that dictate their first principles are different.

Discoveries that have been made in **astronomy** and in **optics** are so wonderful that people who aren't learned in these sciences can hardly believe that mere human beings *could* discover such things. Yet their first principles come from the testimony of that little organ, the human eye. If we disbelieve its report, the whole of those two noble scientific structures falls to pieces. . . .

The principles of **music** all depend on the testimony of the ear. The principles of natural philosophy [here = '**physics**'] depend on facts attested by the senses. The principles of **mathematics** depend on the necessary relations of quantities considered abstractly—e.g. the proposition that equal quantities added to equal quantities make equal sums—these being necessary relations that are immediately

perceived by the understanding.

The science of **politics** borrows its principles from what we know by experience of the character and conduct of man. We consider not what he ought to be, but what he is; and from that we draw conclusions about how he will behave in various situations and circumstances. From such principles we reason concerning the causes and effects of different forms of government, laws, customs, and manners. If men were either more perfect or more imperfect than they are, better or worse creatures than they are, politics would be a different science from what it is.

The first principles of **morals** are the immediate dictates of the moral faculty. What they show us is not what man is, but what he ought to be. Whatever is immediately perceived to be just, honest, and honourable in human conduct carries moral obligation along with it, and the contrary carries demerit and blame; and from the moral obligations that are immediately perceived all other moral obligations must be deduced by reasoning.

If you want to know the colour of an object, you must consult your eyes in a good light when there's no medium or nearby objects that might give it a false tinge. But if you consult any of your other faculties about this you'll be wasting your time.

Similarly, if you want to make judgments relating to the first principles of morals, you must consult your conscience, i.e. your moral faculty, at a time when you are calm and dispassionate, not biased by self-interest, affection, or fashion.

Just as we rely on the clear and distinct testimony of our eyes concerning the colours and shapes of the bodies in our vicinity, we have the same reason to rely confidently on the clear and unbiased testimony of our conscience concerning what we ought or ought not to do. In many

cases, moral worth and demerit are detected just as clearly by our conscience as shape and colour are by our eyes.

The faculties that nature has given us are the only engines we can use to find out the truth. We can't indeed prove that those faculties are trustworthy; for that we would need God to give us new faculties to sit in judgment on the old. But we *have to* trust them—that's something we are born with.

Every man in his right mind believes his eyes, his ears, and his other senses. He believes his consciousness with regard to his own thoughts and purposes, his memory with regard to what is past, his understanding with regard to abstract relations of things, and his taste with regard to what is elegant and beautiful. And he has the same reason to believe the clear and unbiased dictates of his conscience with regard to what is honourable and what is base—the same •reason for believing and the same •necessity of believing. . . .

Chapter 7: Moral approval and disapproval

The judgments that we form in speculative matters are dry and unaffecting, but our moral judgments are not like that; because of their nature, they are necessarily accompanied by affections and feelings, and these are the topic we now come to.

I have remarked that every human action, considered from a moral point of view, appears to us as good or bad or indifferent. When we judge an action to be indifferent—neither good nor bad—though this is a moral judgment it produces no affection or feeling, any more than our judgments in speculative matters do.

But we approve of good actions, and disapprove of bad ones; and this approval and disapproval turns out on analysis to include not only •a moral judgment on the action but also •some affection—favourable or unfavourable—towards

the agent, and •some feeling in ourselves.

Nothing is more evident than this: Moral worth, even in a stranger with whom we don't have the least connection, never fails to produce some degree of esteem mixed with good will.

The esteem that we have for a man on account of his moral worth is different from esteem based on his intellectual accomplishments, his birth, fortune, or his connection with us.

Moral worth, when it doesn't have a setting of •notable abilities and external advantages, is like a diamond in the mine—rough and unpolished, and perhaps crusted over with some baser material that takes away its lustre.

But when it is accompanied by •those advantages, it is like a diamond that has been cut, polished, and given a setting. Then its lustre attracts every eye. Yet these things that add so much to its appearance don't add much to its real value.

[Reid now has a small intensely compressed paragraph, the gist of which is as follows. When we encounter conduct that has real moral worth, two things happen: **(i)** we feel an 'esteem and benevolent regard' towards it, this being a direct upshot of our natural constitution; and **(ii)** we perceive that this is the right feeling to have towards that conduct—it's something that is 'really and properly due to it'. (Reid doesn't say here that **(i)** is a feeling, but he does so in the next paragraph.) And similarly, on the other side of the moral ledger, unworthy conduct produces in us **(i)** an adverse feeling or attitude and **(ii)** a negative moral judgment.]

