

Morals

No. 5 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.—The many occurrences of ‘Hume’ replace Reid’s more polite ‘MR HUME’.

First launched: October 2011

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Glossary

affection: In the early modern period, ‘affection’ could mean ‘fondness’, as it does today; but it was also often used to cover every sort of pro or con attitude—desires, approvals, likings, disapprovals, dislikings, etc. Reid sometimes calls fondness and its like ‘affections’, and sometimes ‘kind affections’.

art: In Reid’s time an ‘art’ was any human activity that involves techniques or rules of procedure. ‘Arts’ in this sense include medicine, farming, painting—and civil law. The contrast between ‘arts’ and ‘sciences’ was primarily a contrast between practical and theoretical.

brute: This meant simply ‘lower animal’ or ‘non-human animal’; it hadn’t any further negative meaning as it does today.

candour: On page 4 Reid is surely using this word in its sense of ‘fairness, impartiality, etc.’; though that makes the phrase ‘candour and impartiality’ puzzling. The other possible meaning—‘openness, frankness, etc.’—doesn’t fit at all well.

content: This always replaces ‘object’ when Reid speaks of the ‘object of a judgment’. He means the content, what the judgment says; it is odd that in chapter 7 and nowhere else he uses ‘object’ in this peculiar way, when his many other uses of it are normal.

crime: In this work ‘crime’ and ‘criminal’ are often used in our sense, as implying a violation of the law of the land; but it is also sometimes used in a broader sense in which a ‘crime’ is any morally wrong conduct, whether or not the law says anything about it.

culture: In this work ‘culture’ is used in its horticultural sense, having to do with attending to the welfare of plants.

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

duty: Like most English-language moral philosophers Reid uses a dialect in which ‘I have a duty to do A’ means the same as ‘I morally ought to do A’. That is not what it means in English, where ‘duty’ is tightly tied to jobs, roles, social positions. The duties of a janitor; the duties of a landowner; ‘My Station and its Duties’ (title of a paper by F. H. Bradley).

esteem: This is used in three ways. **(1)** As a verb in forms like ‘esteem that P’ and ‘esteem him to be F’. **(2)** As a verb in forms like ‘He is highly esteemed’. **(3)** As a noun. In **(1)** it means about the same as ‘think’ or ‘believe’, as in ‘esteem it to be unclean’. In **(2)** it means something like ‘admire’ or ‘value highly’, as in ‘justice ought to be highly esteemed’. And in **(3)** it means something like ‘admiration’ or ‘high standing in people’s opinions’, as in ‘the desires for power, knowledge, and esteem’. So there are two basic senses—one for **(1)** and the other for both **(2)** and **(3)**. On page 23 Reid says that the **(2)–(3)** uses of the word have two ‘very different’ meanings (*not* one for **(2)** and another for **(3)**).

evidentness: This clumsy word replaces Reid’s ‘evidence’ in the places where he uses that to mean ‘evidentness’ (which it never does today). When he uses ‘evidence’ in our sense, it is of course left untouched.

indifferent: As applied to feelings or sensations it means ‘neither nice nor nasty’.

innate: Strictly speaking, something is innate in us if we are born with it; but the word was often used to cover qualities, dispositions etc. that we don’t have at a birth but do come to

have as a necessary part of growing up, with no need for any input from teaching or the like.

injury: These days an injury can be any harm that I suffer; Reid is using the word to mean ‘any harm that someone maliciously and wrongly inflicts on me’. On page 26 he writes: ‘If I am hurt by a flash of lightning, no injury is done’, which was true in his sense of the word, not in ours.

intercourse: The meaning of this is not sexual. It has a very general meaning that covers conversation, business dealings, any kind of social inter-relations; ‘sexual intercourse’ named one species, but you couldn’t drop the adjective and still refer to it.

interested: When on page 51 Reid says ‘I find myself interested in his success’ he means something like: ‘I find myself *on his side*, caring about his success as though it were mine’.

licentious: Outright immoral, wildly indecent.

magistrate: In this work, as in general in early modern times, a ‘magistrate’ is anyone with an official role in government.

principle: In the opening pages (and elsewhere) in this work, Reid uses ‘principle’ in our sense, to stand for a certain kind of proposition. But then on page 3 he speaks of ‘principles or springs of action’, which uses the word in a totally different sense (once common but now obsolete) as meaning ‘source’, ‘cause’, ‘drive’, ‘energizer’, or the like. (Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is, as he explicitly tells us, an enquiry into the *sources in human nature* of our moral thinking and feeling.) On page 20 Reid uses the word first in its old sense and then in the sense that we also give it, *on consecutive lines*!

