

# The Liberty of Moral Agents

No. 4 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.

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## Chapter 1: What the notions of moral liberty and necessity are

By the *liberty* of a moral agent I mean an agent's power over the determinations of his own will. [By 'determinations' of someone's will Reid means: that person's deciding or choosing or willing or setting himself to do something. It is called a '*determination*' because it *settles* the question 'What am I to do?']

Consider someone who has the power to will to unlock a door and the power *not* to will that: if he then voluntarily unlocks the door, he is •free with respect to that action. But if the determination of his will to unlock the door is the necessary consequence of something involuntary in the state of his mind, or of something in his external circumstances, he is •not free *with respect to that unlocking of the door*. And if that is the situation in *all* his voluntary actions, he is •not free *at all*; he doesn't have what I call 'the liberty of a moral agent', but is subject to necessity.

This liberty requires the agent to have understanding and will. To have •will because: what this power of his is employed upon is precisely the determinations of the will. And to have •understanding because: there can't be any will unless there is at least enough understanding for the person to have the *thought* of what he wills.

•And the need for understanding goes further, because the liberty of a moral agent requires not only •the thought of what the agent wills but also some degree of •practical judgment or practical reason.

For if he isn't capable of judging one determination •of his will• to be preferable to another—either in itself or for some end that he is aiming at (•e.g. getting the door open•)—what's the use of his having a power to determine? His determinations must be made in complete darkness, with no reason, motive, or end in view. They can't be either right nor wrong,

wise or foolish. The consequences of his actions can't be attributed to *him*—he wasn't able to foresee them or to see any reason for acting otherwise than how he did.

...Nature doesn't give powers that serve no purpose. So I see no reason to think that any being has a power over the determinations of his will without also being capable of judgments regarding •the direction of his conduct and •what he ought or ought not to do.

In this Essay, therefore, I speak only of the liberty of moral agents who are capable of acting well or badly, wisely or foolishly; and I choose 'moral liberty' as my label for this.

I don't know how much liberty, or of what kind, is possessed by the lower animals or by humans before they come to have the use of reason. We don't see them as having the power of self-control [Reid writes: 'self-government']. Some of their actions can be called 'voluntary', but all of those seem to be determined by whatever passion or appetite, affection or habit, is strongest at the time.

This seems to be *the law of their constitution*, and they submit to it—as falling rocks submit to the law of gravity—without having any conception of the *law* or any intention to *obey*.

This is quite different from •civil and •moral government, each of which is addressed to the rational powers and requires a conception of the law and *intentional* obedience. In the opinion of all mankind, lower animals and human infants are incapable of •these kinds of government. And I can't see what end could be served by giving them a power over the determinations of their own will, unless it was to make them untrainable—which we see they are not!

Moral liberty gives the agent the power to act well or badly. Like every other gift of God, this power can be misused. You use this gift of God rightly if you

act well and wisely, as far as your best judgment can direct you,

thereby deserving admiration and approval. You *misuse* the gift if you

act contrary to what you know or suspect to be your duty and your wisdom,

thereby thoroughly meriting disapproval and blame.

By 'necessity' I understand the lack of the moral liberty that I have defined above. Consider a man who is necessarily determined always to will and to do the best thing there is to do (this is assuming that there *can* be a better and a worse in a situation where necessity reigns). This man ·who always does the best possible thing· would surely be innocent and blameless. But as far as I can see he wouldn't be entitled to the admiration and moral approval of those who knew and believed that all his conduct was necessitated. We could apply to him what an ancient author said of Cato:

'He was good because he couldn't be any other way'.

Understood literally and strictly, this statement is praise not for Cato but for his constitution [= 'his basic make-up'], which was no more Cato's doing than his existence was.

On the other hand, if a man is necessarily determined to do badly, this seems to me to arouse pity but not disapproval.

He acted badly because he couldn't act in any other way.

Who can blame him? Necessity has no law.

If this man *knows* that he acted under this necessity, doesn't he have good grounds for freeing himself from blame? If anything is to be blamed, it isn't *him* but *his constitution*. If God charges him with doing wrong, can't he protest ·to God· in the following way?

Why have you made me like this? Sacrifice me •for the common good if you wish, like a man that has the plague ·and is locked up so as not to infect others·; but don't sacrifice me •because I deserve it; for you know that what I am accused of is your work, not mine.

Such are my notions of moral liberty and necessity, and of the consequences inseparably connected with each.

A man can have this moral liberty without its extending to all his actions, or even to all his *voluntary* actions. He does many things by •instinct, and many others by the force of •habit without any thought at all—and consequently without will. A human being in his infant years has no power of self-control, any more than the lower animals do. The power over the determinations of his will that he acquires in his mature years is limited, as are all his powers; and precisely defining its limits may be a task that our understanding is not capable of. We can only say in general that a man's power over the determinations of his will extends to every action *for which he is accountable*.

This power is given to us by God, and the gift-giver can enlarge or shrink the gift, maintain it or withdraw it, as he wishes. No power in the creature can be independent of the creator. His hook is in our nose; he can let the line run out as far as he sees fit, and when he pleases he can reel it in or pull it sideways in any direction he likes. Let this always be understood when we ascribe liberty to man or to any created being.

So a man of whom it is true that he *is* a free agent *can* have his liberty reduced or lost by •physical sickness, •mental sickness (as in depression or madness), or •vicious habits; and in special cases it may be restrained by •God's intervening to restrain it.

We call man a ‘free agent’ in the same way as we call him a ‘reasonable agent’. In many things he is not guided by reason but by forces like the ones at work in the lower animals. His reason is weak at best. It is liable to be harmed or lost through his own fault or by other means; but still we call him ‘a reasonable agent’. Similarly, someone can be ‘a free agent’ even though his freedom of action may have many similar limitations.

Some philosophers have maintained that the liberty I have described is inconceivable and involves an absurdity. They say this:

Liberty consists only in a *power to act as we will*; and it is impossible to conceive a greater liberty than this in any being. It follows that what can be free are not •the determinations of the will, but only •actions that result from those determinations, actions that *depend* on the will. To say

We have the power to will unlocking the door is to say that

We can *will* unlocking the door, if we *will*. This takes the will to be determined by a previous will; and that, by the same line of thought, must be determined by a will previous to *it*, and so on back through an infinite series of wills, which is absurd. To act *freely*, therefore, can only mean to act *voluntarily*; and this is the only liberty that it makes sense to attribute to man or to any being.

This reasoning, first advanced by Hobbes (I think), has been very generally adopted by the defenders of necessity. It is based on a definition of ‘liberty’ totally different from the one I have given, so it doesn’t apply to ‘moral liberty’ in my sense.

But it is said that this—the Hobbesian ‘liberty’—is the only liberty that is possible, conceivable, not involving an absurdity.

If the word ‘liberty’ had no meaning but this one, that would indeed be strange! I shall mention three other accounts of ‘liberty’, all very common. The ‘Hobbesian’ objection applies to one of them, but not to either of the other two.

Liberty is sometimes opposed to •external force or physical confinement, sometimes to •obligation by law or by lawful authority, and sometimes to •necessity. Let us look at these in turn.

(1) Liberty is opposed to confinement of the body by superior force. So we say a prisoner is set at liberty when his chains are removed and he is released from prison. This is the ‘liberty’ defined in the ‘Hobbesian’ objection; and I agree that *it* doesn’t extend to the will (any more than the physical confinement does), because the will *can’t* be confined by external force, so that there is never any point in saying of someone’s will that it has ‘liberty’ in this sense.

(2) Liberty is opposed to obligation by law or lawful authority. This liberty is *a right to act in one way or another* in matters where the law has neither commanded nor forbidden. This is the sort of liberty we mean when we speak of a man’s ‘natural liberty’, his ‘civil liberty’, his ‘Christian liberty’. Obviously *this* liberty *does* extend to the will, as does the opposing obligation; for obedience is the will to obey, and transgression against the law is the will to disobey it. Without will there can’t be either obedience or transgression. Law presupposes a power to obey or to transgress; it doesn’t take away this power, but offers motives of duty and of self-interest to act in a certain way, leaving it to the power to go along with these motives or to take the consequences of defying them.

(3) Liberty is opposed to necessity, and in this sense it extends *only* to the determinations of the will, and *not* to consequences of acts of the will.

In every voluntary action, the determination of the will is the *first part* of the action, and the moral estimation of the action depends on that first part. Philosophers have been much exercised by this question:

Is it the case that every determination of a person's will is the necessary consequence of •his constitution and •his environment? Or does he often have the power to determine in this way and the power to determine in that?

Some have said that this concerns the *philosophical* notion of liberty and necessity; but it is by no means restricted to philosophers. Very ordinary uneducated people, down through the centuries, have tried to invoke this kind of necessity to free themselves or their friends from blame for their wrongdoings, •pleading that they were not to blame because their willings were inevitable upshots of their constitutions and environments• (though in their behaviour in general they have acted on the contrary principle, •that is, acted as though they believed themselves to be free•).

You must judge for yourself whether this notion of moral liberty is conceivable or not. I have no difficulty conceiving it. I regard the determination of the will as an effect; this effect must have a cause that had the power to produce it; and the cause must be either •the person whose will it is or •some other being. The former is as easily conceived as the latter. If the person was the cause of that determination of his own will, he was free in that action, and it is justly attributed to him, whether it be good or bad. But if some other being was the cause of this determination, producing it either immediately or through means and instruments under his direction, then the determination is the act and deed of *that* being and is solely attributable to *him*.

This objection has been raised: 'Nothing is in our power but what depends on the will, and therefore the will itself cannot be in our power.' I answer that this is a fallacy

arising from taking a common saying ('Nothing is in our power but what depends on the will') in a sense that it was never intended to convey and is contrary to what it necessarily implies.

In common life, when men speak of what is or isn't in a man's power, they are thinking only of the external and visible effects—the only ones they can perceive and the only ones that can affect them. It is true indeed that the only ones of *these* that are in a man's power are those that depend on his will; and that's all that this common saying means.

But so far from implying that the man's will *is not* in his power, it necessarily implies that it *is*! For to say that

what depends on the will is in his power, but the will is not in his power,

is to say that

the end is in his power, but the means necessary for that end are not in his power,

which is a contradiction.

We often say things in universal terms which *must* be meant with some exception, and so the exception is understood. For example, when 'Everything depends on God' we *must* mean to exclude God himself. Similarly, when we say 'Everything that is in our power depends upon the will', we *must* mean to exclude the will itself—for if the will isn't in our power then nothing is in our power.

Every effect must be in the power of its cause.

The determination of the will is an effect. Therefore

The determination of the will must be in the power of its cause,

whether that cause is the agent himself or some other being.

I hope the notion of moral liberty will be clearly understood from what I have said in this chapter, and that you'll see that this notion *can* be conceived and involves no absurdity or contradiction.

## Chapter 2: The words ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, ‘action’ and ‘active power’

Writings on liberty and necessity have been clouded by the ambiguity of the words used in reasoning on that topic. The words ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, ‘action’ and ‘active power’, ‘liberty’ and ‘necessity’ are related to each other. The meaning of one determines the meaning of the rest. When we try to define them, we can do it only through synonymous words which equally stand in need of definition. If we are to speak and reason clearly about moral liberty, we must use those words in their strict sense, but this is hard to do because in all languages the words in question have had their meanings *spread out* through usage.

As we can’t reason about moral liberty without using those ambiguous words, it is appropriate •to identify as clearly as possible their proper and original meanings (in which they ought to be understood when one is dealing with this topic), and •to show what caused them to become so ambiguous in all languages that they create obscurity and tangles in our reasonings. I start on the first task now, reserving the second for chapter 3.

Everything that •begins to exist must have a cause of its existence, and that cause must have had the power to give it existence. And everything that •undergoes a change must have some cause of that change. Putting these two together, we get:

**Neither existence nor any way of existing can begin without an efficient cause.**

This principle appears very early in the mind of man; and it is so universal and so firmly rooted in human nature that the most determined scepticism can’t eradicate it. [By ‘efficient cause’ Reid means what we ordinarily mean by ‘cause’ with no adjective: the cause that *makes* something happen.]

This principle is our basis for our reasoned belief in a Deity. But that is not our only use for it. Everyone’s conduct is governed by it every day, and almost every hour. And if a man *could* root this principle out from his mind, he would then have to give up every sort of practical common-sense and would be fit only to be locked up as insane.

From this principle it follows that when something x undergoes a change, either •x itself is the efficient cause of that change, or •something else is the cause of it.

In the former case, x is said to have *active power*, and to *act* in producing that change. In the latter case, x is merely *passive*, or is *acted on*, and the only relevant active power is in the thing that caused the change in x.

The label ‘cause’ or ‘agent’ is properly given only to something which through its own active power produces a change in itself or in something else. The change—whether of thought or will or motion—is the *effect*. So active power is a quality in the cause that enables it to produce the effect. And the exercise of that active power in producing the effect is called ‘action’, ‘agency’, ‘efficiency’.

For the effect to be produced, the cause must not only *have* but also *exercise* the power to produce it. Power that isn’t exercised produces no effect.

The cause’s having and exercising its power to produce the effect is *all that is necessary* for the production of the effect, which is to say that it is *sufficient* for producing the effect. For it is a contradiction to say that •the cause has the power to produce the effect, and •it exercises that power, and yet •the effect is not produced. The effect can’t be in his power unless all the means necessary for its production are in his power.

It is just as much a contradiction to say that a cause has the power to produce a certain effect but can't exercise that power; for 'power that can't be exercised' is no power at all, and is a contradiction in terms.

A possible source of mistakes should be pointed out here, namely the fact that a being may at one time have a power that it doesn't have at another; and it may *usually* have a power that it doesn't have at some particular time. For example, a man who ordinarily has the power to walk may be without this power at a time when he is tied up. And (·here's the source of the error·) he may be colloquially said to have a power that he can't at that time exercise. But this common way of talking means only that he usually has this power and will have it again when the cause that at present deprives him of it is removed. . . .

These, I think, are necessary consequences of the first principle I mentioned in this chapter, namely that every change that happens in nature must have an efficient cause that had the power to produce it.

Another principle that appears very early in the mind of man is this:

**In our deliberate and voluntary actions we are efficient causes.**

We are conscious of making an effort, sometimes with difficulty, to produce certain effects. Someone who deliberately and voluntarily makes an effort to produce an effect must believe the effect is in his power. No man can deliberately attempt something that he doesn't think is in his power. The language and the ordinary conduct of all mankind show that they are convinced they have some active power in themselves •to produce certain motions in their own bodies and in other bodies, and •to regulate and direct their own thoughts. We have this conviction so early in life that we can't remember when or how we first acquired it.