No judgment of the human heart is clearer or more irresistible than this: *Esteem and regard are really due to good conduct, and the contrary to base and unworthy conduct.* And we can't conceive of a greater depravity in a human heart than •to see and acknowledge worth without feeling

[Reid's word] any respect for it, or •to see and acknowledge the greatest worthlessness without any degree of dislike and indignation.

Reid's next sentence: The esteem that is due to worthy conduct, is not lessened when a man is conscious of it in himself.

which may mean: x's esteem for y's worthy conduct isn't lessened by y's being aware of his own worthiness.

or it may mean: x's esteem for y's worthy conduct isn't lessened by x's being aware that *he* is worthy in the same way.

Nor can he help having some esteem for himself when he is conscious of those qualities for which he most highly esteems others.

Self-esteem based on external advantages or the gifts of fortune is *pride*. When it is based on an empty fantasy of having inward worth that we really don't possess, it is *arrogance* and *self-deceit*. But when a man—without thinking more highly of himself than he ought—•is conscious of the integrity of heart and uprightness of conduct that he most highly esteems in others, and •values himself appropriately because of this, this might be called the *pride of virtue*, but there's nothing wrong with it. It is a noble and magnanimous disposition without which there can't be any steady virtue.

A man who values his own character won't be willing to do anything that is unworthy of it. The language of his heart will be like that of Job: 'My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me while I live.' [Job 27:6]

A good man owes much to the world's view of his character, and will be concerned to defend it against unjust accusations. But he owes much more to his own view of his own character. For if his heart doesn't condemn him, he

puts his trust in God; and he can bear the lash of tongues more easily than the reproach of his own mind.

There's much talk (most of it wrong) about our 'sense of honour'. Properly understood, a worthy man's 'sense of honour' is simply the disgust he feels at the thought of doing anything dishonourable, even if it would never be known or suspected.

A good man will have a much greater abhorrence against doing a bad action than against being wrongly accused of having done it. The false accusation last may inflict a wound on his reputation, but the bad action would inflict a wound on his conscience—a wound that would be difficult to heal and more painful to endure.

On the other side, now, let us consider how we are affected by disapproval of the conduct of others or of our own conduct.

Everything that we disapprove of in the conduct of a man lessens our esteem for him. There are indeed *brilliant faults* that have a mixture of good and bad in them, and these may have one appearance when viewed from one side and a different appearance when viewed from the other.

In such faults of our friends, and much more of ourselves, we're apt to view them on their better side; we view from the worse side mixed faults in people we dislike or disapprove of.

This partiality in taking things by the better or the worse handle is the chief cause of wrong judgment about the character of others, and of self-deception about our own.

But when we dismantle a complex action and view every part separately, bad conduct of every kind lessens our esteem for a man as much as good conduct increases it. Bad conduct is apt to turn

- love into indifference,
- indifference into contempt, and
- contempt into aversion and abhorrence.

[The position of 'contempt' on this descending scale may seem odd. It seems that Reid is **here** using 'contempt' in a now-obsolete sense in which having 'contempt' for something is regarding it as insignificant, negligible—e.g. a brave man's 'contempt for danger'. Every **other** use of 'contempt' in this work uses it in our sense.]

When a man is conscious of immoral conduct in himself, it lessens his self-esteem. It depresses and humbles his spirit, and makes his face fall. He might even punish himself for his misbehaviour if that would wipe out the stain. There's a sense of dishonour and worthlessness arising from guilt, as well as a sense of honour and worth arising from worthy conduct. And this would be the case even if the man could conceal his guilt from all the world.

Our next topic is the agreeable or uneasy [see Glossary] feelings in the breast of the spectator or judge which naturally accompany moral approval and disapproval.

Every affection is accompanied by some agreeable or uneasy emotion. To repeat myself: all the benevolent affections give pleasure, and the contrary ones give some degree of pain.

When we contemplate a noble character—even one in ancient history, or in fiction—it gives a lively and pleasant emotion to the spirits, like a beautiful object. It warms the heart, and invigorates the whole person. Like sunbeams, it enlivens the face of nature and diffuses heat and light all around.