profession: For a university to establish a ‘profession’ for teaching young people about morality and jurisprudence is, roughly, for it to establish a programme or department devoted to the topic in question. More generally, anything that a person does to earn a respectable living can be called a ‘profession’.

provident: Showing care and foresight in providing for the future.

science: In early modern times this word applied to any body of knowledge or theory that is (perhaps) axiomatised and (certainly) conceptually highly organised.

sentiment: This can mean ‘feeling’ or ‘belief’. In this work both meanings are at work, and on page 53 Reid insists that a ‘sentiment’, when the word is properly used, is a belief accompanied by a feeling.

speculative: This means ‘having to do with non-moral propositions’. Ethics is a ‘practical’ discipline, chemistry is a ‘speculative’ one.

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

vulgar: Applied to people who have no social rank, are not much educated, and (the suggestion often is) not very intelligent. When Reid uses it here (only in chapter 7), he often seems to apply it to everyone who isn’t a philosopher.

Chapter 6: The nature and obligatoriness of a contract

The bindingness of contracts and promises is so sacred and so important to human society that any speculations that have a tendency to weaken that obligation and confuse men's notions on this plain and important subject ought to meet with the disapproval of all honest men.

I think we have some such speculations in the third Book of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*; and in this chapter I shall offer some observations on the nature of a contract or promise, and on two passages by Hume on this subject.

I am far from saying or thinking that Hume *meant* to weaken men's obligations to honesty and fair dealing, or that he didn't himself have a sense of these obligations. What I am criticising is not the man but his writings. Let us think of the man as charitably as we can while we freely examine the import and tendency of the writings.

Although the nature of a contract and of a promise is perfectly understood by all men of common understanding, it will be worthwhile for us to attend to the operations of mind signified by these words [i.e. the words 'I promise to . . .' etc.], because this will help us to judge the metaphysical subtleties that have been raised about them. A promise and a contract differ so little in the respects we are concerned with here that the same reasoning (as Hume rightly says) covers both. In a promise, one party only comes under the obligation, and the other acquires a right to whatever was promised. We give the name 'contract' to a transaction in which each party comes under an obligation to the other, and each acquires a right to what the other promised.

[Reid quotes a Latin definition of *pactum* = 'promise or contract', which he translates as:] 'a contract is the

consent of two or more persons in the same thing, given with the intention of constituting or dissolving lawfully some obligation'. This definition may be as good as we can get, but I don't think anyone will say that it gives him a clearer notion of *contract* than he had before. Considered as a strictly logical definition, I think it is open to some objections; but I shan't go into that because I believe that similar objections could be made to any definition of a contract that can be given.

Don't infer from the lack of a fully satisfactory definition that the notion of *contract* is not perfectly clear in the mind of every man of mature years. There are many operations of the mind that we understand perfectly and are in no danger of confusing with anything else, but which we can't define according to the rules of logic by a genus and a specific difference, and when we try to we cast more darkness than light. [Reid is talking about a definition like: "'circle' means 'plane closed figure [genus] with every point on its perimeter equidistant from some one point [specific difference]'".]

Is anything more clearly understood by all men than what it is to see, to hear, to remember, to judge? Yet it's the hardest thing in the world to define these operations according to the rules of logical definition. But it isn't more difficult than it is useless! Sometimes philosophers try to define them; but their definitions turn out to amount to no more than giving one synonymous word for another, and often a worse for a better. So when we define 'contract' by equating it with 'consent', 'convention', 'agreement', what is this but replacing it by a synonymous word that is neither more expressive nor better understood?

[Describing a deal between two boys, Reid says that ‘this is a contract perfectly understood by both parties’, who don’t need help from text-books of Roman law. Then he moves on:]

The operations of the human mind can be divided into the *solitary* and the *social*. Because promises and contracts belong to the social class, I should explain this division.

I call an operation ‘solitary’ if it can be performed by a man in solitude, without intercourse [see Glossary] with any other thinking being. A man can

- see,
- hear,
- remember,
- judge
- reason,
- deliberate and form purposes, and execute them,

without the intervention of any other thinking being. They are solitary acts.

I call an operation ‘social’ if it necessarily involves social intercourse with some other thinking being who has a part in it. When a man

- asks a question for information,
- testifies to a fact,
- gives a command to his servant,
- makes a promise, or
- enters into a contract,

these are social acts of the mind that can’t happen without the involvement of some other thinking being who plays a part in them.