One of the most zealous defenders of necessity has, I think, acknowledged that •this conviction comes to us first as a necessary result of our constitution, and that •it can never be entirely obliterated:

Such are the influences to which absolutely all mankind are exposed that they necessarily regard themselves as •the initiating causes of ·human· actions; and it is a long time before they begin to consider themselves ·more accurately· as •instruments in the hand of a superior agent, ·God·. Consequently, the intellectual habit of attributing their actions purely to themselves comes to be so ingrained that it is never entirely obliterated; and that brings it about that the common language and the common feelings of mankind are suited to the first—the limited and imperfect—the *wrong*—view of things. [Joseph Priestley, *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity*, p. 298]

It is very probable that the very idea of *active power* and of *efficient cause* is derived from our voluntary efforts in producing effects, and that if we weren't conscious of these we would have no conception at all of *cause* or of *active power*, and consequently (·coming back now to the first of my two principles·) no conviction of the necessity of a cause for every change that we observe in nature.

It is certain that the only kind of active power we can conceive is one that is similar or analogous to the power we attribute to ourselves—that is, a power that is exercised through will and with understanding. Even our notion of •God's power is derived from the notion of •human power, by removing from •the former the imperfections and limitations of •the latter.

It may be hard to explain the origin of our conceptions and belief about efficient causes and active power. The



widely-accepted theory that

all our ideas are ideas of sensation or reflection, and every belief is a perception of the agreement or the disagreement of those ideas

appears to be inconsistent both with •the idea of an efficient cause and with •the belief that there must always be such a cause.

Their attachment to that theory has led some philosophers to deny that we have any conception of an efficient cause or of active power, because *efficiency* and *active power* are not ideas either of sensation or reflection. So they maintain that

a cause is only something prior to the effect and constantly conjoined with it.

This is Hume's notion of *cause*, and it seems to be adopted by Priestly, who writes that a *cause* can only be defined as

Such previous circumstances as are constantly followed by a certain effect, the constancy of the result making us conclude that there must be a sufficient reason in the nature of the things why it should be produced in those circumstances.

But theory ought to give way to fact, not fact to theory! Everyone man who understands English knows, that neither •priority [previousness] nor •constant conjunction nor •both taken together imply *efficient causality*. . . .

The very dispute over *whether* we have the conception of an efficient cause shows that we *have!* For though men may dispute about things that don't exist, they can't dispute about things of which they have no conception.

This chapter has aimed at showing that the conception of *cause*, of *action*, and of *active power* in the strict and proper sense of those words, is found in the minds of all men very early in their lives, even when they are just beginning to think. That makes it probable that in all languages the words by which those conceptions are expressed were at first clear and unambiguous, yet it is certain that •even• among the most enlightened nations the words in question are applied to so many different kinds of things, and used in such a vague way, that it is very difficult to reason clearly with them.

This at first seems hard to explain. But think about it a little, and you will see that it's a natural consequence of the slow and gradual progress of human knowledge.

Since the ambiguity of these words so greatly affects our reasoning about moral liberty, and provides the strongest objections against it, it is relevant to my purposes to show where the ambiguity comes from. When we know the causes that have produced this ambiguity, we shall be less in danger of being misled by it, and the proper and strict meaning of the words will come more clearly into view.

### Chapter 3: Why those words are ambiguous

When we attend to external objects and start to think about them, we find that we have the power to produce some of their motions and changes, but that many of their motions and changes must have some other cause. In cases of the latter sort it must be either that the objects have life and active power, as we have, or that they are moved or changed by something that has life and active power, the way they are sometimes moved by us.

Our first thoughts seem to be that the objects in which we perceive such motions have understanding and active power as we have.

‘Savages,’ says the Abbé Raynal, ‘wherever they see motion that they can’t account for, postulate a soul.’ All men can be considered as ‘savages’ in this respect, until they can be taught and can use their faculties better than savages do.

Poets give us a great deal of pleasure by clothing every object with intellectual and moral attributes, in metaphor and in other figures of speech. This pleasure we take in poetical language—mightn’t it arise in part from how it fits with our earliest views back at the infant stage when we calmly accepted the rational conversations of birds and beasts in Æsop’s Fables?

Be that as it may, the Abbé Raynal’s remark is sufficiently confirmed both from fact and from the structure of all languages.

Primitive nations really do believe that the sun, moon, and stars, the earth, sea, and air, and fountains and lakes have understanding and active power. Savages find it natural to bow down to these things and beg for their favour, as a kind of idolatry.

All languages carry in their structure the marks of their having been formed at a time when this belief prevailed. The division of verbs and participles into active and passive, which is found in all languages, must have been originally intended to distinguish what is really active from what is merely passive; and, in all languages we find active verbs applied to the sorts of things in which, according to the Abbé Raynal, savages think there is a soul.

Thus we say ‘The sun rises and sets’, ‘The moon changes’, ‘The sea ebbs and flows’, ‘The winds blow’. Languages were formed by men who believed these objects to have life and active power in themselves, and so for them it was proper and natural to report such motions and changes with active verbs. There’s no surer way of tracking what nations believed before they had records than by the structure of their language; despite the changes produced in it by time, a language will always bear traces of the thoughts of those who invented it. When we find the same beliefs indicated in the structure of *all* languages, those beliefs must have been common to the whole human species when languages were being invented.

When a few people with superior intellectual abilities find leisure for speculation, they begin to do science [Reid writes: ‘to philosophize’], and they soon discover that many of the things they used to regard as thinking and active are really lifeless and passive. This is a very important discovery. It elevates the mind, frees men from many ignorant superstitions, and opens the door to further discoveries of the same kind.

As science advances, life and activity in natural objects retreats, leaving the objects dead and inactive. We find that rather than moving voluntarily they are moved necessar-

ily; rather than •acting they are •acted-upon; and nature appears as one great machine in which one wheel is turned by another, that by a third; and the scientist doesn't know how far back this necessary sequence may reach.

The weakness of human reason makes men apt, when they leave one extreme, to throw themselves into the arms of the opposite extreme. And thus science, even in its infancy, may lead men from •idolatry and polytheism into •atheism, and from •ascribing active power to inanimate things to •concluding that everything happens by necessity.

Whatever origin we ascribe to the doctrines of atheism and of fatal necessity [= 'necessity that makes everything that happens inevitable'], it is certain that both can be traced back almost as far as science; and both appear to be the opposites of the earliest beliefs of men.

Objects to which the *many* had ascribed life and activity were discovered, thanks to the observation and reasoning of the theorizing *few*, to be inanimate and inactive. But the few, while convinced of this, had to speak the language of the many in order to be understood. [Reid repeats some of his favourite examples of this. Then:]

Once the forms of language have been established by custom, they are not as easily changed as are the notions on which they were originally based. While the •sounds remain, their •meanings are gradually enlarged or altered. This is sometimes found even in those disciplines where the meanings of words are the most accurate and precise. In arithmetic, for instance: among the ancients, the word 'number' always signified *so many units*, and it would have been absurd to apply it either to unity or to any fraction of a unit; but now we apply 'number' to *one*, to *a half*, and so on. For the ancients, multiplying always increased a number and division lessened it; but we speak of multiplying by a fraction, which lessens, and of dividing by a fraction,

which increases the number. We also speak of dividing or multiplying by *one*, which neither lessens nor increases a number. In the ancient language these ways of speaking would have been absurd.

[Reid elaborates on this through four short paragraphs, along the lines of chapter 2 of his first Essay in this book. Then:]

I should mention another way in which science has contributed greatly to the ambiguity of the words we are considering.

The first step into natural science—and what has commonly been considered as its ultimate purpose—is the investigation of the causes of the phenomena of nature, that is, the causes of natural events that are not effects of human power. 'Happy is he who has been able to learn the causes of things' [Virgil, quoted in Latin] expresses the attitude of every mind that has an aptitude for speculation.

Knowledge of 'the causes of things' promises •an increase in human power as much as it does •the satisfying of human curiosity, which is why enlightened people all through the centuries have sought this knowledge with an eagerness proportional to its importance.

Nothing shows up the difference between our intellectual powers and those of the lower animals more conspicuously than this does. We don't see in the animals any desire to investigate the causes of things, or indeed any sign that they have the proper notion of a cause.

Yet there is reason to think that in this investigation men have wandered much in the dark, and that they haven't had successes equal to their desire and expectation.

We easily discover an established order and connectedness in the phenomena of nature. From what *has* happened we can often know what *will* happen. Many discoveries of this kind have been made by casual observation; they are the

basis for ordinary prudence in the conduct of life. Scientists, observing more accurately and conducting experiments, have made many more such discoveries—ones through which practical techniques are improved and human power and knowledge are both increased.

That concerns our rich knowledge of truths of the form ‘If something of kind A occurs, something of kind B will follow’. But how much do we know about the real *causes* of the phenomena of nature? All our knowledge of external things must be based on what our senses tell us, and causation and active power are not things we can sense. Furthermore, when x occurs before y, and x-type events are constantly conjoined with y-type ones, it isn’t always the case that x causes y; if it were, Monday night would be the cause of Tuesday morning, which would be the cause of Tuesday night.

Are the phenomena of the material world produced by the immediate operation of God, the first cause, acting according to laws that he in his wisdom has set down? Or does he rather make use of subordinate causes in the operations of nature? And if the latter is the case, what sorts of things *are* these subordinate or intermediate causes, and how is the causal work distributed amongst them? Also, do they in every case act exactly as they are ordered to, or do they sometimes have a choice? Even today these are still open questions.

When we are so much in the dark about the *real causes* of natural phenomena, and have a strong desire to know them, it isn’t surprising that clever men should construct endless conjectures and theories—ones by which the soul, hungering for knowledge, is fed with chaff instead of wheat! Here, with one sentence each, are five famous tubs of chaff.

In one very ancient system, *love* and *strife* were said to be the causes of things. In the Pythagorean and Pla-

tonic system that role was taken by *matter*, *ideas*, and *an intelligent mind*. By Aristotle, *matter*, *form*, and *privation*. Descartes thought that *matter* and a certain quantity of *motion* given at the outset by God are sufficient to account for all the phenomena of the natural world. Leibniz thought that the universe is made up of active and percipient *monads* which produce all the changes they undergo, doing this by the power they were endowed with from the outset.

While men thus wandered in the dark in search of causes, unwilling to confess their disappointment, they vainly conceived everything they stumbled across to be a ‘cause’, and the proper notion of a cause was lost because the label ‘cause’ was given to countless things that aren’t and couldn’t be causes.

This jumbling together of different things under the name ‘cause’ is the more easily tolerated because, harmful as it may be to good philosophy, it doesn’t make much difference to ordinary everyday life. A constant antecedent or accompaniment of the phenomenon whose cause is sought may answer the purpose of the inquirer as well as the real cause would. For example, a sailor wants to know the cause of the tides, so that he can know when to expect high tide; he is told that it is high tide when the moon is such-and-such a length of time past its high point in the sky; and now he thinks he knows the *cause* of the tides. Of course he in fact knows no such thing; but what he takes to be the cause serves his purpose, and his mistake does him no harm.

Some scientists have given up the pretence of discovering the *causes* of the operations of nature, and have set to work to discover by observation and experiment the *rules* or ‘*laws of nature*’ according to which the phenomena of nature are produced. Those scientists seem to be the ones who have the soundest views about the natural world and about the weaknesses of human understanding.

To comply with custom, or perhaps to satisfy people's eagerness to know the causes of things, we call the laws of nature 'causes' and 'active powers'. Thus, we speak of the powers of gravitation, of magnetism, of electricity. We call them *causes* of many natural phenomena, and that is what the ignorant and the semi-educated think they are.

But abler minds can see that laws of nature are *not* agents. They aren't endowed with active power, so they can't be 'causes' in the proper sense of that word. They are only the *rules* according to which the *unknown* cause acts.

Thus it appears that •our natural desire to know the causes of natural events, •our inability to discover them, and •the vain theories of philosophers and scientists engaged in this search, have made the word 'cause' and its relatives so ambiguous—signifying so many different kinds of things—that they have in a way lost their proper and original meaning; but we have no other words to express that meaning.

Everything joined with the effect and prior to it is called its *cause*. An instrument, an 'occasion', a reason, a motive, an end—these are all called causes! And the related words 'effect', 'agent', 'power', have their meanings extended in the same vague manner.

If the terms 'cause' and 'agent' hadn't lost their proper meaning in the crowd of meanings they have been given, we would immediately perceive a contradiction in the phrases 'necessary cause' and 'necessary agent'. Perhaps we can't always avoid the loose meaning of those phrases; and anyway it is authorized by custom, which is the arbiter of language, and so shouldn't be condemned. But let us be on our guard against being misled by it into thinking of essentially •different things as though they were •the same.

To say that man is 'a free agent' is merely to say that sometimes he is truly an agent and a cause, not merely

acted on as a passive instrument. On the other hand, to say that he acts 'from necessity' is to say that he doesn't *act* at all, that he is not an agent, and that for all we know there may be only one agent in the universe, an agent who does everything that *is* done, good or bad.

If this necessity is attributed even to God in the statement that *he* acts 'from necessity', this implies that

- there aren't and cannot be any causes at all,
- nothing acts, but everything is acted on,
- nothing moves, but everything is moved,
- all is passion without action,
- all is instrument without any agent, and
- everything that did, does, or will exist has for its due season that *necessary existence* that we ordinarily regard as belonging to God alone.

I regard this as the genuine and most tenable system of necessity. It was the system of Spinoza, though he wasn't the first to propose it, for it is very ancient. And if this system is true, our reasoning to prove the existence of •God as• a first cause of everything that begins to exist must be given up as fallacious.

If it is evident to human understanding, as I take it to be, that •whatever begins to exist *must* have an efficient cause which had the power to settle whether or not it came into existence; and if it is true that •effects that are well and wisely fitted for the best purposes demonstrate not only the power of the cause but also its intelligence, wisdom, and goodness, •the proof of God's existence from these principles is very easy and obvious to anyone who can think.

If on the other hand •our belief that *everything that begins to exist has a cause* is acquired only from experience, and if—as Hume maintains—•the only notion of a *cause* is that of *something prior to the effect, which experience has shown to be constantly conjoined with such an effect*, I don't see how

it is possible from these principles to •prove the existence of an intelligent cause of the universe.

Hume seems to me to reason soundly from his definition of 'cause' when, writing like an Epicurean, he maintains we can't infer anything about a cause of the universe, because it is a singular effect. We can't have experience that effects *like this* are *always* conjoined with such-and-such a kind of cause, •because we can't have experience of any other effects *like this*•. Furthermore, the cause we assign to this effect •in the argument for God's existence• is a cause that no-one has seen or can see, and therefore experience can't tell us that

this cause has always been conjoined with such-and-such a kind of effect. He seems to me to reason soundly from his definition of *cause* when he maintains that *anything can be the cause of anything*, since priority and constant conjunction is all that can be conceived in the notion of a cause.