We feel a sympathy [see Glossary] with every noble and worthy character that is represented to us. We rejoice in his prosperity, we are afflicted in his distress. We even catch some sparks of the heavenly fire that animated his conduct, and feel the glow of his virtue and magnanimity.

This sympathy is a necessary effect of our judgment on his conduct, and of the approval and esteem due to it; for real sympathy is always an effect of some benevolent affection,

such as esteem, love, pity or humanity.

When the person that we approve of is connected with us by acquaintance, friendship or blood, the pleasure we get from his conduct is greatly increased. We claim some ownership of his worth, and are apt to value *ourselves* on account of it. This shows a stronger degree of sympathy, which gathers strength from every social tie.

But the highest pleasure of all comes from being conscious of good conduct in ourselves. The Bible calls this the testimony of a good conscience [see 2 *Corinthians* 1:12]; and it is represented not only in the sacred writings but in the writings of all moralists of every age and sect as the purest, noblest and most valuable of all human enjoyments.

If we wanted to select some one kind of enjoyment as the chief happiness of this life, . . . our preference would surely have to go to the enjoyment that comes from •the consciousness of integrity and •a steadily continuing attempt to act as well as we can in our situation. This ranks above all other enjoyments the human mind is capable of on account of

- its dignity,
- the intensity of the happiness it provides,
- its stability and duration,
- its being in our power, and
- its being proof against all accidents of time and fortune.

And on the other side, the view of a vicious character, like that of an ugly object, is disagreeable. It gives disgust and abhorrence.

If the unworthy person is closely connected with us, we have a very painful sympathy [see Glossary] indeed. We blush even for the smaller faults of people we're connected with, and feel ourselves (as it were) dishonoured by their bad conduct.

But when any person connected with us is very depraved, we are deeply humbled and depressed by this. Our sympathetic feeling has some resemblance to that of guilt, although there isn't any actual guilt in it. We are ashamed to see our acquaintance; we would like to disclaim all connection with the guilty person. We want to tear him from our hearts and blot him out of our memories.

Time, however, alleviates those sympathetic sorrows that arise from bad behaviour in our friends and acquaintances, if we are conscious that we had no share in their guilt.

God in his wisdom constituted us in this way so that this sympathetic distress would give us a deeper concern for our friends' good behaviour as well as for their good fortune; so that friendship, relatedness and every social tie should be helpful to virtue and unfavourable to vice.

It is very common even in vicious [see Glossary] parents to be deeply afflicted when their children start behaving in ways in which the parents themselves used to behave, setting their offspring a terrible example.

If bad conduct in people we care about is uneasy and painful to us, it is so much more when we are conscious of it in ourselves. This uneasy feeling has a name in all languages. We call it 'remorse'.

It has been described in such frightful colours by writers, sacred and secular, of every age and of every belief-system, even by Epicureans, that I shan't try to describe it.

It's because of the unpleasantness of this feeling that bad men try so hard to get rid of it, and to do everything they can to hide, even from themselves, the wickedness of their conduct. That's the source of

- all the arts of self-deception by which men put gloss on their crimes or try to wash out the stain of guilt; and of

- the various methods of expiation [= 'atonement', 'making good'] that superstition has invented to soothe the conscience of the criminal. . . .; and of
- the efforts that many men with bad hearts make to excel in some amiable quality that may be a kind of counterweight to their vices—in the opinion of others and of themselves.

No man can bear the thought of being absolutely without any worth. His awareness of this would make him detest himself, hate the light of the sun, and fly if possible out of existence.

I have tried to describe the natural operations of the principle of action in man that we call the 'moral sense', the 'moral faculty', 'conscience'. All we know of our natural faculties is through their operations within us. We are conscious of their operations in our own minds, and we see the signs of their operations in the minds of others. The operations of this faculty appear to be

- judging ultimately what is right, what is wrong, and what is indifferent in the conduct of moral agents;
- approving of good conduct and disapproving of bad in consequence of that judgment, and
- the agreeable emotions that come with obedience to its dictates and the disagreeable ones that come with disobedience.

The Supreme Being, who has given us eyes to see what may be useful and what harmful to our natural life, has also given us this inner light to direct our moral conduct.

Moral conduct is the business of every man; and therefore the knowledge of it ought to be within everyone's reach.