Between the operations of the mind that I call ‘solitary’ and those I call ‘social’ there is a notable difference: the solitary don’t have to be expressed by words or any other sensible sign; they can exist and be complete without being expressed, without being known to any other person;

whereas in the social operations the expression is essential. They can’t happen without being •expressed by words or signs, and •known to the other party.

If nature hadn’t made man capable of such social operations of mind and equipped him with a language to express them, he could still

- think, and reason, and deliberate, and will,
- have desires and aversions, joy and sorrow

—in short he could perform all the mental operations that the writers in logic and psychology have so copiously described; but he would still be a solitary being, even when in a crowd; he couldn’t ask a question, give a command, ask for a favour, testify to a fact, make a promise or a bargain.

Philosophers seem generally to hold that the social operations of the human mind are not radically different in kind from the solitary ones—that they are only •special cases of solitary operations or •complexes of which solitary operations are elements, and can be explained entirely in term of them.

That is probably the reason why in enumerations the operations of the mind only the solitary ones are mentioned, with no notice being taken of the social operations, though they are familiar to everyone and have names in all languages.

But I think that •it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to analyse our social operations as variants of or compositions out of solitary ones, and that •any attempt to do this would fail as completely as have the attempts that have been made to analyse all our social affections in terms of the selfish ones. The social operations appear to be as simple in their nature as the solitary, •which means that they can’t be complexes or composites of which solitary operations are parts. They are found in every individual of the species, even before the use of reason.

Man's power to have social intercourse with his kind, by asking and refusing, threatening and pleading, commanding and obeying, testifying and promising, must either be •a distinct faculty given by our Maker, a part of our constitution like the powers of seeing and hearing, or •a human invention. If men have invented this art of social intercourse, each individual of the species must have invented it for himself. It can't be *taught*. . . ., because all teaching presupposes social intercourse and language already established between the teacher and the learner. This intercourse must from the outset be carried on by sensible signs, because that's the only way the thoughts of other men can be discovered. I think it is likewise evident that this intercourse, at least at the beginning, must be carried on by natural signs whose meaning is understood by both parties, previous to all compact or agreement. For there can be no compact without signs and social intercourse. (I specify 'at the beginning' because after social intercourse has begun and reached a certain level of competence, it could be *improved* by teaching.)

So I take it that •human social intercourse is the exercise of a faculty given to us by God specifically for that purpose, just like the powers of seeing and hearing. And that •God has given to man a natural language by which his social operations are expressed and without which the artificial languages of articulate sounds and of writing could never have been invented by human art [= 'by human skill'; but Reid wants to express the God-given/man-made difference in terms of 'nature'/'art' and 'natural'/'artificial'.]

The signs in this natural language are looks, changes of the features, modulations of the voice, and gestures of the body. All men understand this language without instruction, and all men can use it in some degree. But those who use it most are the ones who are best at it. It forms a great part of the language of savages, who are therefore more expert in

the use of natural signs than civilized people are.

The language of dumb persons consists mostly of natural signs, and they are all very skilled in this language of nature. Everything that we call *style* and *pronunciation* in the most perfect orator and the most admired actor is nothing but the addition of the language of nature to the language of articulate sounds. The pantomimes of the ancient Romans carried it to the highest pitch of perfection. They could act parts of comedies and tragedies in dumb-show, so as to be understood not only by those who were accustomed to this entertainment but also by visitors to Rome from all the corners of the earth.

A noteworthy fact about this natural language—and one that clearly shows it to be a part of the human constitution—is that although a man can't perfectly express his sentiments by it without practice and study, there's no need for study or practice for the spectator to understand it. Knowledge of it is latent in our minds in advance; and when we see it we immediately recognise it. It's like recognising an acquaintance whom we hadn't thought about for years and couldn't have described—no sooner do we see him than we know for certain that he is the very man.

This knowledge in all mankind of the natural signs of men's thoughts and sentiments is indeed so similar to reminiscence that it seems to have led Plato to think of all human knowledge as a kind of remembering.

It's not by reasoning that everyone knows that an open countenance and a calm eye is a sign of friendliness, that a furrowed brow and a fierce look is the sign of anger. It's not from reason that we learn to know the natural signs of consenting and refusing, of affirming and denying, of threatening and pleading.