[In two more paragraphs Reid mentions 'another zealous defender of the doctrine of necessity', unnamed, who seems to accept Hume's premises though Reid is 'far from thinking' that this philosopher will come to Hume's conclusions.]

## Chapter 4: The influence of motives

The modern advocates for the doctrine of necessity put the weight of their argument on the influence of motives. They say:

Every deliberate action must have a motive. When there is no motive on the other side, this motive *must* determine the agent; when there are contrary motives, the strongest *must* prevail. We reason from men's motives to their actions, as we reason from other causes to their effects. If a man is a free agent and *not* governed by motives, all his actions must be mere caprice, rewards and punishments can have no effect, and such a man must be absolutely ungovernable.

·In face of this kind of thinking, I see that· to make clear the sense in which I ascribe moral liberty to men I have to explore the influence that we allow to motives. ·I have eight main things to say·, to prevent misunderstandings that have been very common on this point.

(1) I grant that all thinking beings are and ought to be influenced by motives. But the influence of motives is of a different kind from that of efficient causes. Motives are neither causes nor agents. It would be absurd to suppose that a motive either *acts* or *is acted on*; it is equally incapable of action and of passion, because it is not a •thing that exists, but a •thing that is conceived—what the Aristotelians called an *ens rationis* [Latin, 'being of reason'. Reid means something like this: If a man acts so as to get revenge on an enemy, we may say 'His motive was revenge'; but this use of the noun 'motive' doesn't imply that there are particular items in the world called 'motives'. We use the noun in one way of talking or thinking about a certain kind of fact, not a fact about a particular 'thing that exists', but one about *why the man acted as he did*; so the seemingly thing-like *motive* is a mere by-product of a

way of talking or thinking—that is, it's a 'being of reason'.] So motives can influence action, but they don't themselves act. They are comparable with advice or urging, which leaves a man still at liberty. For it is pointless to give advice to someone who doesn't have the power to do, and the power not to do, the recommended action. Similarly, motives presuppose liberty in the agent, and would have no influence at all if that liberty were not there.

It is a law of nature regarding matter that

Every motion or change of motion is proportional to the force impressed, and goes in the direction of that force.

The theory that all our actions are necessitated holds that a similar law holds for the actions of thinking beings. Staying close to the physical one, we can express it thus:

Every action or change of action in a thinking being is proportional to the force of motives impressed, and goes in the direction of that force.

The law of nature regarding matter is based on the principle that •matter is an inert, inactive substance, which doesn't act but is acted on; and the law of necessity must similarly be based on the supposition that a •thinking being is •also• an inert, inactive substance, which doesn't act but is acted upon.

(2) Rational beings, in proportion as they are wise and good, will act according to the best motives; and every rational being who does otherwise misuses his liberty. In every situation where there is a right and a wrong, a better and a worse, the most perfect being always infallibly acts according to the best motives. This indeed is little more than an identical proposition [= 'an elementary, trivial logical truth']; for

it is a contradiction to say that a being is perfect yet does what is wrong or unreasonable. But to say that •he doesn't act freely because he always does what is best is to say that •the proper use of liberty destroys liberty, and that liberty consists only in its misuse!

God's moral perfection doesn't consist in his having no power to act badly. As Clarke rightly remarks, if God *couldn't* act badly, there would be no ground to thank him for his goodness to us any more than to thank him for being infinite. God's moral perfection consists in this: having an irresistible power to do everything, he exercises it only in doing what is wisest and best. To be subject to necessity is to have no power at all; for power and necessity are opposites. We grant, therefore, that motives have influence, like the influence of advice or persuasion; but this influence is perfectly consistent with liberty, and indeed presupposes liberty.

**(3)** Must every deliberate action have a motive? That depends on what we mean by 'deliberate'. Judging by the word's source in the Latin *librare* = 'to weigh', it seems that the original meaning of 'deliberate action' is 'action in which motives are weighed'. Taking the adjective 'deliberate' in *that* sense, surely any deliberate action must involve motives, and indeed contrary motives, otherwise they could not be weighed against one another. But 'deliberate action' is commonly taken to mean 'action done by a cool and calm determination of the mind, with forethought and will'; and I believe that countless actions of that sort are performed without a motive.

Is this right? Well, put that question to every man's consciousness! Every day I perform many trifling actions in which I am not conscious of any motive; even when I reflect carefully on what happens in my mind. Leibniz and perhaps others might want to say that I can be influenced

by a motive of which I am not conscious. To this I have two replies. First, it is an arbitrary supposition with no evidence in its favour. Secondly, it is to say that I may be convinced by an argument which never entered into my thought.

It often happens that someone for whom it is of some importance to bring about a certain end can get it equally well by any one of several different means. In such a case, the person who intends the end hasn't the least trouble in adopting one of these means, even though he is quite sure that it is no better than any of the others.

To say that this cannot happen is to contradict the experience of mankind; for surely a man who has to spend a shilling may have two hundred shillings that are of equal value both to him and to the person he is paying, so that any one of them would serve his purpose equally well. To say that in such a case the man *couldn't make the payment* is still more ridiculous, though it is supported by some of the Aristotelians who maintained that an ass between two equal bundles of hay would be unable to choose between them, and so would stand still till it died of hunger.

If a man couldn't act without a motive, he would have no power at all; for motives are not in our power; and someone who doesn't have power over a necessary means doesn't have power over the end.

*An action performed without any motive can't have either merit nor demerit.* This proposition is much insisted on by writers in support of necessity; they present it triumphantly, as if the whole controversy turned on it. I grant it to be a self-evident proposition, and I don't know of any author who ever denied it.

But actions performed without any motive, however insignificant they are for •moral judgments on conduct, are important in •the question concerning moral liberty. For if there has ever been an action of this kind, *motives are not*



*the sole causes of human actions.* And if we have the power to act without a motive, *that* power may combine with a weaker motive to counterbalance a stronger one.

(4) It can never be proved that when there is a motive on one side only, that motive must determine the action.

According to the laws of reasoning, the burden of proof is borne by those who hold the affirmative. That is, the other side has to show (affirmatively) that in such a case the motive must prevail; my side is not obliged to show (negatively) that it needn't prevail. And I have never seen a shadow of argument for the affirmative position that doesn't take for granted the thing in question, namely that motives are the sole causes of actions.

Is there no such thing as wilfulness, caprice, or obstinacy among mankind? If there isn't, then it's amazing that these should have names in all languages! If there *are* such things, a single motive can be resisted—indeed, *many* motives—all pushing in the same direction—can be resisted.

(5) When it is said that *of contrary motives the strongest always wins*, we can't intelligently agree or disagree until we are clear about what is meant by the 'strongest' motive.

I don't find that those who have put this forward as a self-evident axiom have ever tried to explain what they mean by 'strongest', or given any rule by which to judge which of two motives is stronger.

How are we to know whether the strongest motive always wins if we don't know which of two motives is stronger? There must be some test for a motive's strength, some balance in which motives can be weighed; otherwise there is no meaning to the statement 'The strongest motive always wins'. So we must *search* for this test, this balance; because those who have laid so much stress on this 'axiom' have left us wholly in the dark as to its meaning. I grant that when the contrary motives are of the same kind and differ only in quantity,

it may be easy to say which is the stronger—a bribe of a thousand pounds is a stronger motive than a bribe of a hundred pounds. But when the motives are of different kinds—like money and fame, duty and ambition, health and strength, riches and honour—by what rule shall we judge which is the stronger motive?

We must measure the strength of motives merely by their success or by some other standard distinct from their success.

If we measure their strength merely by their success, and by 'the strongest motive' mean only the motive that wins, it will be true indeed that the strongest motive wins—but it will be an identical proposition meaning merely that the strongest motive is the strongest motive. From this, surely, nothing follows.

Here is something that might be said in reply:

By 'strength' of a motive we don't *mean* its aptness to win, but rather the *cause* of its aptness to win. We measure the cause by the effect, and from the superiority of the effect we infer the superiority of the cause—like inferring that the heavier of two weights is the one that lowers its side of the scale.

I answer that the axiom, on this account of it, takes for granted that motives are the causes, and the *only* causes, of actions. The only role allowed to the agent is to be acted on by the motives, as the balance is acted on by the weights. The axiom supposes that the agent does not act but is acted upon; and from this supposition it is concluded that he does not act. This is to reason in a circle—or rather it isn't reasoning at all but simply assuming the thing that was to be proved.

Contrary motives can very properly be compared to lawyers pleading the opposite sides of an issue in a law-court. To say 'Sentence was given in favour of the side supported

by Smith, so he is the more powerful pleader' would be very weak reasoning. The sentence is in the power of the •judge, not of the •lawyer. It is equally weak reasoning in defence of necessity to say that 'Motive M prevailed, therefore it was the strongest', since the defenders of liberty maintain that the determination was made by the •man and not by the •motive.

It comes down to this: unless some measure of the strength of motives can be found distinct from whether they win, we can't find out whether the strongest motive always wins. If such a measure can be found and applied, *then* we may be able to judge the truth of this maxim—but not otherwise.

Everything that can be called a motive is addressed either to the •animal part of our nature or to its •rational part. Motives of the former kind are ones we share with the lower animals, those of the latter kind come only to rational beings. Just to have clear labels, let me call the former 'animal motives' and the latter 'rational motives'.

Hunger is a motive in a dog to eat; so is it in a man. According to the strength of the appetite it gives a stronger or a weaker impulse to eat. And the same thing may be said of every other appetite and passion. Such animal motives give an impulse to the agent, and he finds it easy to let it have its way. And if the impulse is strong, he can't resist it without an effort that requires some degree of self-control. Such motives are not addressed to the rational powers. Their influence is immediately upon the will. We feel their influence and judge their strength by the conscious effort it takes to resist them.

When a man is acted upon by two contrary motives of this kind, he finds it easy to yield to the stronger. They are like two forces pushing him in contrary directions. To yield to the stronger he needs only to be passive. By exerting his own force he may resist, but this requires a conscious effort.

The strength of motives of this kind is perceived not by our •judgment but by our •feeling; and

the stronger of two contrary motives is the one to which the agent can give way more easily, or the one that it requires a •greater effort of self-control to resist.

We can call this the *animal test* of the strength of motives.

With motives of this kind, does the strongest always win? In the lower animals I believe it does. They seem to have no self-control; an appetite or passion in them is overcome only by a stronger contrary one. That is why they are not accountable for their actions and can't be made subjects of law.

But in men who can exercise their rational powers and have at least some degree of self-control, the strongest animal motive doesn't always win. The flesh doesn't always prevail against the spirit, though all too often it does. If men *were* necessarily determined by the strongest animal motive, they would no more be accountable, or capable of being governed by law, than the lower animals are.

Let us next consider rational motives (which are more commonly and more properly called 'motives' than the animal ones are). Their influence is on the judgment, by convincing us that a certain action ought to be done, is our duty, or is conducive to our real good or to some end that we are set on pursuing.

Unlike animal motives, they don't give a blind impulse to the will. They •convince but they don't •impel—except in the possibly frequent cases where they arouse some *passion* of hope or fear or desire. When one's being convinced arouses a passion, the passion may push the same way as the conviction does, just as other animal motives do. But there can be conviction without passion; and what I call a 'rational motive' is being convinced of what one ought to do

in pursuit of some end that one has judged fit to be pursued.

I don't think the lower animals can be influenced by such motives. They don't have the conceptions of *ought* and *ought not*. Children acquire these conceptions as their rational powers grow, and the conceptions are found in all fully equipped human adults.

If there is any competition between rational motives, it is obvious that the strongest *in the eyes of reason* is the one that it is most our duty and our real happiness to follow. Our duty and our real happiness are inseparable ends; and they are the ends that every man endowed with reason is aware that he ought to pursue in preference to all others. This we may call the *rational test* of the strength of motives. A motive that is the strongest according to the animal test may be—and very often *is*—the weakest according to the rational test.

The important competition between contrary motives is that between animal motives and rational ones. This is the conflict between the flesh and the spirit upon the outcome of which the character of men depends.

Which kind of motive is stronger, animal or rational? The answer is that the animal ones are commonly stronger by the standard of the animal test. If that were not so,

human life would not be a state of trial,  
it would not be a battle,  
virtue would not require any effort or self-control, and  
no man would have any temptation to do wrong.

But when we assess the contrary motives by the rational test, it is obvious that the rational motive is always the strongest.

And now I think it appears that the strongest motive, according to *either* of the tests I have mentioned, does not always win.

In every wise and virtuous action the motive that wins is the strongest according to the rational test but commonly the

weakest according to the animal test. In every foolish action and in every vicious one the motive that wins is commonly the strongest according to the animal test but is always the weakest according to the rational test.

**(6)** It is true that we reason from men's motives to their actions, often doing so with great probability though never with absolute certainty. To infer from *this* fact that men are necessarily determined by motives is very weak reasoning.

For purposes of argument, allow for a moment that men do have moral liberty. What use can they be expected to make of this liberty? Surely it can be expected that of the various actions within their power they will choose what pleases them most for the present or what appears to be most conducive to their real though distant good. When there is a competition between these motives, the foolish will prefer present gratification, the wise the greater and more distant good.

Now isn't this just how we see that men *do* act? Isn't it from the presumption that they act in *this* way that we reason from their motives to their actions? Surely it is! Well, then, isn't it weak reasoning to argue that men *don't* have liberty because they act exactly as they would if they *did* have liberty? It would surely be more like reasoning—genuine unfeeble reasoning—to start with the same premises and draw the opposite conclusion, namely, the conclusion that men do have liberty.

**(7)** Nor is it better reasoning to argue that if men are not necessarily determined by motives all their actions must be capricious.

To resist the strongest animal motives when duty requires one to do so—far from being capricious—is utterly wise and virtuous. And we hope that good men often do this.

To act against rational motives must always be foolish, vicious or capricious. And it can't be denied that there are

all too many actions of that kind. But is it reasonable to conclude that because liberty can be misused by foolish and vicious people, therefore it can never be put to its proper use, which is to act wisely and virtuously?

(8) It is equally unreasonable to conclude that if men are not necessarily determined by motives, rewards and punishments would have no effect. With wise men they will have their due effect, though not always with the foolish and the vicious.

Let us consider •what effect rewards and punishments do—really and in fact—produce, and •what follows from that according to the opposing systems of liberty and of necessity.

I take it for granted that in fact *the best and wisest laws, both human and divine, are often broken, despite the rewards and punishments that are attached to them*. If anyone denied this fact, I wouldn't know how to argue with him.

