

# 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.

First launched: September 2004

Last amended: November 2007

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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.]