

# The Liberty of Moral Agents

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

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.

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## Chapter 9: Arguments for necessity

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

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

And in chapters 4 and 5 I dealt with these:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The natural and obvious meaning of this question is:

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

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

If the meaning of the question is:

•Was there a cause of the action?

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

Let us try again. Perhaps the question means:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

this doctrine of necessity is that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 10: Arguments for necessity (continued)

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

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

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

I have considered these arguments in chapters 4 and 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

so also

whatever shall be certainly shall be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

argument stands thus:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

then it must be equally true that

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

If it is true that

something future can be known now only if its *necessary* cause exists now,  
it must be equally true that

something past can be known now only if some consequence of it with which it is *necessarily* connected exists now.

The fatalist might say that past events *are* indeed necessarily connected with the present, but he surely won't go so far as

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

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

## Chapter 11: Permitting evil

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

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

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

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

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

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

knowing from eternity everything that will exist (foreknowledge)

and *not*

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

but

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

any harder to stomach than the thought that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Closing remarks**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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