Combine this fact with the supposition of necessity—i.e. that there is no moral liberty, and all human conduct is strictly determined—and you get the conclusion that in every instance of law-breaking the motive of reward or punishment was not strong enough to produce obedience

to the law. This implies a fault in the lawgiver; but there can be no fault in the law-breaker, who acts mechanically by the force of motives. Blaming him would be like blaming a balance when a one-pound weight doesn't raise a weight of two pounds.

On the supposition of necessity there can be neither *reward* nor *punishment* in the proper senses of those words, because they imply *deserving* good and *deserving* bad. For the necessitarian, reward and punishment are only tools used in mechanically producing a certain effect. When the effect is not produced the tool must be wrong for the job or else wrongly used.

On the supposition of liberty, rewards and punishments will have a proper effect on the wise and the good; but not on the foolish and the vicious when opposed by their animal passions or bad habits; and this is just what we see to be the fact. On this supposition of liberty the breaking of the law doesn't show a defect in the law or a fault in the lawgiver; the fault is solely in the law-breaker. And it is only on this supposition that there can be either reward or punishment in the proper sense of those words, because it is only on this supposition that anyone can *deserve* good or *deserve* bad.

## Chapter 5: Liberty is consistent with government

It is said that liberty would make us absolutely ungovernable by God or man. To understand the strength of this conclusion we need a firm grasp of what is meant by 'govern'. There are two radically different kinds of government, which I shall label—just for convenience's sake—•mechanical government'

and •moral government'. The former is the •government of beings that have no active power, and are merely passive and acted-on; the latter is the •government of beings that are thinking and active.

For an example of mechanical government, think of the captain of a ship at sea—a ship that has been skillfully built and equipped with everything needed for the intended voyage. Governing the ship properly for this purpose requires much skill and attention; and this skill, like every other, has its rules or laws. But by whom are those laws to be obeyed or those rules observed? Not by the ship, surely, for it is an inactive being; rather, by the captain. A sailor may say of the ship that ‘She doesn’t obey the rudder’, and he has a definite clear meaning when he says this, and is perfectly understood. But he means ‘obey’ not in its literal sense but in a metaphorical sense, for in the literal sense the ship can no more *obey* the rudder than it can give a command. Every movement of the ship and of the rudder is exactly proportional to the force exerted on it, and is in the direction of that force. The ship never ‘disobeys’ the laws of motion, even in the metaphorical sense; and they are the only laws it can be subject to.

The sailor may curse the ship for ‘not obeying the rudder’; but this is the voice of passion, not of reason; it is like the losing gambler who curses the dice. The ship is as innocent as the dice.

Whatever may happen during the voyage, whatever may be its outcome, the ship in the eye of reason is not an object of approval or of blame; because it doesn’t *act*, but is only *acted on*. If the material in any part of the ship is faulty, who put it to that use? If anything is wrongly formed, who made it? If the rules of navigation were not observed; who broke them? If a storm caused a disaster, that was no more in the ship’s power than in the captain’s.

[Then a paragraph about a puppet show, where errors are due only to the maker or the user of the puppets.]

Suppose for a moment that the puppets are endowed with thought and will but without any degree of active power.

This makes no change in the kind of government they are under, because thought and will can’t produce any effect unless active power is also present. On this supposition, the puppets might be called ‘thinking machines’; but they would still be *machines*, and as much subject to the laws of motion as inanimate matter is, and therefore incapable of any government except mechanical government.

Let us next consider the nature of moral government. This is the government of persons who have reason and active power, and whose conduct comes under laws prescribed by a legislator. Their obedience is *obedience* in the proper sense; so it must be their own act and deed, and consequently they must have the power to obey and the power to disobey. To subject them to laws that they haven’t the power to obey, or require a service beyond their powers, would be the worst sort of tyranny and injustice.

When laws are fair, and are prescribed by a just authority, they create moral obligations in those that are subject to them, and disobedience is a crime that deserves punishment. But if a law is impossible to obey, if breaking it is necessary, then there can be no moral obligation to do what is impossible, no crime in yielding to necessity, and no justice in punishing a person for something that he hadn’t the power to avoid. These are fundamental axioms in morals, and to every unprejudiced mind they are as self-evident as the axioms of mathematics. The whole science of morals must stand or fall with them.

Now that the natures of mechanical and of moral government have been explained, they being the only kinds of government I can conceive, it is easy to see how far liberty or necessity agrees with either.

On the one hand I acknowledge that necessity agrees perfectly with mechanical government. This kind of government is at its best when the only agent is the governor—anything

that is *done* is the doing of the governor alone. So he alone merits praise for things that are well done, and blame for anything done badly. In common language, praise or dispraise is often given *metaphorically* to the work; but strictly it belongs only to the author of the work. Every workman understands this perfectly, and rightly takes to himself the praise or dispraise of his own work.

On the other hand, it is equally obvious that if the governed are subject to •necessity there can be no •moral government. There can't be wisdom or fairness in prescribing laws that can't be obeyed. There can be no moral obligation on beings that have no active power. There can be no crime in not doing what it was impossible to do, and no justice in punishing such an omission.

If we apply these theoretical principles to the kinds of government that do actually exist—whether human or divine—we shall find that when men are the governors even mechanical government is imperfect.

Men don't make the matter they work upon. Its various kinds, and the qualities belonging to each kind, are the work of God. The laws of nature to which it is subject are God's work. The motions of the atmosphere and of the sea, the heat and cold of the air, the rain and wind, all of which are useful instruments in most human operations, are not in our power. So that in all of *men's* mechanical productions, the work should be ascribed to God more than to man.

•Civil government among men is a kind of •moral government, but it is imperfect because its lawgivers and judges are imperfect. Human laws can be unwise or unjust, human judges biased or unskilful. But in all fair civil governments the maxims of moral government that I have mentioned are acknowledged as rules that *ought* never to be violated. Indeed the rules of justice are so obvious to all men that •even• the most tyrannical governments profess to be guided

by them, and use the plea of 'necessity' to excuse what they do that is contrary to them.

That a man can't be under an obligation to do something impossible, that he can't be criminal in yielding to necessity or justly punished for what he couldn't avoid—all criminal courts admit these maxims as basic rules of justice.

In opposition to this, some of the ablest defenders of necessity have said that what human laws require for a breach of law to constitute a crime is merely *that it be voluntary*; from which they infer that the •criminality consists in •the determination of the will, whether that determination be free or necessary. This seems to me to be the only basis on which criminality could be made consistent with necessity; so it ought to be considered.

I agree that a crime must be voluntary; for if an action is not voluntary it is not a deed *of the man* and can't fairly be attributed to him; but •for criminality• it is just as necessary that the criminal have moral liberty. In sane adults this liberty is presumed. In cases where it can't be presumed, no criminality is attributed even to voluntary actions.

Here are four phenomena that make this evident. **(1)** The actions of the lower animals appear to be voluntary, but they are never thought to be criminal, even when they are noxious. **(2)** Young children act voluntarily, but are not chargeable with crimes. **(3)** Madmen have both understanding and will, but they lack moral liberty and therefore are not chargeable with crimes. **(4)** When a sane adult performs a voluntary action which would ordinarily be highly criminal, he is largely or wholly cleared of blame if he acted from a motive that is thought to be irresistible by any ordinary degree of self-control—a motive such as would be presented by the rack or the threat of present death; which makes it clear that if the motive were absolutely irresistible the freedom from blame would be complete.

So far is it from being true in itself, or agreeable to the common sense of mankind, that the criminality of a ·law-breaking· action depends solely on its being voluntary!

[Reid devotes a paragraph to explaining how men's government of lower animals is a sort of mechanical government 'or something very like it'.]

Children under age are governed much in the same way as the most intelligent lower animals. The opening up of their intellectual and moral powers, which can be greatly helped by proper instruction and example, is what makes them gradually come to be capable of moral government.

Reason teaches us that God's government of the inanimate and inactive part of his creation is analogous to—but infinitely more perfect than—the mechanical government that men exercise. I think this is what we call God's *natural* government of the universe. In this part of the divine government, whatever is done is God's doing. He is the sole cause, the sole agent, whether he acts immediately or acts through instruments subordinate to him; and his will is always done, for instruments are not causes or agents, though we sometimes improperly call them so.

So it is as agreeable to reason as to the language of the Bible to attribute to God whatever is done in the natural world. When we call something 'the work of nature' we are saying that it is the work of God. There is nothing else we can mean.

The natural world is a great machine, designed, built and governed by the wisdom and power of God; and if this natural world contains any beings that have life and intelligence and will without any degree of active power, they must be subject to the same kind of mechanical government. Their determinations—that is, their acts of will—whether we call them good or bad must be the actions of God as much as the productions of the earth are; for intelligence and will without

active power can't *do* anything, and therefore nothing can justly be attributed to it. [Reid elaborates this point through a further paragraph. Then:]

According to the system of necessity, this natural world is the entire created universe, and

- God is the sole agent of everything that is done in it,
- there can be no moral government or moral obligation;
- laws, rewards and punishments are only mechanical engines, and
- the lawgiver's will is obeyed as much when his laws are broken as when they are kept.

These must be our notions of the government of the world on the supposition of necessity. It must be purely mechanical, with no moral government, on that hypothesis.

Let us consider, on the other hand, what the supposition of liberty naturally leads us to think about God's government.

Those who adopt this system—i.e. who believe that there is such a thing as moral liberty—think that in the little bit of the universe that we can see •a great part has no active power and moves only as necessity moves it, and so must be subject to a mechanical government, and also •it has pleased God to bestow upon some of his creatures—man in particular—some degree of active power and of reason to direct him to the right use of his power.

We don't know what connection there is in the nature of things between reason and active power; but we see clearly that •reason without active power can do nothing, and that •active power without reason has no guide to direct it to any end.

The conjunction of •reason and •active power constitutes •moral liberty. However little of it man possesses, his having *some* moral liberty raises him to a superior rank in the creation of God. He isn't merely a *tool* in the hand of the master, but a *servant* in the proper sense of that word—someone who

has been *entrusted* with certain tasks and is accountable for carrying them out. Within the sphere of his power he has a subordinate dominion or government, so that he can be said to be made ‘in the image of God’, the supreme governor. But because his dominion is subordinate he has a moral obligation to use it properly, so far as he is guided by his God-given reason. When he does so he earns moral approval, and equally earns disapproval and punishment when he misuses the power that has been entrusted to him. And he must finally give to the supreme governor and righteous judge an account of his use of the talent committed to him.

This is the moral government of God. Far from being *inconsistent* with liberty, it *presupposes* liberty in those who are subject to it, and it can’t extend any further than their liberty extends; for •accountability can no more agree with •necessity than •light can agree with •darkness.

Note also that as active power in man and in every created being is the gift of God, it is entirely up to him

whether a man has active power,  
how much active power he has, and  
how long he goes on having it.

So nothing happens through a creature’s active power that God doesn’t see fit to *allow*. I shall discuss this at length in chapter 11.

Our power to act doesn’t exempt us from being acted upon and restrained or compelled by a superior power; and God’s power is always superior to man’s.

It would be foolish and presumptuous for us to claim to know all the ways in which God’s government is carried on, which would include knowing *how God’s purposes are achieved by men acting freely and having purposes of their own that are different from or opposite to his*. For, as the heavens are high above the earth so are his thoughts above our thoughts and his ways above our ways.

A man can have a great influence on the voluntary determinations of other men by means of education, example and persuasion—both sides in the liberty/necessity debate must agree about *that*. When you talk me into doing something, how far is the moral responsibility for my action mine and how far is it yours? We don’t know; but God knows and will judge righteously.

But I would say this: if a *man* of superior talents can have a great influence on the actions of his fellow creatures, without taking away their liberty, it is surely reasonable to allow a much greater influence of the same kind to *God*, who made man. And there is no way of proving that God doesn’t have wisdom and power needed to govern *free* agents so that they serve his purposes.

God may have ways of governing man’s determinations consistently with man’s moral liberty—ways of which we have no conception. And he who freely gave *us* this liberty may limit it in any way that is needed for his wise and benevolent purposes. The justice of his government requires that his creatures should be accountable only for what they have received, and not for what was never entrusted to them. And we are sure that the judge of all the earth will do what is right.

So it turns out, I think, •that on the supposition of necessity there can be no moral government of the universe; its government must be wholly mechanical, and everything that happens in it, good or bad, must be God’s doing. And •that on the supposition of liberty there may be a perfect moral government of the universe, consistently with God’s accomplishing all the purposes he had in creating and governing it.

Of the arguments to show that man is endowed with moral liberty, the three that carry most weight with me are: Man has moral liberty **(1)** because he has a natural conviction



or belief that in many cases he acts freely; **(2)** . . . because he is accountable; and **(3)** . . . because he is able to pursue an end through a long series of means adapted to it. ·I shall

discuss these in turn, giving them a chapter each·.

## Chapter 6: First argument

Our conviction that we act freely is a natural one. It is built into us. This conviction is so early, so universal, and so essential to most of our rational operations that it must be built into us and be the work of God who made us.

Some of the most strenuous advocates for the doctrine of necessity admit that it is impossible to act on it. They say that we have a natural sense or conviction that we act freely, but that this is a fallacious sense.

This doctrine is insulting to God, and lays a foundation for universal scepticism. It supposes that God in making us gave us one faculty on purpose to deceive us, and another to detect the fallacy and discover that he has deceived us.

If one of our natural faculties is fallacious, there can be no reason to trust to any of them; for he who made one made all. •The genuine dictate of our natural faculties is •the voice of God, just as much as •what he reveals from heaven; and to say that it is fallacious is to attribute a lie to the God of truth. [Then a brief paragraph on how shocking it is to credit God with a lie.]

. . . .Let us now consider the evidence of our having a natural conviction that we have some degree of active power.

The very conception or idea of active power must come from something in our own constitution—that is, it must be built into us ·. It can't be accounted for in any other way. We

see events but we don't see the power that produces them. We see one event to *follow* another, but we don't see the chain *connecting* them. So the notion of power and causation can't be acquired from external objects.

Yet the notion of cause, and the belief that every event must have a cause that had the power to produce it, are found so firmly established in every human mind that they can't be rooted out. This notion and this belief must have their origin in something in our constitution; and their being *natural* to man is supported by the following ·five· observations.

**(1)** We are conscious of many voluntary exertions—some easy, others harder, and some requiring a great effort. These are exercises of power. And though a man may be unconscious of his power when he *doesn't* exercise it, he must have both the conception of it and the belief in it when he knowingly and willingly exercises it intending to produce some effect.