Epicurus •reasoned acutely and soundly to show that a concern for our present happiness should lead us to the practice of temperance, justice and humanity. But most people can't follow long trains of •reasoning. The loud voice

of the passions drowns the still, calm voice of reasoning.

Conscience commands and forbids with more authority than reasoning does, and in the most ordinary and most important questions of conduct it does so without the labour of reasoning. Its voice is heard by everyone, and you can't disregard it and get away with it.

The sense of guilt puts a man at odds with himself. He sees that he is what he ought not to be. He has fallen from the dignity of his nature, and has sold his real worth for a thing of no value. He is conscious of demerit, and can't avoid the dread of meeting with its reward [here = 'punishment'].

On the other side, someone who pays a sacred regard to the dictates of his conscience can't fail to get a present reward—one proportioned to the effort required for him to do his duty.

The man who confronts strong temptation and by a noble effort maintains his integrity is the happiest man on earth. The more severe his conflict has been, the greater is his triumph. The consciousness of inner worth gives strength to his heart, and makes his face shine. Tempests may beat and floods roar, but he stands firm as a rock in the joy of a good conscience and confidence in God's approval. . . .

Chapter 8: Conscience

I shall now conclude this Essay with five observations about this power of the mind that we call 'conscience', hoping to make its nature better understood.

1. Like all our other powers, conscience comes to maturity very gradually, and can be much aided in its strength and vigour by proper culture [see Glossary].

All the human faculties have their infancy and their state of maturity.

The faculties that we have in common with the brutes appear first, and have the quickest growth. In the first period of life, children can't distinguish right from wrong in human conduct; nor can they engage in abstract reasoning in matters of science. Their judgment of moral conduct, as well as their judgment of truth, grows slowly and gradually, like grass.

In plants, first the blade or the leaf appears, then the flower, and last of all the fruit—the noblest of the three, and the one for which the others were produced. These follow along a regular order. They need moisture and heat and air and shelter to bring them to maturity, and can be much improved by culture. According to the variations in soil, season and culture, some plants are brought to much greater perfection than others of the same species. But no variation of culture or season or soil can make grapes grow from thorns, or figs from thistles.

We can see a similar development in the faculties of the mind; for there is a wonderful similarity among all the works of God, from the least right through to the greatest.

The faculties of man unfold themselves in a certain order that was set by the great Creator. In their gradual development they may be greatly helped or hindered, improved or spoiled, by education, instruction, example, exercise, and by the society and conversation of men. All these things, like soil and culture in plants, can make big changes for the better or for the worse.

But these means can't produce any new faculties, or any except what were initially planted in the human mind by the Author of nature. And what is common to the whole species across all the varieties of instruction and education, of improvement and degeneracy, is the work of God and not the operation of second causes [see Glossary].

Conscience, i.e. the faculty of distinguishing right conduct from wrong, is in this category of 'common to the whole species', because it does and always did appear in mature men in all nations and at all times.

The seeds (so to speak) of moral discernment are planted in our mind by God. They grow up in their proper season, and are at first tender and delicate, and easily bent. Their progress depends very much on their being appropriately cultivated and properly exercised.

That's how it is with the power of reasoning, which everyone agrees is one of mankind's most eminent natural faculties. It doesn't show up in infancy. It grows up very gradually as we grow to maturity. But its strength and vigour depend so much on its being properly cultivated and exercised that we see many individuals—indeed, many *nations!*—in which it is hardly visible.

Our ability to think closely and sharply is not naturally strong and vigorous enough to make us secure us from errors in speculation [see Glossary]. On the contrary, a great part of mankind in every century has been •sunk in gross ignorance of things that are obvious to the more enlightened, and •chained down by errors and false notions that a duly improved human understanding could easily throw off.

It would be extremely absurd to infer from the errors and ignorance of mankind that there's no such thing as truth, or that man has no natural faculty of discerning it and distinguishing it from error.

Similarly, our moral discernment of what we ought to do and what we ought not to do is not naturally strong and vigorous enough to make us secure us from very gross mistakes with regard to our duty.

In matters of conduct, as well as in matters of speculation, we are liable to be misled by prejudices of upbringing or by wrong instruction. But in matters of conduct we are *also*

very liable to have our judgment twisted by our appetites and passions, by fashion, and by the contagion of evil example.

So we mustn't think that because man has a natural power to distinguish what is right from what is wrong he has no need of instruction; that this power doesn't need cultivation and improvement; that he can safely rely on the suggestions of his mind, or on beliefs that he has come by he doesn't know how!

