

# The Liberty of Moral Agents

No. 4 of *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*

Thomas Reid

Copyright ©2010–2015 All rights reserved. Jonathan Bennett

[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

## Contents

<b>Chapter 1: What the notions of moral liberty and necessity are</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: The words ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, ‘action’ and ‘active power’</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Why those words are ambiguous</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The influence of motives</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Liberty is consistent with government</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 6: First argument</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Second argument</b>	<b>26</b>

<b>Chapter 8: Third argument</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter 9: Arguments for necessity</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Chapter 10: Arguments for necessity (continued)</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Chapter 11: Permitting evil</b>	<b>41</b>

## 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.