**(2)** Deliberating about whether or not to do something involves a conviction that doing it is in our power. . . .

**(3)** You have concluded your deliberation and now resolve to do what has appeared to you to be the best thing to do: can you form such a resolution or purpose without thinking that you have the power to carry it out? No; it is impossible. . . .

(4) When I pledge my word in a promise or contract, I must believe that I'll have the power to do what I promise. Otherwise the promise would be outright fraud.

Every promise contains a tacit condition, 'If I live', 'If God continues to give me the power he has given so far'. So our conviction that we *have* the power doesn't in any way go against our dependence on God. . . .

If we act on the system of necessity, there must be another condition implied in all deliberation, in every resolution, and in every promise—namely 'If *when the time comes* I am willing'. But the will is not in our power, so we can't make promises on its behalf!

With *this* condition understood, as it must be if we act on the system of necessity, there can be no deliberation, no resolution, and no obligation in a promise. A man might as well deliberate resolve and promise regarding the actions of other men as his own. . . .

(5) Can any man blame himself for yielding to necessity? If so, then he can blame himself for dying, or for being a man! Blame presupposes a wrong use of power; and when a man does as well as it was *possible* for him to do, what can he be blamed for? So any conviction of having done wrong, any remorse and self-condemnation, implies a conviction of having had the power to do better. Take away this conviction and there may *still* be a *sense* of misery, or a dread of evil to come, but there can be no *sense* of guilt or resolve to do better.

Many who hold the doctrine of necessity disown these consequences of it and think they can avoid them. . . . But their inseparable connection with that doctrine appears self-evident, which is why some necessitarians have had the boldness to avow them. *Their position is this*:

Men can't accuse themselves of having 'done something wrong' in the basic sense of the words. In a strict

sense they *should* have no dealings with repentance, confession, and pardon, because these are adapted to a fallacious view of things.

Those who can believe all *that* may indeed celebrate with high praise the great and glorious doctrine of necessity. It restores them—they think—to the state of innocence. It delivers them from all the pangs of guilt and remorse, and from all fear about their future conduct (though not from fear about their fate). They can be as secure those who won't do anything wrong, and as those who have come to the end of their lives. A doctrine so flattering to the mind of a sinner is very apt to make weak arguments convincing! . . .

If the belief that we have active power is necessarily implied in the *rational* operations I have mentioned, that belief must have come into our minds when *reason* did; and it must be as universal among men and as necessary in the conduct of life as those *rational* operations are.

We can't *remember* when we acquired the belief. It can't be a prejudice of our upbringing or of false philosophy. It must be built into us, and so must be the work of God.

In this respect it is like our belief *in* the existence of a material world, our belief *that* those we have conversations with are living thinking beings, our belief *that* the things we clearly remember really did happen, and our belief *that* we continue to be the same identical persons *through* time.

We find it hard to account for these beliefs of ours, and some philosophers think they have discovered good reasons for giving them up. But the beliefs stick to us tightly, and the greatest sceptic finds that he has to accept them in his *practice* even while he wages war against them in *theory*.

[Reid now offers several paragraphs of remarks and examples involving people who reject some proposition in theory but live by it in practice. Then:]

Some beliefs are so necessary that without them a man wouldn't be the being that God made him. These may be opposed in theory but we can't root them out. While one is theorizing, they seem to vanish; but in practice they resume their authority. This seems to be the case with those who hold the doctrine of necessity and yet act as if they were free.

[The a paragraph repeating that 'this natural conviction of some degree of power in ourselves and in other men' concerns only voluntary actions.]

But it is worth noting that we don't think that absolutely *everything* that depends on a man's will is in his power. There are many exceptions, the most obvious of which I shall mention because they both •illustrate how power is connected to the will and •are of importance in the question concerning the liberty of man.

[Two examples are: madness, where 'the will is driven by a tempest'; and idiocy, where there is no 'light in the understanding' and only blind impulse can rule.]

Between •the darkness of infancy which is equal to that of idiots and •the maturity of reason there is a long twilight which imperceptibly develops into full daylight. In this period of life, the young person has little power to govern himself. His actions are in others' power more than in his own—for natural reasons backed up by the laws of society. His folly and indiscretion, his frivolity and unreliability, are considered as the fault of youth rather than of the person. We consider him as half a man and half a child, and expect that each by turns should play its part. Only a severe and unfair censor of conduct would demand the same cool deliberation, the same steady conduct, and the same mastery over himself, in a boy of thirteen as in a man of thirty.

It is an old saying that 'violent anger is a short fit of madness'. If this is ever literally true, the man of whose anger it is true can't be said to have command of himself.

If real madness could be proved, it must *have the effect of madness while it lasts*, whether that is for an hour or for life. But there is no way of proving that a short fit of passion really is madness, which is why anger is not admitted in human law-courts as cancelling guilt. And I don't think that anyone can ever be sure in his own mind that *his* anger, both in its beginning and in its progress, was irresistible. Only •God•, the searcher of hearts, knows for sure what allowance should be made in cases of this kind.

But even if a violent passion is not literally irresistible, resisting it may be *difficult*; and surely a man doesn't have the same power over himself in a passion as when he is cool. For this reason, passion is allowed by all men to reduce guilt when it can't cancel it; it carries weight in criminal courts as well as in private judgment.

Note also that someone who has accustomed himself to restrain his passions *enlarges by habit* his power over them and consequently his power over himself. When we consider that a Canadian savage can acquire the power of defying death in its most dreadful forms, and of enduring the most excruciating tortures for many long hours without losing the command of himself, this can teach us that in the constitution of human nature there is plenty of room for the enlargement of the power of self-command—a power without which there can be no virtue and no magnanimity.

[Through three paragraphs Reid contrasts our reaction to a man who betrays his country for a large bribe with our reaction to one who betrays it under torture or credible threat of death.]

Why is it that everyone agrees in condemning the first of these men as a traitor while regarding the second man as having much less guilt, if any? If each man acted necessarily, compelled by an irresistible motive, I see no reason why we shouldn't pass the same judgment on both.

But the reason for these different judgments is evidently this: •the love of money and of what is called a man's 'interest' is a cool motive, which leaves a man's power over himself intact; whereas •the torment of the rack or the dread of present death are such violent motives that men who don't have uncommon strength of mind are not masters of themselves in such a situation, and therefore what they do is not held against them or is thought less criminal.

[Reid points out that a man's habits can lessen his power over himself. For this and other reasons, there is much inter-personal variation in degree of self-command.]

These are facts attested by experience and supported by the common judgment of mankind. On the system of liberty they are perfectly intelligible; but I think they are inconsistent with the system of necessity, for how can actions that are all *necessary* be divided into the *easy* ones and the *difficult* ones? •By how much power it takes to

perform them?• How can power be greater or less, increased or lessened, in people who have no power?

This natural conviction that we act freely, which is acknowledged by many who hold the doctrine of necessity, ought to throw the whole burden of proof onto *them*. For the liberty side of the debate has what lawyers call a *right of ancient possession*—a right that ought to be recognized until •and unless• it is overturned. If it can't be proved •that we always act from necessity, there is no need of *arguments* on the other side to convince us •that we are free agents.

To illustrate this by a similar case: if a philosopher wanted to convince me that my fellow men with whom I converse are not thinking intelligent beings but mere machines, though I might be at a loss to find arguments *against* this strange opinion, I would think it reasonable, until convincing proof is brought *for* it, to retain the belief that nature gave me before I was capable of weighing evidence.

## Chapter 7: Second argument

Certain principles are proclaimed by every man's conscience, and are the basis for the systems of •morality and •natural religion, as well as of the system of •revelation. They are these:

- There a real and essential distinction between right and wrong conduct, between just and unjust.
- Perfect moral rectitude is to be ascribed to God.
- Man is a moral and accountable being, capable of acting rightly and wrongly, and answerable for his conduct to •God• who made him and assigned him a

part to act on the stage of life.

These have been generally accepted by people on both sides of the dispute about human liberty, so •in what follows• I shall take them for granted.

These principles afford an obvious and (I think) invincible argument that man is endowed with moral liberty.

Two things are implied in the notion of a moral and accountable being—•understanding and •active power.

(1) He must understand the law to which he is bound and understand his obligation to obey it. [Reid develops this

point at some length, remarking that the lower animals *are not* capable of ‘moral obligation’ because they *don’t* have ‘that degree of understanding which it implies’; whereas man *is* because he *does*.]

(2) Another thing implied in the notion of a moral and accountable being is the power to do what he is accountable for. [Reid expands on this a little, repeating things said earlier.]

Some moralists have mentioned what they think is an exception to this maxim, as follows. When a man has *through his own fault* lost the power to do his duty, his obligation (they say) remains, although he now can’t discharge it. For example, if a man has become bankrupt through extravagant spending, his inability to pay his debts doesn’t take away his obligation to pay them.

To judge whether in this and similar cases there is any exception to the axiom above mentioned—namely, that an obligation to do something requires the power to do it—the cases must be described accurately.

No doubt a man is highly criminal in living beyond his means, and his crime is made much worse by his being thereby unable to pay his just debts. Well, now, let us suppose that

- he is punished for this crime as much as it deserves;
- his goods are fairly distributed among his creditors;
- half of his debt remains unpaid;
- he adds no new crime to his past one;
- he becomes a new man, and not only supports himself by honest industry but does everything in his power to pay what he still owes.

I now ask: is he further punishable, and really guilty, for not paying more than he is able to pay? Consult your own conscience and say whether you can blame this man for not doing more than he is able to do. His guilt before his

bankruptcy is undeniable, and he has been duly punished for it. But you must allow that his subsequent conduct is *not* blameworthy, and that in his present state he is accountable for no more than he is able to do. His obligation is not *cancelled*: as he becomes able to pay more, his obligation to pay returns; but it doesn’t stretch further than that.

[Reid gives another example: a sailor in his country’s navy who ‘cuts off his fingers’ so as to be unable to serve. He is guilty of a crime and should be punished for it; but he shouldn’t be required still perform the duties of a sailor.]

Suppose a servant through negligence and inattention misunderstands an order given him by his master, and because of this misunderstanding he does something he was ordered not to do.

It is commonly said that *culpable ignorance does not excuse a fault*, but that is the wrong thing to say because it doesn’t show where the fault lies. His only fault was that inattention or negligence which caused his misunderstanding; there was no subsequent fault.

To make this clear, let us vary the case. Let us suppose that he was *unavoidably* led into the misunderstanding without any fault on his part. His misunderstanding is now *invincible* [here = ‘unavoidable’] and in the opinion of all moralists it takes away all blame; yet the only difference we have made in the case concerns the cause of his misunderstanding. His subsequent conduct was the same in both cases. The fault in the original case therefore lay solely in his negligence and inattention.

The axiom that *invincible ignorance takes away all blame* is only a particular case of the general axiom that *there can be no moral obligation to do what is impossible*. The former is based on the latter and can have no other foundation.

[Reid presents ‘one case more’: a man whose wild way of life has made him completely mad, which he knew it was

going to do. Criminal as he *was*, nobody will think that he *now* bears any guilt or is under any obligation.]

My judgments on these cases are based on the basic principles of morals, the most immediate dictates of conscience. If these principles are given up, all moral reasoning is at an end and no distinction is left between just and unjust. And it's obvious that none of these cases is an exception to the axiom I have cited. No moral obligation is consistent with impossibility in the performance.

So active power is implied in the very notion of a moral-ly-accountable being. And if man is such a being he must have a degree of active power proportional to the account he is to make. . . . What I said in the first argument about the limits on our power also strengthens the present argument. A man's •power, I noted, extends only to his voluntary actions and has many limitations even with respect to them.

His •accountableness has the same extent and the same limitations. [Reid then sketches madness, infancy, and violent passions as reducers of *power* and also, he now says, of *accountability* also.]

Thus, power exactly corresponds with moral obligation and accountableness. They not only •correspond in general

in their relations to voluntary actions, but •every limitation of power produces a corresponding limitation of the other two. This amounts to nothing more than the maxim of common sense, confirmed by divine authority, which says that from him to whom much is given much will be required.

The bottom line of this •second• argument is that a certain degree of active power is a talent that God has given to every rational accountable creature, and the creature will be answerable for how he uses it. If man had no power, he would have nothing to answer for. All wise and all foolish conduct, all virtue and vice, consist in the right use or in the misuse of the power that God has given us. If man had no power, he couldn't be wise or foolish, virtuous or vicious.

If we adopt the system of necessity, the expressions 'moral obligation' and 'accountability', 'praise' and 'blame', 'merit' and 'demerit', 'justice' and 'injustice', 'reward' and 'punishment', 'wisdom' and 'folly', 'virtue' and 'vice', ought to be dropped or to have new meanings given to them when they are used in religion, in morals, or in civil government; for on that system there can be no such things as those expressions have always been used to signify.

## Chapter 8: Third argument

That man has power over his own actions and volitions is shown by his ability to carry out wisely and prudently a plan of conduct which he has thought up in advance and resolved to carry through. . . . Some men in their adult years deliberately laid down a plan of conduct which they

resolved to keep to throughout life, and some of them steadily pursued, by the proper means, the end they had in view.

In this argument it doesn't matter whether a man has made the best choice of his main end—whether it is riches or power or fame or the approval of his maker. All I am

supposing is that he has prudently and steadily pursued it; that in a long course of deliberate actions he has adopted the means that seemed most favourable to his end and avoided whatever might thwart it.

Nobody has ever doubted that such conduct demonstrates that the man has a certain degree of wisdom and understanding, and I say it demonstrates equally forcefully that he has a certain degree of power over his voluntary determinations.

You'll see that this is right if you bear in mind that understanding without power, though it may form plans, can't carry them out. A regular plan can't be devised without understanding, and can't be carried out without power; so the carrying out of a plan, an •effect, demonstrates that the •cause has both power and understanding. . . .

In this argument I employ the same principles as we use in demonstrating the existence and perfections of ·God·, the first cause of all things:

The effects that we observe in the course of nature require a cause. Effects wisely adapted to an end require a wise cause. Every indication of the wisdom of the creator is equally an indication of his power. His wisdom appears only in the works done by his power; wisdom without power may speculate but it can't act; it may plan but it can't carry out its plans.

The same reasoning can be applied to the works of men. In a stately palace we see the wisdom of the architect. His wisdom contrived it, and wisdom could do no more. The execution of the plan required both •a clear conception of the plan and •power to operate according to the plan.

Let us apply these principles to the case of the man who in a long course of conduct has determined and acted prudently in pursuing a certain end. If he had the wisdom needed to plan this course of conduct and the power over his

own actions needed to carry it out, he is a free agent who, in this case, used his liberty with understanding.

But if all his particular determinations that combined to bring about the success of his plan were produced not by •himself but by •some cause acting necessarily on him, then there is no evidence left that he devised the plan or that he ever gave it a thought.