What would we think of a man who, because he has a natural power to move all his limbs, concludes that he doesn't need lessons in dancing, fencing, riding or swimming? All these exercises are performed by the power of moving our limbs that have by nature; but they'll be performed very awkwardly and imperfectly by anyone who hasn't been trained to them and practised them.

What would we think of the man who, because he has a natural power of distinguishing what is true from what is false, concludes that he has no need to be taught mathematics or physics or other sciences? It's by the *natural* power of human understanding that everything in those sciences has been discovered, and that the truths they contain are discovered. But if the understanding were left to itself, with no help from instruction, training, habit, and exercise, it wouldn't make much progress! We all know this from our experience of people who have not been instructed in those matters.

Our natural power of distinguishing right from wrong needs—just as our other natural powers do—the aid of instruction, education, exercise, and habit. . . .

A man who neglects the means of improvement in the knowledge of his duty may do very bad things while following the light of his mind. He isn't to blame for acting according to his judgment, but he may be very blameworthy for not taking the available steps to have his judgment better informed.

There are truths—both speculative and moral—which a man left to himself would never discover; yet when they are squarely laid before him he accepts and adopts them, not merely on the authority of his teacher but on their own intrinsic evidentness. He may even wonder how he could have been so blind as not to see them before.

Like a man whose son has been long abroad, and is thought to be dead. After many years the son returns, and isn't recognised by his father, who if left to himself would *never* discover that this is his son. But when the son reveals himself, the father soon finds many details that satisfy him that this is his son who was lost and can't be anyone else.

Truth has an affinity with the human understanding that error doesn't have. And right principles of conduct have an affinity with an honest mind that wrong principles don't have. When they are set before it in a good light, a well-disposed mind recognises this affinity, feels their authority, and perceives them to be genuine. . . .

A man born and brought up in a savage nation may be taught to pursue injury with unrelenting malice, to the destruction of his enemy. Perhaps when he does so, his heart does not condemn him. But if he is fair and honest, and if when the tumult of his passion is over he has the virtues of clemency, generosity, and forgiveness laid before him, as they were taught and exemplified by the divine Author of our religion, he will see that it is more noble to control himself and subdue a savage passion than to destroy his enemy. He will see that to make a friend of an enemy, and to overcome evil with good, is the greatest of all victories, and provides a manly and rational delight that is incomparably better than the brutish passion of revenge. He will see that hitherto he acted •like a man to his friends, but •like a brute to his enemies; now he knows how to make his whole character consistent, having one part of it in harmony with another.

Someone who doesn't see that he needs all the help he can get in order to know how he ought to act in many concrete cases must indeed be a great stranger to his own heart and to the state of human nature.

2. Conscience is exclusive to man. We don't see a trace of it in brute animals. It is one of those privileges by which we are raised above them.

Brute animals have many faculties in common with us: they see, hear, taste, smell, and feel. They have their pleasures and pains. They have various instincts and appetites. They have an affection for their offspring, and some of them for their herd or flock. Dogs have a wonderful attachment to their masters, and give clear signs of sympathy [see Glossary] with them.

We see in brute animals anger and emulation, pride and shame. Some of them can be trained by habit, and by rewards and punishments, to do many things useful to man.

All this must be granted; and if our perception of what we ought or ought not to do could be fully explained in terms of any of these principles or of any combination of them, it would follow that some brutes are moral agents and accountable for their conduct.

But common sense rebels against this conclusion. A man who seriously charged a brute with a crime would be laughed at. They may do things that are hurtful to themselves or to man. They may have qualities—or or acquire habits—that lead to such actions; and this is all we mean when we call them 'vicious'. But they can't be immoral; nor can they be virtuous. They aren't capable of self-control; and when they act according to the passion or habit that is strongest in them at the time, they are acting according to the nature that God has given them. No more than that can be required of them.

They can't lay down for themselves a rule that they are not to transgress even when prompted by appetite or upset by passion. We see no reason to think that they can form the conception of •a general rule or of •obligation to adhere to it.

They have no conception of a promise or a contract, and you can't enter into any treaty with them. They can't affirm or deny, or resolve, or give their word. If nature had made them capable of these operations we would see signs of that in their motions and gestures.