No-one can see any necessary connection between •those operations and •the signs of them. It's just that we are so

constructed by the Author of our nature that the operations themselves become visible, so to speak, by their natural signs. This knowledge is like reminiscence in its immediacy: we form the conclusion with great assurance, without knowing any premises from which it could be inferred by reasoning.

To what extent is social intercourse natural and a part of our constitution, and to what extent is it a human invention? This is a good question, but to tackle this in detail would lead us too far from the intended scope of the present enquiry.

It is sufficient to observe that this intercourse of human minds, by which their thoughts and sentiments are exchanged and their souls mingle together as it were, is common to the whole species from infancy.

Its first beginnings—like those of our other powers—are weak and scarcely perceptible. But it is a certain fact that we can see some communication of sentiments between the nurse and her nursling before it is a month old. And I'm sure that if both had grown out of the earth and had never seen another human face, they would be able in a few years to converse together.

There seems indeed to be some degree of social intercourse among brute-animals, and between some of them and man. A dog rejoices in the caresses of his master, and is humbled by his displeasure. But there are two social operations that brute-animals seem to be altogether incapable of. They can't be truthful in things they say, they can't keep their promises. If nature had made them capable of these operations, they would have had a language to express them by, as man has; but we see no evidence of this.

A fox is said to use tricks, but he can't lie because he can't give testimony. . . . A dog is said to be 'faithful' to his master, but that means only that he is affectionate, not that

he is keeping some engagement that he has made. I see no evidence that any brute-animal is capable of either giving testimony or making a promise.

A dumb man can't speak, any more than a fox or a dog can; but he can give his testimony by signs as early in life as other men can do by words. He knows what a lie is as early as other men, and hates it as much. He can give his word, and is aware of the obligatoriness of a promise or contract.

So it is man's special privilege that he can communicate his knowledge of facts by testimony, and enter into engagements by promise or contract. God has given him these powers by a part of his constitution that distinguishes him from all brute-animals. And whether they are basic powers or analysable in terms of other powers that are basic, it's obvious that they spring up in the human mind at an early period of life, and are found in every human being, whether savage or civilized.

These privileged powers of man, like all his other powers, must have been given for some purpose—some good purpose. And if we look a little further into how nature organises things in relation to this part of the human constitution we'll see the wisdom of nature in the structure of •it and discover clearly our duty in consequence of •it. [The first 'it' presumably refers to this part of our constitution; the second 'it' seems to refer to the structure of this part of our constitution.]

(a) It is obvious that if no credit was given to testimony, if there was no reliance on promises, they wouldn't serve any purpose, even that of deceiving.

(b) Suppose that some drive in human nature led men to make declarations and promises, but men found by experience that declarations were usually false and promises were seldom kept, no sensible man would trust to them and so they would become useless.

(c) So we find that this power of giving testimony and of promising can't serve any purpose in society unless there is a considerable degree of (b) fidelity on one side and (a) trust on the other. These two must stand or fall together; neither can possibly exist without the other.

(d) Fidelity in statements and promises, and corresponding trust and reliance on them, form a system of social intercourse—the most amiable and useful that men can have. Without fidelity and trust, there can be no human society. There never was a society, even of savages—indeed even of robbers or pirates—in which there wasn't a high degree of truthfulness and trustworthiness among themselves. Without this, man would be the most unsocial animal that God has made. His state would be an actual case of what Hobbes conceived the state of nature to be: a state of war of every man against every man, with no way of ending this war in peace.

(e) Man is obviously made for living in society. His social •affections make this fact as evident as the fact that the eye was made for seeing. His social •operations, especially those of testifying and promising, also make it evident.

It follows from all this that if nature hadn't arranged to get men to be faithful in their statements and promises, human nature would be self-contradictory—made for a purpose but not given the needed means to attain it. As though they had been provided with good eyes but with no way of raising their eyelids. There are no blunders of this kind in the works of God. Wherever some purpose is intended, the means are admirably fitted for achieving it—which is what we find in the case before us, •i.e. in the matter of truthfulness and trust in statements, and fidelity and trust in promises•.

We see that as soon as children come to be able to understand statements and promises, they are led by their constitution to rely on them. Their constitution equally leads

them to truthfulness and candour [here = 'sincerity in promising'] on their own part. And they don't ever deviate from this road of truth and sincerity until they have been corrupted by bad example and bad company. This disposition to be sincere, and to believe others to be so, must be regarded as an effect of their constitution—call it an instinct, or what you will.