The cause that directed all these determinations so wisely—whatever it was—must be a wise and intelligent cause; it must have understood the plan and have intended it to be carried through.

You might think that all this series of determinations was produced by *motives*. But motives surely don't have the understanding needed to conceive a plan and intend it to be carried through; so we need to go back behind the motives to some intelligent being who had the power to arrange those motives and apply them with the right order and timing to bring about the ·planned· end.

This intelligent being must have understood the plan and intended to follow it; so the man had no hand in carrying out the plan, and we have no evidence •that he had *any* hand in the planning, or even •that he is a thinking being.

If we can believe that an extensive series of means can

- combine to promote an end without any cause having intended the end, and
- have power to choose and apply those means for the purpose,

we may as well believe that this world was made by a chance coming together of atoms without an intelligent and powerful cause. If a lucky coming together of *motives* could produce the conduct of an Alexander or a Julius Caesar, no reason can be given why a lucky coming together of *atoms* couldn't produce the planetary system!

So if wise conduct in a man shows that he has some degree of wisdom, it also shows with equal force and clarity that he has some degree of power over his own determinations. . . .

Descartes thought that the human body is merely a mechanical engine and that all its motions and actions are produced by mechanism. If such a machine could be made to speak and to act rationally, we could indeed be sure that •its maker had both reason and active power; but once we learned that everything the machine did was purely mechanical we would have no reason to conclude that •the man had reason or thought. . . .

And if the necessitarian accepts this, and agrees that he has no evidence that there is thought and reasoning in any of his fellow men, who for all he knows may be mechanical engines, he will be forced to admit that the maker of those engines must have active power as well as understanding, and that the first cause is a free agent. We have the same reason to believe in God's freedom as we have to believe in

his existence and his wisdom. And if God acts freely, that destroys every argument brought to prove that freedom of action is impossible.

The First Cause gives us evidence of his •power by every effect that gives us evidence of his •wisdom. And if he sees fit to communicate to men some degree of his wisdom, no reason can be given why he may not also pass along some degree of his power as the talent that wisdom is to use.

Clarke has proved that the first motion—or the first effect, whatever it may be—can't be produced necessarily, and thus that the first cause must be a free agent (this is in his *Demonstration of the existence and attributes of God*, and at the end of his remarks on Collins's *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty*). He shows this so clearly and unanswerably that I have nothing to add. And I haven't seen any of the defenders of necessity bringing any objections against his reasoning.



## Chapter 9: Arguments for necessity

I have already considered some of the arguments that have been offered for necessity. I dealt with this one in chapter 1:

- Human liberty concerns only actions that are subsequent to volition, and power over volition itself is inconceivable and involves a contradiction.

And in chapters 4 and 5 I dealt with these:

- Liberty is inconsistent with the influence of motives;
- it would make human actions capricious;
- it would make man ungovernable by God or man.

I shall now discuss some other arguments that have been urged in this cause. They fall into three groups: they aim to prove regarding liberty of determination or volition that

- it is impossible, or that
- it would be harmful, or that
- in fact man has such liberty.

I shall deal with the first kind of argument in the remainder of this chapter, and the third kind in chapter 10. The second kind has in fact already been dealt with, and needn't be gone through again.

To prove that liberty of determination is impossible it has been said that there must be a sufficient reason for everything. *For every existence, for every event, for every truth, there must be a sufficient reason.* The famous German philosopher Leibniz boasted of being the first to apply this principle in philosophy, and of having thereby changed metaphysics from being a play of meaningless words to being a rational and demonstrative science. So it ought to be considered.

A very obvious objection to this principle was that two or more means may be equally fit for the same end. and that in such a case there may be a sufficient reason for adopting

one of the means yet no sufficient reason for preferring that one to another that is just as good.

To counter this objection Leibniz maintained that such a case couldn't occur, or that if it did then none of the means could be used because there wouldn't be a sufficient reason to prefer one to the rest. So he sided with some of the Aristotelians in maintaining that if an ass *could* be placed between two equally inviting bundles of hay, the poor beast would certainly stand still and starve; but he says that it would take a miracle for an ass to be so situated.

When it was objected to the principle of sufficient reason that there could be no reason but the will of God

- why the material world was placed in one part of unlimited space rather than another,
- why the world was created at one point in limitless time rather than another, or
- why the planets should move from west to east rather than in a contrary direction,

Leibniz met these objections by maintaining that there is no such thing as unoccupied space or eventless time; that space is nothing but the order of co-existing things and duration is nothing but the order of successive things; that all motion is relative, so that if there were only one body in the universe it would be immovable; that it is inconsistent with God's perfection that any part of space should be empty, and I suppose he meant the same for every part of time. So that according to this system the world, like its author, must be infinite, eternal, and immovable—or at least as great in extent and duration as it is possible for it to be.

When it was objected to the principle of sufficient reason that of two perfectly similar particles of matter there can

be no reason but the will of God for placing *this* one *here* and *that* one *there*, Leibniz replied that there cannot be two particles of matter—or two things of any sort—that are perfectly alike. And this seems to have led him to another of his grand principles, which he calls *the identity of indiscernibles*—the thesis that if *x* is in every way exactly like *y* then *x* is *y*, or that two things cannot be exactly alike in every way.

When the principle of sufficient reason had produced so many surprising discoveries in philosophy, it is no wonder that it should give an answer to the long disputed question about human liberty. This it does in a moment:

The determination of the will is an event for which there must be a sufficient reason—that is, something previous which was necessarily followed by that determination and could not have been followed by any other; so it was necessary.

Thus we see that this principle of the necessity of a sufficient reason for everything is very fruitful with consequences; and by its fruits we may judge it! Those who will adopt it must adopt all its consequences. All that is needed to establish them *all* beyond dispute is to prove the truth of the principle on which they depend.

So far as I know Leibniz's only argument in proof of this principle is an appeal to the authority of Archimedes, who he says makes use of it to prove that a balance loaded with equal weights on both ends will stay still.

I grant this to be good reasoning with regard to any *machine* such as a balance, that when there is no external cause for its motion it must stay still because the machine has no power of moving itself. But to apply this reasoning to *a man* is to take for granted that *the man is a machine*—and that is just what we are arguing about.

This principle of the necessity of a sufficient reason for •every existence, for •every event, and for •every truth—Leibniz and his followers want us to accept it as a basic axiom, without proof and without explanation. But it is obviously a vague proposition that can bear as many meanings as the word 'reason' can. It must have different meanings when applied to things as different in kind as •an event and •a truth; and it may have different meanings even when applied to the same thing. So if we are to think clearly about it we must, rather than taking it all in a single lump, pull it apart and apply it to different things in precise different meanings.

It can connect with the dispute about liberty only by being applied to the determinations of the will. Let us, then, take a voluntary action of a man; and ask:

•Was there or was there not a sufficient reason for this action?

The natural and obvious meaning of this question is:

•Was there for this action a motive sufficient to justify the action as wise and good, or at least as innocent?

Clearly in *this* sense there is not a sufficient reason for every human action, because many actions are foolish, unreasonable and unjustifiable.

If the meaning of the question is:

•Was there a cause of the action?

undoubtedly the answer is Yes: every event must have a cause that had power sufficient to produce that event, and that exercised its power for the purpose. In the present case either •the man was the cause of the action, and then it was a free action and is justly attributed to him, or •it had some other cause, and cannot justly be attributed to the man. In this sense, therefore, there was indeed a sufficient reason for the action; but this concession has no bearing on the question about liberty.

Let us try again. Perhaps the question means:

- Was there something previous to the action which necessitated its being produced?

Everyone who believes that the action was free will answer No.

Those three are the only meanings I can find for the principle of sufficient reason when applied to the determinations of the human will. In the first it is obviously false; in the second, it is true but irrelevant to liberty; in the third it is a mere *assertion* of necessity, without proof.

Before we leave this boasted principle, let us see how it applies to events of another kind. When we say that a scientist has assigned a 'sufficient reason' for some phenomenon, what do we mean? Surely we mean that he has accounted for it from the known laws of nature. The sufficient reason for a natural phenomenon must therefore be some law or laws of nature of which the phenomenon is a necessary consequence. But are we sure that there is a sufficient reason in *this* sense for every phenomenon of nature? I think we are not.

In *miraculous* events the laws of nature are suspended or counteracted, but I set them aside. For all we know, in the *ordinary* course of God's providence there may be particular acts of his administration that don't fall under any general law of nature.

Thinking creatures need established laws of nature if they are to conduct their affairs with wisdom and prudence, and pursue their ends by suitable means; but still it may be appropriate that some particular events not be fixed by •general laws but rather be directed by •particular acts of God, so that his thinking creatures may have enough reason to beg for his aid, his protection and direction, and to depend on him for the success of their honest plans.

We see that even in the most law-abiding human governments it is impossible for every act of administration to

be directed by established laws. Some things must be left to the direction of the executive power—particularly acts of clemency and generosity to petitioning subjects. Nobody can prove that there is nothing analogous to this in God's government of the world.

We have not been authorized to pray that God would counteract or suspend the laws of nature on our behalf; so prayer presupposes that he can lend an ear to our prayers without going against the laws of nature. Some have thought that the only use of prayer and devotion is to produce a proper mood and disposition *in ourselves*, and that it has no efficacy with God. But there is no proof of this hypothesis, which contradicts our most natural beliefs as well as the plain doctrine of scripture, and tends to damp the fervour of every prayer.

It was indeed a doctrine in Leibniz's scheme of things that since the creation of the world God has done nothing except in the case of miracles, his work being made so perfect at first as never to need his interposition. But he was opposed in this by Sir Isaac Newton and others of the ablest philosophers and scientists, and he was never able to give any proof of this thesis.

So there is no evidence that there is a sufficient reason for every natural •event, if by 'sufficient reason' we understand some fixed law or laws of nature of which the event is a necessary consequence.

But what shall we say is the sufficient reason for a •truth? For

- a sufficient reason for our *believing* a truth is our having good evidence. But what can be meant by
- a sufficient reason for its *being* a truth?

My best guess is: the sufficient reason of a contingent truth is that it is true, and a sufficient reason of a necessary truth is that it must be true. This doesn't tell us much!

I think it appears from what I have said that this principle of the necessity of a sufficient reason for everything is very indefinite in its meaning. If it means that

of every event there must be a cause that had sufficient power to produce it,

this is true, and has always been admitted as a basic axiom in philosophy and in common life. If it means that

every event must be *necessarily* consequent on something called 'a sufficient reason' that went before it,

this is a direct assertion of universal fatality and has many strange, not to say absurd, consequences; but in this sense it is not self-evident and no proof of it has been offered. [By 'universal fatality' Reid means the thesis that everything that happens was predetermined, bound to happen, theoretically predictable, from the beginning of the universe.] Quite generally: in every sense of it in which it looks true the doctrine gives no new information, and in every sense of it in which it could be informative the doctrine has no appearance of being true.

Another argument that has been used to prove liberty of action to be impossible is that it implies *an effect without a cause*. A short answer to this: a free action is an effect *produced by* a being who had power and will to produce it, so it is *not* an effect without a cause. ·Don't try to avoid this conclusion by saying that for some reason there must also be some *other* cause, and in the case of a so-called 'free action' there isn't one·. Given •a being x who has the power and the will to produce a certain effect, to suppose that •another cause is necessary for the production of that effect is a contradiction; for it is to suppose x •to have power to produce the effect and •not to have power to produce it.

But because great stress is laid on this argument by a late zealous defender of necessity, we shall look into his way of stating it. He introduces this argument with a remark with which I entirely agree, namely that all we need to establish

this doctrine of necessity is that

throughout all nature the same consequences invariably result from the same circumstances.

I know nothing more that could be wanted to establish universal fatality throughout the universe. When it is proved that through all nature the same consequences invariably result from the same circumstances, the doctrine of liberty must be given up.

To head off a possible misunderstanding, let me say this. I agree that in reasoning

the same •consequences through all nature will invariably follow from the same •premises,

because good reasoning must be good reasoning at all times and places. But this has nothing to do with the doctrine of necessity ·that I am concerned with here·, which requires that

the same •events through all nature invariably result from the same •circumstances.

The proof that our author offers for this crucial thesis is that an event not preceded by any circumstances that made it be what it was would be *an effect without a cause*. Why so? He answers:

Because a *cause* cannot be defined to be anything but *such previous circumstances as are constantly followed by a certain effect*, the constancy of the result making us conclude that there must be a *sufficient reason* in the nature of things why it should be produced in those circumstances.

I concede that if this is the only definition that can be given of 'cause' it will indeed follow that an event not preceded by 'circumstances' that made it happen the way it did would be an event without a cause (not an *effect* without a cause, which is a contradiction in terms); I don't think there can be an event without a cause, so the issue comes down to

whether this is the only definition that can be given of 'cause'. Is it?

The definition brings in something new (I think), in classifying a cause as a 'circumstance'; but I'll set that aside, and offer two main comments on the definition.

**First comment:** This definition of 'cause' is just a reworded version of the definition that Hume gave. He ought to be acknowledged as its inventor, for I don't know of any author before him who maintained that our *only* notion of a cause is that of something prior to the effect which has been found by experience to be constantly followed by the effect. This is a main pillar of his system; and he has drawn from it very important conclusions which I am sure our present author will not adopt.

Without repeating what I have already said about causes in Essay 1 and in chapters 2 and 3 of the present Essay, I shall point out some things that follow from this definition of 'cause'—four main ones, and some consequences of those—so that we can judge the definition by its fruits.

(1) It follows that night is the cause of day, and day the cause of night. For no two things have more constantly followed one other since the beginning of the world.

(2) It follows also that anything, so far as we know, could be the cause of anything, because nothing is essential to a cause but its being constantly followed by the effect. From this it further follows that •something unthinking could be the cause of something that thinks, that •folly could be the cause of wisdom, and evil the cause of good, and that •all reasoning from the nature of the effect to the nature of the cause, and all reasoning from final causes, must be given up as fallacious. For example, we can't validly reason from the harmony of the universe to the skill of its maker, or from the ways in which nature fosters our welfare to God's wanting us to prosper.

(3) It follows that we have no reason to conclude that every event must have a cause; for countless events happen where it can't be shown that there were certain previous circumstances that have constantly been followed by such an event. And even if it were certain that •every event we have been able to observe had a cause, it wouldn't follow that •every event must have a cause; for it is contrary to the rules of logic to •argue that because a thing has always been, therefore it must be, which would be to •reason from what is contingent to what is necessary.

(4) It follows that we have no reason to conclude that there was any cause of the creation of this world. For there were no 'previous circumstances' that had been constantly followed by such an effect! In the same way it would also follow that any event that is singular in its nature, or the first thing of its kind, cannot have a cause.