The most intelligent brutes never invented a language or learned to use one that had already been invented. They have never formed a plan of government, or transmitted inventions to their posterity.

These facts and many others that are obvious to common observation show that we have had good reason to consider the brute-creation as deprived of the noblest faculties that God has given man, and particularly of the faculty that makes us moral and accountable beings.

3. Conscience is obviously intended by nature to be the immediate guide and director of our conduct after we arrive at the years of understanding.

There are many things whose nature and structure show intuitively [= 'as immediately obvious, not needing any reasoning'] the purpose for which they were made.

A man who knows the structure of a watch or clock will confidently conclude that it was made to measure time. And someone who knows the structure of the eye and the properties of light will be equally confident that the eye was made for us to see by.

In the structure of the human body the intended purpose of many of its parts is so obvious as to leave no possibility of doubt. Who can *wonder whether* the muscles were intended to move the parts in which they are inserted? Whether the

bones were intended to give strength and support to the body, and some of them to guard the parts that they enclose?

When we attend to the structure of the mind, the intended purpose of its various basic powers is equally obvious. Isn't it obvious that the external senses are given to us to enable us to detect the qualities of bodies that may be useful or hurtful to us? Memory to enable us to retain the knowledge we have acquired? Judgment and understanding to enable us to distinguish what is true from what is false?

•The natural appetites of hunger and thirst, •the natural affections of parents towards their offspring, and of relatives to each other, •the natural willingness of children to believe and to be led, •the affections of pity and sympathy with the distressed, •the attachment we feel to neighbours, to acquaintance, and to the laws and constitution of our country; these are all parts of our constitution that clearly point out their purpose; anyone who didn't see this would have to be blind or *very* inattentive. Even the passions of anger and resentment seem clearly to be a kind of defensive armour, given to us by our Maker to guard us against injuries. . . .

So it holds generally for the intellectual and active powers of man that the intention for which they are given is written legibly on their face.

Nor is this the case of any of them more evidently than of conscience. Its intended purpose is plainly implied in the work assigned to it, namely to show us what is good, what bad, and what indifferent in human conduct.

It judges concerning every action before it is done. For we can rarely act in such a rush that we have no awareness that what we are about to do is right, or is wrong, or is indifferent. Like the bodily eye, conscience naturally looks forward, though its attention may be turned back to the past.

Some writers seem to have thought that the only role of conscience is to reflect on past actions with approval or disapproval; but that's like thinking that the only work our eyes do is to look back on the road we have travelled and see whether it is clean or dirty; a mistake that no-one could make who has made the proper use of his eyes!

Conscience sets limits for every appetite, affection, and passion; it says to every other principle of action 'You may go this far, but no further'.

We can indeed transgress its dictates, but we can't do so with innocence, or even with impunity.

We condemn ourselves, or in the language of scripture *our heart condemns us*, whenever we go beyond the rules of right and wrong that conscience prescribes.

Other principles of action may have more *strength*, but this is the only one that has *authority*. Its judicial sentence makes us guilty in our own eyes and the eyes of our Maker, whatever other principle may be set in opposition to it.

So it's clear that this principle's nature gives it an authority to direct our conduct; to judge, acquit, or condemn, and even to punish. No other principle of the human mind has such authority. . . .

The authority of conscience over the mind's other active principles doesn't need to be proved by argument, because it is self-evident. For all it implies is that *in all cases a man ought to do his duty*. Someone who in all cases does what he ought to do is the perfect man.

The Stoics formed the idea of this perfection in the human nature, and held it out as the goal to which the race of life ought to be directed. Their *wise man* was one in whom a concern for the *honestum* [= 'for the right and honourable'] swallowed up every other principle of action.

The *wise man* of the Stoics, like the *perfect orator* of the rhetoricians, was an idea that they had, and it was in some

ways more than human nature is capable of. But it may have been the most perfect model of virtue that ever was exhibited to the heathen world, and some of those who followed it in their lives were ornaments to human nature.

4. The moral faculty or conscience is an active power of the mind.

That is because every truly virtuous action must be more or less influenced by it. Other principles may go along with it and lead the same way; but no action can be called morally good unless it is somewhat influenced by a concern for what is right. Thus a man who has no concern for justice may pay the money he owes simply so as not to be thrown into prison. In this action there is no virtue at all.