Thus, things that are essential to human society—good faith on one side and trust on the other—are formed by nature in children's minds before they are capable of •knowing their usefulness or •being influenced by thoughts of duty or of •self•-interest.

When we have matured enough to have the conception of right and wrong in conduct, we see the baseness of lying, falsehood and dishonesty, not by any chain of reasoning but by an immediate perception. For we see that all men—even those who are conscious of it in themselves—disapprove of it in others.

Every man who is taken in by a falsehood thinks himself injured and badly treated, and feels resentment. Every man takes it as a reproach when falsehood is attributed to him. These are the clearest bits of evidence that all men disapprove of falsehood when their judgment isn't biased.

Has any nation been rough and crude enough not to have these sentiments? Not that I have heard of. Dumb people certainly have them, and reveal them at about the same time in their lives as in those who speak. And it's reasonable to suspect that dumb persons, at that time of life, have had as little help in morals from their education as the greatest savages.

When a mature adult offers a statement or a promise, he thinks he has a right to be trusted and feels insulted if he isn't. But there can't be a shadow of right to be trusted unless there's also an obligation to be trustworthy. For right on one hand necessarily implies obligation on the other.

In the most savage state that ever was known of the human race, men have always lived in larger or smaller societies; and this fact is solid evidence that they have had that sense of their obligation to fidelity, without which no human society can subsist.

So I think it is obvious that just as fidelity (on one side) and trust (on the other) are essential to interactions that we call 'human society', so the Author of our nature has wisely provided for them to be perpetuated among men, to the extent needed for human society, at all periods of individual life and at all stages of human improvement and degeneracy.

In early years, we have an innate disposition to fidelity and trust; and later on we feel our obligation to fidelity as much as to any moral duty whatsoever.

[Reid says that there's no need for him to mention the advantages of fidelity; and then he briefly mentions some. Then:]

A few remarks about the nature of a contract will be sufficient for present purposes.

Obviously both parties to a promise have to understand *what* is being promised. . . . An undertaking to do one doesn't-know-what can't be made or accepted.

It's equally obvious that a contract is a voluntary transaction. But let's be clear and careful about what act of the will is involved here. When I promise you that I will do A, it may be the case both that

(i) I am resolving to make myself bound or obliged to do A, and

(ii) I am resolving to do A.

But only (i) is essential to a contract ·or promise·, and it mustn't be confused with (ii). The latter is only my intention and fixed purpose to do A, and it's no part of the contract ·or promise·. My will to become bound, and to confer a right on

you, is the very essence of the contract; my intention to keep my side of the contract is no *part* of the contract.

That purpose of mine is a solitary act of my mind that lays no obligation on me and confers no right on you. A fraudulent person may contract to do A with a fixed purpose of not doing A; but this purpose doesn't affect his obligation. He is as much bound as the honest man who contracts with a fixed purpose of performing.

Just as a contract is binding whatever the promiser's purpose is, so also there may be a purpose without any contract. A purpose isn't a contract, even when it is declared to the person for whose benefit it is intended. I may say to you 'I intend to do A for your benefit, but I'm not engaging myself to' [more bluntly: 'I'll do A for you, but this isn't a promise']; everyone understands the meaning of this and sees no contradiction in it. If a declared purpose were the same thing as a contract ·or promise·, it would be a contradiction, equivalent to saying 'I promise to do A but I don't promise'.

All this is so obvious to every man of common sense that I wouldn't have seen any need to mention it if Hume—acute as he was—hadn't based some of his contradictory theses about contracts a confusion of •the will to engage in a contract to do A with •the will or purpose to do A.

* * * * *

I shall now consider Hume's theorising regarding contracts.

To support his cherished thesis that *justice is not a natural but an artificial virtue, and derives its whole merit from its usefulness*, he has laid down some principles which I think have a tendency to subvert all faith and fair-dealing among mankind.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* III.ii.1 he lays it down as an 'undoubted maxim' that no action can be virtuous or

morally good unless there is in human nature some motive to produce it other than its morality. Applying this ‘undoubted maxim’ to a few examples, we get the result that if

- a man keeps his word with only the motive that he ought to do so,
- a man pays his debt from the motive that justice requires this of him,
- a judge makes a certain decision in a lawsuit from no motive except respect for justice,

none of these is a virtuous or morally good action. These strike me as shocking absurdities which no metaphysical subtlety could justify.

It is perfectly obvious that every human action gets its label and its moral nature from the motive from which it is performed. A benevolent action is done from benevolence. An act of gratitude is done from a sentiment of gratitude. An act of obedience to God is done from a respect for his command. And quite generally an act of virtue is done from a respect for virtue.