Several of these consequences were fondly embraced by Hume as necessarily following from his definition of 'cause' and as favourable to his system of absolute scepticism. Those who adopt his definition of 'cause' confront a choice: adopt those consequences, or show that they don't follow from the definition.

**Second comment:** We can give a definition of 'cause' that isn't burdened with such awkward consequences. Why shouldn't an 'efficient cause' be defined as 'a being that had power and will to produce the effect'? The production of an effect requires active power, and active power—being a quality—must be *in* a being that *has* that power. Power without will produces no effect, but when power and will are combined the effect must be produced.

I think this is the proper meaning of 'cause' as used in metaphysics; especially when we •affirm that everything that begins to exist must have a cause, and •prove by reasoning that there must be an eternal first cause of all things.

Was the world produced by ‘previous circumstances’ that are constantly followed by such an effect? or was it produced by a being that had power to produce it and willed its production?

In natural science the word ‘cause’ is often used in a very different sense. When an event is produced according to a known law of nature, that law of nature is called the ‘cause’ of the event. But a law of nature is not the *efficient cause* of any event; it does not *make* the event occur; it is merely the rule according to which the efficient cause acts. A law is •a thing conceived in the mind of a rational being, not •a thing that really exists out there in the world; so it (like a motive—see page 13 above) can’t either act or be acted on, and so can’t be an efficient cause. Where there is no *thing* that acts *according to the law*, the law itself doesn’t have any effect.

Our author takes it for granted that every human voluntary action was made to be what it was by the laws of the course of nature, in the same sense as mechanical motions are made to happen by the laws of motion; and that it as impossible •for a choice to occur without being thus determined as it is •for a mechanical motion occur without dependence on a law or rule, or •for any other effect to occur without a cause.

I should point out that there are two kinds of laws, both very properly called ‘laws of nature’, which we must distinguish from one another. They are •moral laws of nature and •physical laws of nature. [In Reid’s time, ‘physical’ did not mean ‘having to do with matter’. It meant ‘having to do with what is the case, as distinct from ‘moral’ (what *ought to be* the case) and ‘logical’ (what *must be* the case).] The former are the rules that God has prescribed to his thinking creatures for their conduct. They concern voluntary and free actions only, for those are the only ones that can be subject to moral rules. These laws of

nature *ought* always to be obeyed, but they *are* often broken by men. So there is no impossibility in the violation of the moral laws of nature, nor is such a violation an effect without a cause. It *has* a cause, namely the rule-breaker, who can fairly be held to account for it.

The physical laws of nature are the rules according to which God usually acts in his natural running of the world; and whatever is done according to them is done not by man but by God—either immediately or through instruments under his direction. These laws of nature don’t curtail God’s powers, nor do they lay on him an obligation always to keep to them. He has sometimes acted contrary to them in the case of miracles, and it may be that he often disregards them in the ordinary course of his providence. Miraculous events that are contrary to the physical laws of nature, and ordinary acts of God’s administration that don’t come under natural laws, are *not* impossible and are *not* effects without a cause. God is the cause of all these events, and they should be attributed to him alone.

It can’t be denied that the *moral* laws of nature are often broken by man. If the physical laws of nature make it impossible for him to obey the moral laws, then he is quite literally *born under one law and bound to another*, which contradicts every notion of a righteous government of the world.

But even if this supposition had no such shocking consequences, it is merely a supposition; and until it is proved that every choice or voluntary action of man is determined by the physical laws of nature, this argument for necessity merely takes for granted the point to be proved.

[Reid mentions in passing the ‘pitiful’ argument presented earlier in this chapter, of the balance that stays still because the weights are equal.]

When there is a dispute, any argument whose premises are not accepted by both sides is the kind of fallacy that logicians call *petitio principii* [= ‘taking for granted the thing in dispute’], and so far as I can see *all* the arguments offered to prove that liberty of action is impossible are like that.

I would add that every argument of this class, if it really were conclusive, must apply to God as well as to all created beings; and *necessary existence*, which has always been considered as the special privilege of the supreme being, must

belong equally to every creature and to every event—even the most trifling.

This I take to be the view of Spinoza and of those among the ancients who carried fatality to the highest pitch.

I referred you earlier to Clarke’s argument that purports to demonstrate that the first cause is a free agent. Until that argument is shown to be fallacious—which I have never seen anyone try to do—such weak arguments as have been brought to prove the contrary ought to have little weight.

## Chapter 10: Arguments for necessity (continued)

With regard to the second class of arguments for necessity—ones purporting to prove that liberty of action would be harmful to man—I have only to point out a fact that is too obvious to be denied, namely that whether we adopt the system of liberty or that of necessity, men do actually hurt themselves and one another through their voluntary actions. It can’t be claimed that this fact is inconsistent with the doctrine of liberty, or that it is harder to explain on this system than on the necessity system.

So someone who wants a solid argument against liberty from a premise about its harmfulness will have to prove that if men were free agents they would do *more* hurt to themselves or to one another than they actually do.

To this purpose it has been said that liberty would make men’s actions capricious, would destroy the influence of motives, would take away the effects of rewards and punishments, and would make man absolutely ungovernable.

I have considered these arguments in chapters 4 and 5

of this Essay; so I shan’t go through them again here, but shall proceed to arguments for necessity that are intended to prove that in fact men are not free agents. This is the third kind of argument in the trio mentioned near the start of chapter 9.

The most formidable argument of this class, and I think the only one that I haven’t already considered in this Essay, is an argument based on God’s foreknowledge:

God foresees every volition of the human mind. So each volition *must* be what he foresees it to be, and therefore it must be *necessary*.

This argument can be understood in three different ways. The supposed necessity of the volition may be thought to be something that follows from

- merely the fact that it is certainly going to happen,
- the fact that it is foreseen, or
- the impossibility of its being foreseen if it was not necessary.

I shall look at it in each way, so that we can see all its force.

(1) It may be thought that as nothing can be known to be going to happen unless it is *certainly* going to happen, so if it is certainly going to happen it must be necessary.

This opinion is supported by the authority of Aristotle, no less. He held the doctrine of liberty, but believed at the same time that whatever is certainly going to happen must be necessary; so in order to defend the liberty of human actions he maintained that contingent events are not (in advance) certain to be going to happen; but I don't know of any modern advocate of liberty who has defended it on that basis.

It must be granted that, just as  
 whatever was certainly was, and  
 whatever is certainly is,

so also

whatever shall be certainly shall be.

These are identical propositions, which can't be doubted by anyone who thinks clearly about them.

But I know no rule of reasoning by which from the premise 'Event E certainly will occur' it follows that 'Event E will be necessary'. The *manner* of E's production, whether as free or as necessary, can't be concluded from the *time* of its production, whether that be past, present, or future. *That it will occur* doesn't imply *that it will occur necessarily* any more than it implies *that it will occur freely*. For present, past and future have no more connection with necessity than they have with freedom.

I grant therefore that from events' being foreseen it follows that they are certainly going to happen; but from their being certainly going to happen it doesn't follow that they are necessary.

(2) If the argument means that an event must be necessary merely because it is foreseen, this doesn't follow

either. For it has often been observed that foreknowledge and knowledge of every kind is an immanent act [= 'something that occurs *within the knower*'], and so it has no effect on the thing known. The event's way of existing, whether as free or as necessary, is not in the least affected by its being known to be •going to happen any more than by its being known to •have happened or to •be happening now. God foresees his own future free actions, but neither his foresight nor his purpose makes them necessary. So the argument is inconclusive when taken in this second way as well as in the first.

(3) The argument may be understood as follows: it's impossible for an event that isn't necessary to be foreseen; therefore every event that is certainly foreseen must be necessary. Here the conclusion certainly follows from the premise, so the whole weight of the argument rests on the proof of the premise.

Let us consider, therefore, whether it can be proved that no free action can be certainly foreseen. If this can be proved, it will follow that either •all actions are necessary or •not all actions can be foreseen.

With regard to •the premise•, the general proposition that it is impossible that any free action should be certainly foreseen, I have three things to say.

(i) If you believe God to be a free agent, you must believe that this proposition can't be proved and is indeed certainly false. For you yourself foresee that God will always do what is right and will keep all his promises; and at the same time you believe that in doing what is right and in keeping his promises God acts with the most perfect freedom.

(ii) [Reid here repeats the previous point, in different words.]

(iii) Without considering the consequences that this general proposition carries in its bosom, making it look very



bad, let us attend to the arguments that have been offered to prove it.

Priestley has worked harder on the proof of this proposition than has any other author I know of, and maintains that foreknowledge of a contingent event is not merely •a difficulty or (as it has been called) •‘a mystery’, but •an outright absurdity or contradiction. Let us hear Priestley’s ‘proof’ of this:

As certainly as nothing can be *known to exist* but what *does exist*, so certainly can nothing be *known to arise* from something existing but what *does arise* from or depend on something existing. But by the definition of the terms, a contingent event doesn’t depend on any previous known circumstances, since some other event might have arisen in the same circumstances.

[That last sentence is exactly as quoted by Reid.]

This argument when stripped of some of its verbiage amounts to this: •nothing can be known to arise from what exists unless it does arise from what exists; but •a contingent event doesn’t arise from what exists. The reader is left to draw the conclusion that •a contingent event can’t be known to arise from what does exist.

Now, obviously a thing can ‘arise from what does exist’ in either of two ways—freely or necessarily. A contingent event arises from its cause not necessarily but freely and in such a way that another event might have arisen from the same cause in the same circumstances.

The second proposition of the argument is that a contingent event doesn’t depend on any previous known ‘circumstances’, which I take to be only a variant way of saying that it doesn’t arise from what does exist. To make the two propositions mesh, therefore, we have to understand ‘arising from what does exist’ to mean ‘arising *necessarily* from what does exist’. When this ambiguity has been cleared up, the

argument stands thus:

Nothing can be *known to arise necessarily* from what exists unless it *does necessarily arise* from what exists; but a contingent event doesn’t arise necessarily from what exists; therefore a contingent event can’t be known to arise necessarily from what exists.

I accept the whole of this argument, but its conclusion is not what Priestley undertook to prove, and therefore the argument is the kind of fallacy that logicians call *ignorantia elenchi* [‘ignoring the point at issue and proving something else’].

The thing to be proved is not that a contingent event can’t be known to arise necessarily from what exists, but that a contingent future event can’t be the object of knowledge. To draw the argument to Priestley’s conclusion, we have to put it thus:

Nothing can be known to arise from what exists except what arises necessarily from what exists; but a contingent event doesn’t arise necessarily from what exists; therefore a contingent event can’t be known to arise from what exists.

This has the conclusion we were promised; but the first premise assumes the thing to be proved; and therefore the argument is what logicians call *petitio principii* [= ‘assuming as a premise the thing to be proved’].

To the same purpose he says: ‘Nothing can be known *now* unless it or its necessary cause exists *now*.’ He affirms this, but I can’t find that he proves it. . . .

On the whole, the arguments I can find on this point are weak, out of all proportion to the strength of Priestley’s confidence in asserting that there can’t be a greater absurdity or contradiction than that a contingent event should be the object of ·fore·knowledge.

Some people, without claiming to show a manifest absurdity or contradiction in the ·idea of· knowledge of future

contingent events, still think that it is impossible that the future free actions of man—a being of imperfect wisdom and virtue—should be certainly foreknown. To them I humbly offer the following ·four· considerations.

(1) I grant that *humans* have no knowledge of this kind in man, which is why we find it so difficult to conceive it in any other being.

All our knowledge of future events is based either on •their necessary connection with the present course of nature or on •their connection with the character of the agent that produces them. Even with future events that necessarily result from the established laws of nature our knowledge of them is hypothetical. It presupposes that the laws that govern them will continue to hold, and we don't know for sure how long those laws will continue to hold. Only God knows when the present course of nature will be changed, so only he has certain knowledge even of events of this kind.

God's character—his perfect wisdom and perfect righteousness—gives us *certain* knowledge that he will always be true in all his declarations, will keep all his promises, and will be just in all his dealings. But when we reason from the character of *men* to their future actions, though we often have •probabilities that are high enough for ·us when planning for· our most important worldly concerns, we don't have •certainty, because men are imperfect in wisdom and in virtue. Even if we had perfect knowledge of the character and situation of a man, this wouldn't suffice to give us certain knowledge of his future actions, because men—both good and bad—sometimes deviate from their general character.

God's foreknowledge therefore must be different not only in *degree* but in *kind* from any knowledge we can have of what will happen.

(2) Though we can have no conception of how God can know the future free actions of men, this is not a sufficient

reason to conclude that they can't be known. Do we know, or can we conceive, how God knows the secrets of men's hearts? Can we conceive how God made this world without any pre-existent matter? All the ancient philosophers thought this to be impossible, simply because they could not conceive *how* it could be done. Can we give any better reason for believing that the actions of men cannot be certainly foreseen?

(3) Can we conceive how *we ourselves* have certain knowledge through the faculties that God has given us? If any man thinks he clearly understands

*how* he is conscious of his own thoughts,  
*how* he perceives external objects by his senses,  
*how* he remembers past events,

I have sadly to tell him that he is not yet wise enough to understand his own ignorance.

(4) There seems to me to be a great analogy between •foreknowledge of future contingents and •memory of past contingents. We possess •the latter in *some* degree, and therefore find no difficulty in believing that God may have it in *the highest* degree. But •the former is something that we don't have in *any* degree, which inclines us to think it impossible.

In both foreknowledge and memory the object of the knowledge is something that •doesn't exist now, and •isn't necessarily connected with anything that exists now. Every argument brought to prove the impossibility of foreknowledge counts just as strongly against possibility of memory. If it is true that

something can be known to arise from what does exist only if it *necessarily* arises from it,

then it must be equally true that

something can be known to have gone before what does exist only if it *necessarily* went before it.

If it is true that

something future can be known now only if its *necessary* cause exists now,  
 it must be equally true that  
 something past can be known now only if some consequence of it with which it is *necessarily* connected exists now.  
 The fatalist might say that past events *are* indeed necessarily connected with the present, but he surely won't go so far as

to say that it is by tracing this necessary connection that we remember the past. So he still has the unsolved problem of *how* we remember past events.

So why should we think that foreknowledge is impossible for God, when he has given us a faculty—memory—that bears a strong analogy to it and which is no more understandable by us than foreknowledge is? . . .