In individual cases the moral principle may be opposed by any of our animal principles. Passion or appetite may urge us to do what we know to be wrong. In every such case the moral principle ought to prevail; and the harder that is to do, the more glorious the victory is.

In some cases, a concern for what is right may be the sole motive for an action, without help or hindrance from any other principle of action; as when a judge or arbitrator settles a dispute between two people who don't mean anything to him, acting solely from a concern for justice.

So we see that conscience, as an active principle, sometimes concurs with other active principles, sometimes opposes them, and sometimes acts alone.

I tried to show earlier that a concern for *our own good on the whole* is not only a rational principle of action, but a leading principle to which all our animal principles are subordinate. So we have two regulating or leading principles in the constitution of man, (i) a concern for what is best for us on the whole and (ii) a concern for duty; and you may

want to ask: 'Which of these ought to yield if they happen to interfere?'

Some well-meaning people have maintained that all concern for ourselves and for our own happiness ought to be extinguished; that we should love virtue for its own sake only, even if it were to be accompanied by eternal misery.

This seems to have been the extreme view of some mystics. Perhaps they were led into it in opposition to a contrary extreme of the schoolmen [= 'academic Aristotelians'] of the middle ages. *They* claimed that the desire for good to ourselves is the sole motive for action, and that virtue is approvable only because of its present or future reward.

Sounder views of human nature will teach us to avoid both these extremes.

On the one hand, the disinterested [see Glossary] love of virtue is undoubtedly the noblest principle in human nature, and ought never to bow to any other. On the other hand, no active principle that God has planted in our nature is vicious in itself, something that ought to be eradicated if that were in our power.

They are all useful and necessary in our present state. The perfection of human nature consists not in extinguishing them but in restraining them within their proper bounds, keeping them in appropriate subordination to the governing principles.

What about cases where a concern for our happiness on the whole conflicts with a concern for duty? This is a merely imaginary conflict; there can't actually be any such opposition between the two leading principles.

While the world is under a wise and benevolent administration, it's impossible that any man should be a loser by doing his duty. So every man who believes in God, while he is careful to do his duty, can safely leave the care of his happiness to his Maker. He realizes that his most effective

way of attending to his long-run happiness is *by* attending to his duty.

But consider the case of an atheist who wrongly thinks his virtue is contrary to his happiness on the whole. Shaftesbury is right: this man's dilemma is without remedy. It will be impossible for him to act so as not to seem to himself to contradict a leading principle of his nature. He must either sacrifice his happiness to virtue, or his virtue to happiness, and he has to decide whether it is better to be a fool or to be a knave!

This shows •morality's strong connection with the principles of •natural religion; because only natural religion can secure a man from the possibility of coming to think that he may play the fool by doing his duty.

Thus even Shaftesbury in his most sober work concludes that *virtue without piety is incomplete*. Without piety it loses its brightest example, its noblest object, and its firmest support.

5. Conscience, i.e. the moral faculty, is an intellectual power.

It is the sole source of our basic conceptions or ideas of right and wrong in human conduct. And of right and wrong there are not only many different •degrees but many different •species.

Justice and injustice,
gratitude and ingratitude,
benevolence and malice,
prudence and folly,
magnanimity and meanness,
decency and indecency,

are various special cases that fall under the general notion of right and wrong in conduct, all of them objects of moral approval or disapproval in a greater or a lesser degree.

It's through our moral faculty that we •have the conception of these as moral qualities, and can perceive various moral relations among them. For example: justice is entitled to a small degree of praise, but injustice to a high degree of blame; and the same holds for gratitude and ingratitude. When justice and gratitude interfere, gratitude must give way to justice, and unmerited beneficence [= 'bringing a benefit to someone who doesn't deserve it'] must give place to both. [Reid's thesis that justice must win any conflict between it and gratitude is a sheer addition; it doesn't follow from what he has been saying about praise and blame.]

Many such relations between the various moral qualities

are immediately discerned by our moral faculty. A man needs only to consult his own heart to be convinced of them.

All our reasonings in morals, in natural jurisprudence, in the law of nations, as well as our reasonings about the duties of natural religion, and about the moral government of the Deity, must be based on—i.e. must have as first principles—the dictates of our moral faculty, ·our conscience·.

Thus, because this faculty provides the human mind with •many of its basic conceptions or ideas, as well as with •the first principles of many important branches of human knowledge, it is right to regard it as an intellectual power of the mind, as well as an active one.