Hume’s thesis that

virtuous actions have merit only if they have motives other than their being virtuous

is so far from the truth that it is the direct opposite of the truth; i.e. a virtuous action is greatest and most conspicuous when every motive that can be put in the opposite scale is outweighed by the sole consideration of the action’s being our duty. So Hume’s ‘undoubtedly true’ thesis is undoubtedly false! I don’t think it was ever maintained by any moralist except the Epicureans, and it smacks of the dregs of that sect. It agrees well with the principles of those who maintained that *virtue* is an empty name that is entitled to no respect except insofar as it serves pleasure or profit.

I believe that Hume *acted* on moral principles that were better than the ones he proclaimed in his writings, and that

what Cicero said of Epicurus is also applicable to him:

‘He is his own refutation; his writings are disproved by the uprightness of his character. . . . Most men’s words are thought to be better than their deeds; his deeds on the contrary seem to me better than his words.’ [Reid quotes this in Latin.]

But let us see how Hume applies this maxim to contracts. I give you his own words:

‘Someone has lent me a sum of money, on condition that I return it in a few days; and at the end of those few days he demands his money back. I ask, What reason or motive have I to return the money to him? You may answer:

“If you have the least grain of honesty, or sense of duty and obligation, your respect for justice and your hatred for villainy and knavery provide you with enough reasons to return the money.”

And this answer is certainly true and satisfactory for a man in his civilized state, one who has been brought up according to a certain discipline. But as addressed to a man who is in a crude and more natural condition—if you’ll allow that such a condition can be called ‘natural’—this answer would be rejected as perfectly unintelligible and sophistical.’

The doctrine we are taught in this passage is this: A man in a civilized state, having been brought up according to a certain discipline, may have respect for justice, a hatred of villainy and knavery, and some sense of duty and obligation; but to a man in his crude and more natural condition the considerations of honesty, justice, duty and obligation will be perfectly unintelligible and sophistical. And this is offered as an argument to show that justice is not a natural but an artificial virtue.

I shall offer three observations on this argument. [In the first of them, Reid takes Hume's word 'sophistical' in one of its meanings, as = 'an example of invalid reasoning'. It seems highly likely that Hume meant it rather as = 'an attempt to confuse or deceive'.]

A. What is unintelligible to man in his crude state may be intelligible to him in his civilized state, but how could something •sophistical in the crude state become •sound reasoning when man is more improved? What is a sophism, will always be so. . . . Hume's argument requires that to man in his crude state the motives for justice and honesty should not only appear to be sophistical but should really be so. If the motives were just in themselves, then justice would be a natural virtue although the crude man erroneously thought otherwise. But if justice is not a natural virtue—which is what Hume aims to prove—then every argument by which man in his natural state may be urged to it must really *be* a sophism and not merely seem to be so; and the effect of discipline and upbringing in the civilized state can only be to make motives to justice that are really sophistical appear to be just and satisfactory.

B. I wish Hume had shown us why the state of man in which the obligation to honesty and the abhorrence of villainy appear unintelligible and sophistical is his *more natural* state.

It is the nature of human •society as much as of the •individual to be progressive. In the individual, infancy leads to childhood, childhood to youth, youth to manhood, and manhood to old age. If someone said 'The state of infancy is more natural than that of manhood', I'm inclined to think this would be meaningless. Similarly in human society there's a natural progress from crudeness to civilization, from ignorance to knowledge. What period in this progress shall we call man's natural state? They seem to me to be equally natural. . . .

Hume, indeed, shows some caution about affirming the crude state to be the more natural state of man, because he adds the qualifying parenthesis 'if you'll allow that such a condition can be called "natural"'.

But if the premises of his argument are to be weakened by this clause, that weakness must be passed on to the conclusion; and the conclusion, according to the rules of good reasoning, ought to be that 'justice is an artificial virtue, if you'll allow that it can be called "artificial"'.

C. Hume ought to have produced factual evidence that there ever was a state of man of the sort he calls man's more 'natural' state. It's a state in which

a man borrows a sum of money on condition that he repays it in a few days; yet when the time for repayment comes, his obligation to repay what he has borrowed is 'perfectly unintelligible and sophistical'.

Hume ought to have given at least *one* example of a human tribe that was found to be in this 'natural' state. If no such example can be given, the 'natural state' is probably imaginary—like the state that some have imagined in which men were apes, or fishes with tails.