## Chapter 11: Permitting evil

Before leaving this topic, I should discuss one other use that the advocates of necessity have made of divine foreknowledge. This has been said:

All those consequences of •the scheme of necessity that are thought most alarming are also consequences of •the doctrine of God's foreknowledge—especially the proposition that God is the real cause of moral evil. For •to suppose God to foresee and permit what it was in his power to have prevented is the same as •to suppose him to will it and directly cause it. He distinctly foresees all the actions of a man's life and all the consequences of them; so if he didn't think that some particular man and his conduct were suitable for his plan of creation and providence, he certainly wouldn't have brought that man into existence at all.

This reasoning involves a supposition that seems to contradict itself. That •all the actions of a particular man are clearly foreseen and at the same time that •*that* man is never brought into existence seems to me to be a contradiction;

and it is similarly contradictory to suppose that •an action is clearly foreseen and yet •is prevented from happening. For if it is foreseen, it *will* happen; and if it is prevented, it *won't* happen and therefore couldn't be foreseen.

The knowledge this writer is supposing God to have is neither foreknowledge nor ordinary knowledge [Reid wrote: 'neither prescience nor science'], but something very different from both. It is a kind of knowledge that has come up in debates among metaphysical divines about the order in which God made his decrees—a subject they shouldn't have been arguing about, because it lies far beyond the limits of human understanding. Some of them attributed this special kind of knowledge to God, whereas others said that it is impossible though they firmly maintained that God has foreknowledge.

It was called 'middle knowledge' [Reid uses the Latin, *scientia media*], to distinguish it from foreknowledge. By this 'middle knowledge' they meant *not*

knowing from eternity everything that will exist (foreknowledge)

and *not*

knowing all the connections and relations of things that exist or could exist (ordinary knowledge),

but

knowledge of contingent things that never did and never will exist—for example, knowing every action that *would* be done by a man who is merely thought of and won't ever be brought into existence.

There are arguments against the possibility of middle knowledge that don't hold against foreknowledge. For example, it can be argued that nothing can be *known* except what *is true*. It is *true* that the future actions of a free agent will exist, so we see no impossibility in its being *known* that they will exist; but there are no *truths* about the free actions of someone who never did and never will exist, and so nothing can be *known* about them. If there is any meaning in the statement 'x would behave thus and so if placed in such-and-such a situation' where x is someone who never exists, it is that of 'x's acting thus and so when placed in such-and-such a situation is •a consequence of the conception of x'; but this contradicts the supposition of its being •a free action.

Things that are merely conceived and don't actually exist have no relations or connections except ones that are implied in the conception or are consequences of it. Thus I conceive *two circles in the same plane*. If this is all I conceive, it is not true that these circles are equal and not true that they are unequal, because neither of those relations is implied in my conception; . . . but if the two circles really existed, they would have to be either equal or unequal.

Similarly, I can conceive a being who has the power to do some action or not to do it, and who doesn't care much

either way. It is not true that he would do it, nor is it true that he would not do it, because neither is implied in my conception nor follows from it; and what isn't true can't be known.

Though I don't see any fallacy in this argument against middle knowledge, I am aware of how apt we are to go wrong when we apply what belongs to *our* conceptions and *our* knowledge to *God's* conceptions and knowledge; so I don't claim to settle for or against 'middle knowledge'; but I do remark that to suppose that God •prevents something that he •foresees by his *foreknowledge* is a contradiction. And I add that for God to know that a contingent event that he chooses not to permit *would* certainly happen if he *did* permit it is not •foreknowledge but the •middle knowledge whose existence or possibility we are not forced to admit.

Setting aside all disputes about middle knowledge, I acknowledge that under God's administration nothing can happen that he doesn't see fit to permit. Natural and moral evil are permitted to occur—that's a fact that can't be disputed. How can this happen under the government of a being who is infinitely good, just, wise, and powerful? This question has always been regarded as difficult for human reason to answer, whether we embrace the system of liberty or that of necessity. But if the existence of natural and moral evil is as hard to explain on the basis of the system of necessity as it is on the system of liberty, it can't have any weight as an argument against liberty in particular.

The defenders of necessity, wanting to reconcile it to the principles of theism, find that they have to give up all the moral attributes of God except *goodness*, in a certain sense. They maintain this:

A desire to produce happiness is God's sole motive in making and governing the universe. Justice, truthfulness, and trustworthiness are only applications of

goodness—means for promoting its purposes—and God exercises them only so far as they serve that end. Virtue is acceptable to him only to the extent that it tends to produce happiness, and vice displeases him only to the extent that it tends to produce misery. He is the proper cause and agent of all moral evil as well as all moral good; but he does all this for a good end, namely to produce the greater happiness for his creatures. He does evil so that good may come of it; and this end sanctifies the worst actions that contribute to it. When he surveys the wickedness of men, all of which is his own work, he must pronounce all of it to be, just like all his other works, *very good*.

This view of God's nature—the only one consistent with the scheme of necessity—appears to me much more shocking than is the permission of evil on the scheme of liberty. It is said that all you need in order to accept it is 'strength of *mind*'; I should have thought it also requires strength of *face* ·not to burst out laughing while asserting it·!

In this system. . . pleasure or happiness is placed on the throne as the queen to whom all the virtues have a humble role as mere servants.

·According to this account·, God in his actions does not aim at *his own* good, because that is already at the highest possible level; rather, he aims at the good of his creatures. These creatures are themselves capable of a certain degree of this disposition ·to bring good to others·, so isn't he pleased with this image of himself in his creatures and displeased with the contrary disposition? Why, then, should he be the author of malice, envy, revenge, tyranny, and oppression in their hearts? A deity of the kind the account postulates might be pleased with other vices that have no malevolence in them, but surely he couldn't be pleased with malevolence,

If we form our notions of God's moral attributes from ·what we see of how he governs the world, from ·the dictates of our reason and conscience, or from ·what we are taught through divine revelation, it will seem to us that God's goodness is matched as an essential attribute of his nature by his justice, truthfulness, faithfulness, love of virtue and dislike of vice.

In man, who is made in the image of God, goodness or benevolence is indeed an essential part of virtue, but it isn't the whole of it.

I can't think of any arguments showing goodness to be essential to God that won't equally clearly show that other moral attributes are also essential to him. And I can't see what objections could be brought against attributing other virtues that wouldn't have equal strength against the attribution of goodness—except for the 'objection' that attributing the other virtues makes a difficulty for the doctrine of necessity!

If other moral evils can be attributed to God as means for promoting general good, why can't we also credit him with making false declarations and false promises? But then what basis will we have for believing what he reveals or relying on what he promises?

Supposing this strange view of God's nature were to be adopted as an aid to the doctrine of necessity, it still confronts a great difficulty. Since it is supposed that God made and governs the universe solely so as to produce the greatest happiness for his creatures, why is there so much misery in a system made and governed by infinite wisdom and power for a contrary purpose?

The ·necessitarian· solution of this difficulty forces one to the hypothesis that all the world's misery and vice are necessary ingredients in the system that produces the greatest sum of happiness on the whole. This connection between

•the greatest sum of happiness and •all the misery the universe contains must be inevitable and necessary in the nature of things, so that even almighty power can't break it; for benevolence could never lead God to inflict misery unless it were necessary.

If we were satisfied that there is this necessary connection between •the greatest sum of happiness on the whole and •all the natural and moral evil that is or has been or will be, questions would arise:

- How far might this evil extend?
- On whom will it happen to fall?
- Is this connection of happiness with evil temporary or eternal?
- What proportion of the total happiness is balanced by the necessary evil?

Mortal eyes can't see the answers to any of these questions.

'Perfect wisdom and almighty power have combined to make a world with the sole aim of making the world happy'—what a pleasing prospect that is! It would lead us to expect nothing but uninterrupted happiness to prevail for ever. But alas! when we consider that in this happiest system there must necessarily be all the misery and vice that we see—and who knows how much more as well?—the prospect darkens!

These two hypotheses, one limiting God's moral character and the other limiting his power, seem to me to be the inevitable upshot of combining theism with the system of necessity; which is why the ablest necessitarians have adopted both hypotheses.

Some •defenders of liberty have tried to defend *that* system by rushing too quickly into a position that sets limits to God's foreknowledge, and their opponents have been highly indignant about this. But haven't •they equally good grounds for indignation against those who defend necessity by limiting God's moral perfection and his almighty power?

Now let us turn to the other side and consider what consequences can be fairly drawn from God's permitting agents to whom he has given liberty to misuse it.

Why does God permit so much sin in his creation? I can't answer this question. . . . He gives no account of his conduct to the children of men. It is for us to obey his commands, and not to ask 'Why do you act like that?'

We might form hypotheses about this; but while we have reason to be satisfied that everything God does is right, it is more appropriate for us to acknowledge that the ends and reasons of his government of the universe are out of reach of our knowledge, and perhaps out of reach of our understanding. We can't get into God's thinking far enough to know all the reasons why it was suitable for him—for him who owns everything and to whom everything is owed—to create not only machines that are moved solely by his hand, but also servants and children who could, •by obeying his commands and imitating his moral perfections, rise to a high degree of glory and happiness in his favour, and who also could, •by perverse disobedience, incur guilt and just punishment. In this he appears to us awe-inspiring in his justice as well as lovable in his goodness.

But as God himself, when his character is impeached, is not above appealing to men to testify to the fairness of his treatment of them, *we* may with humble reverence plead on his behalf, arguing for the moral excellence that is the glory of his nature and of which the image is the glory and the perfection of man.

Note first that 'permit' has two meanings. 'Permitting' something can mean •not forbidding it, and it can mean •not blocking it by superior power. In the former sense, God never permits sin: his law forbids every moral evil; and by his laws and his government he gives every encouragement to good conduct and every discouragement to bad. But he

doesn't always use his superior power to block it from being committed. This is the basis for the accusation that God permits evil; and it is said that permitting something (in this sense) is the very same thing as directly willing and causing it.

As this is asserted without proof, and is far from being self-evident, it might be sufficient just to deny it until it is proved. But I shan't in that way stay on the defensive.

I point out that the only moral attributes that might be thought to be inconsistent with permitting sin are •goodness and •justice. I shall look at these in turn, from the point of view of the necessitarians.

First, •goodness. The defenders of necessity. . . maintain that •goodness is God's only essential moral attribute, and provides the motive of all his actions. So if they want to be consistent they will have to maintain that to will and directly to cause sin. . . is consistent with perfect goodness—indeed that goodness is a sufficient motive to justify willing and directly causing sin.

From their point of view, therefore, there is no need to try to reconcile *permitting* sin with the goodness of God. For if goodness were inconsistent with *permitting* sin, it would be inconsistent with *causing* sin; and, an inconsistency between goodness and the causing of sin would overturn their whole system. . . .

So what the necessitarians have to do is to prove that •justice is inconsistent with permitting sin. On this point I am ready to argue with them.

But what basis can they have for saying that permitting sin is perfectly consistent with God's •goodness but inconsistent with his •justice? Is the thought that

God permits sin, though what he delights in is virtue  
[here = 'justice']

any harder to stomach than the thought that

God inflicts misery when his sole delight is to give happiness?

Should those who believe that the infliction of misery is necessary to promote happiness find it incredible that permitting sin may tend to promote virtue?

[Then a paragraph listing six facts about God's conduct in which 'the justice as well as the goodness of his moral government' appear; followed by a paragraph quoting the prophet Ezekiel's defence of God against the charge that he is 'not equal', meaning 'not fair'. Then:]

I shall briefly consider one other argument for necessity that has been offered recently. It has been maintained that the power of thinking is the result of a certain state of matter, and that a certain configuration of a brain makes a soul [here = 'mind']. From there the argument runs: since man is a wholly *material* being, it can't be denied that he must be a *mechanical* being; the doctrine of necessity follows immediately and certainly from the doctrine of materialism.

This argument won't persuade anyone who sees no reason to accept materialism; and even for those who *do* accept materialism the argument seems to me to be fallacious.

Philosophers have usually conceived matter as something inert and passive, having certain properties inconsistent with the power of thinking or of acting. But now a philosopher arises who proves—let us suppose—that we were quite mistaken in our notion of matter; that it doesn't have the properties we thought it had, and in fact has no properties except those of attraction and repulsion. But he still thinks that it will be agreed that something made of matter must be a mechanical thing, and thus that the doctrine of necessity directly follows from that of materialism.

But in this argument he deceives himself. If matter is what we thought it to be, it is equally incapable of thinking and of acting freely. But if the properties from which we

drew this conclusion have no reality (as this philosopher thinks he has proved), and if it has the powers of attraction and repulsion, and needs only to be configured in a certain way to be able to think rationally, why shouldn't that same configuration make it act rationally and freely? There is no way to show that it couldn't. If matter is cleared of the charges of solidity, inertness, and sluggishness, and if it is raised in our esteem to something nearer to what we think of as spiritual and immaterial beings, why should it still be a merely mechanical thing? Are its solidity, inertness, and sluggishness to be first removed so as to make it capable of thinking and then slapped back on in order to make it incapable of acting?

So those who reason soundly from this system of materialism will easily see that the doctrine of necessity, far from being a direct consequence of materialism, isn't in the least supported by it.

### **Closing remarks**

Extremes of all kinds ought to be avoided; yet men are prone to go to extremes, avoiding one at the cost of rushing to its opposite.

The most dangerous of all extreme opinions are those that exalt the powers of man too high and those that sink man's powers too low.

By raising them too high we feed pride and vainglory; we lose the sense of our dependence on God, and attempt things that are too much for us. By depressing them too low we cut the sinews of action and of obligation, and are tempted to think 'We *can't* do anything, so there is nothing for us to do—nothing that it makes sense even to attempt—except to be carried passively along by the stream of necessity.'

Some good men have been led by their religious zeal to deprive us of all active power, thinking that this is the way to kill pride and vainglory. Other good men have been led by a similar zeal to depreciate the human understanding and to put out the light of nature and reason, thinking that in this way they would raise the status of divine revelation.

Those weapons—those put-downs of our power and our understanding—that were taken up in support of religion are now used to overturn it; and something that was thought to give security to religious orthodoxy has become the stronghold of atheism and unbelief.

Atheists join hands with theologians in depriving man of all active power, so that they can destroy all moral obligation and all sense of right and wrong. They join hands with theologians in depreciating human understanding, so that they can lead us into absolute scepticism.

God in his mercy to the human race has built us in such a way that no theoretical opinion whatever can root out our sense of guilt and demerit when we do wrong, or the peace and joy of a good conscience when we do right. No theoretical opinion can root out a regard for the testimony of our senses, our memory, and our rational faculties. But we have reason to view with suspicion opinions that run counter to those natural sentiments of the human mind and tend to shake though they never can eradicate them.

[The Essay closes with a few paragraphs repeating Reid's earlier theme about how someone whose theoretical position is sceptical about his powers and his understanding will nevertheless *live his life* on the basis of a non-sceptical attitude to both.]