Indeed, such a state seems impossible. That a man should lend without any conception of his having a right to be repaid; or that a man should borrow on the condition of paying in a few days and yet have no conception of his obligation, seems to me to involve a contradiction. . . .

In *Enquiry into the Principles of Morals*, section 3, dealing with the same subject, Hume has the following note:

'Obviously, the will or consent alone never transfers property or creates the obligation of a promise. . . . For the will to impose an obligation on any man, it must be expressed by words or signs. The words initially come in as subservient to the will, but before long they become the principal part of the promise; and

a man who secretly intends not to keep his promise and withholds the assent of his mind, isn't any less bound by the promise. But though in most cases the expression is the whole promise, it isn't always so. Someone who uttered the words without knowing their meaning wouldn't have made a binding promise. Someone who knows what the words mean and utters them only as a joke, giving clear signs that he has no serious intention of binding himself, wouldn't be obliged to keep the promise. But for this to hold good, the "clear signs" mustn't be ones that we cleverly detect while the man is trying to deceive us. For him not to be bound by a verbal promise he must give signs *different from signs of deceit* that he doesn't intend to keep the promise. All these contradictions are easily accounted for if justice arises entirely from its usefulness to society; they'll never be explained on any other basis.'

Here we have the opinion of this solemn moralist and sharp metaphysician that the principles of honesty and fidelity are basically a bundle of contradictions. This is one part of his moral system that I can't help thinking borders on licentiousness [see Glossary]. It surely tends to give a very unfavourable notion of the cardinal virtue without which no man has a claim to be called 'honest'. What respect can a man have for the virtue of fidelity if he believes that its essential rules contradict each other? A man can't be bound by contradictory rules of conduct, any more than he can be bound to believe contradictory propositions.

Hume tells us that 'all these contradictions are easily accounted for, if justice arises entirely from its usefulness to society; they'll never be explained on any other basis'.

I don't know what is meant by 'accounting for' or 'explaining contradictions'. What I do know is that no hypothesis

can make a contradiction *not* be a contradiction. However, without trying to 'account for these contradictions' on his own hypothesis, Hume announces in a decisive tone that they will never be explained on the basis of any other hypothesis.

What if it turns out that •the contradictions mentioned in this paragraph arise from two crucial mistakes Hume has made concerning the nature of promises and contracts, and that •when these are corrected there's not a trace of contradiction in the cases he presents?

The first mistake is that a promise is some kind of will, consent or intention that may but needn't be expressed. This is just wrong about the nature of a promise, for no will or consent or intention that isn't expressed is a promise. A promise is a social transaction between two people; so if it isn't expressed it doesn't exist.

Another mistake that runs through the quoted passage is that the will, consent or intention that constitutes a promise is a will or intention to perform what we promise. Everyone knows that there can be a fraudulent promise, made by someone who has no intention of keeping it. A promise to do A doesn't include an intention to do A or not to do A; such an intention is a solitary act of the mind, and can't create or dissolve an obligation. What makes something a *promise* is its being •expressed to the other person with understanding and with an intention to become bound, and its being •accepted by him.

With these remarks in hand, let us review the quoted passage.

First, Hume observes that the will or consent alone does not cause the obligatoriness of a promise, but it must be expressed.

I answer: The will that isn't expressed isn't a promise; so something that isn't a promise doesn't cause the

obligatoriness of a promise—is *that* a contradiction? He goes on: ‘The words initially come in as subservient to the will, but before long they become the principal part of the promise.’ He is supposing that originally the verbal expression wasn’t a constituent part of the promise, but it soon becomes such; it is brought in to aid and be subservient to the promise that was originally made by the will. He wouldn’t have said this if he had realised that what *constitutes* a promise is the expression accompanied by understanding and will to become bound.

He adds, ‘And a man who secretly intends not to keep his promise, and withholds the assent of his mind, isn’t any less bound by the promise.’ We need to be told more about what situation Hume has in mind here. The man knowingly and voluntarily gives his word, without intending. . . *what?* If it’s **(a)** . . . without intending to **keep the promise**, to do what he promises to do, that is a possible case, and I think it is what Hume means. But I repeat what I have said before: the intention to do A is no part of the promise to do A, and its absence doesn’t affect the obligatoriness of the promise in the slightest.

If Hume meant **(b)** . . . without intending to **give his word**, this is impossible. It’s of the nature of all social acts of the mind that just as they can’t exist without being expressed, they can’t be expressed knowingly and willingly without existing. If a man puts a question knowingly and willingly, it is impossible that he should at the same time will not to

put it. If he gives a command knowingly and willingly, it is impossible that he should at the same time will not to give it. We can’t have contrary wills at the same time. And, similarly, if a man knowingly and willingly becomes bound by a promise it is impossible that he should at the same time will not to be bound. . . .

He adds: ‘Though in most cases the expression is the whole promise, it isn’t always so.’ I answer that if the expression isn’t accompanied by understanding and a will to engage, it never makes a promise. Hume here assumes something that nobody ever accepted, something that must be based on the impossible supposition made in the preceding sentence. . . .

Hume’s final case concerns x who fraudulently makes to y a promise that he doesn’t intend to keep, and y detects the fraudulent intent but accepts the promise anyway. In this case, says Hume, x is bound by his verbal promise. I agree with this, of course, for a reason that I have already stated several times.

No-one who attends to the nature of a promise or contract will see the faintest evidence that there’s a contradiction in the principles of morality relating to contracts. It would be astonishing that a man like Hume should have deceived himself on such a plain topic, if we didn’t often see cases where able men zealously defend a favourite hypothesis in a way that darkens their understanding and blocks them from seeing what is before their eyes.

Chapter 7: Moral approval implies a real judgment

The approval of good actions and disapproval of bad ones are so familiar to every adult person that it seems strange there should be any dispute about their nature.

Whether we reflect on our own conduct, or attend to the conduct of others that we see or hear and read about, we can't help approving of some things, disapproving of others, and regarding many with perfect indifference.

We're conscious of these operations of our minds every day, almost every hour. Maturely thoughtful people can look in on themselves and attend to what happens in their own thoughts on such occasions. Yet for half a century philosophers have seriously disagreed about what this approval and disapproval is: Does it include a real judgment that must, like all other judgments, be true or false? Or does it include only some agreeable or uneasy feeling in the person who approves or disapproves?

Hume rightly says that this controversy started 'of late' [i.e. fairly recently]. Before the modern system of ideas and impressions was introduced, nothing would have seemed more absurd than to say that when I condemn a man for what he has done I am not passing any judgment on the man, but only expressing an uneasy feeling in myself.

The modern system didn't produce this 'discovery' at once, but gradually, stepwise, as the system's consequences were more precisely traced and its spirit more thoroughly imbibed by successive philosophers.

Descartes and Locke went no further than to maintain that the secondary qualities of body—heat and cold, sound, colour, taste and smell—that we perceive and judge to be in the external object are mere feelings or sensations in our minds. . . ., and that the job of the external senses is not to

judge concerning external things but only to give us ideas or sensations from which we are to do our best to *infer* the existence of a material world external to us.

Arthur Collier and Bishop Berkeley revealed from the same principles [i.e. the same 'modern system'] that not only the secondary but also the *primary* qualities of bodies—including extension, shape, solidity and motion—are only sensations in our minds; and therefore that there is no material world external to us at all.

When that same philosophy came to be applied to matters of taste, it revealed that beauty and ugliness are not anything in the objects that men have ascribed them to from the beginning of the world, but merely certain feelings in the mind of the spectator.

From all of that it was easy to take the next step of inferring that moral approval and disapproval are not judgments that must be true or false, but merely agreeable and uneasy feelings or sensations.

Hume took the last step along this path, and crowned the system by what he calls his 'hypothesis', namely that strictly speaking belief is an act of the sensitive rather than the cogitative part of our nature [i.e. the feeling part rather than the thinking part]. . . .

I have had occasion to consider each of these paradoxes except the one about morals, in my *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*; and though they are strictly connected with each other and with the 'modern' system that has produced them, I haven't attacked them all in one lump, but have tried to show that they are inconsistent with sound notions of our intellectual powers, no less than they are with the common sense and common language of mankind. And the

same thing will be seen to hold with regard to the conclusion relating to morals, namely that moral approval is only •an agreeable feeling and not •a real judgment.

In the hope of avoiding ambiguity, let us attend to the meanings of 'feeling' and 'judgment'. Perhaps these operations of the mind can't be logically defined, but they are well understood, and are easily identified by their properties and by events that accompany them.

Feeling or sensation seems to be the lowest degree of animation we can conceive. We give the label 'animal' to every being that feels pain or pleasure; and this seems to be the boundary between the non-animal and animal creation.

We don't know of any being that ranks so far down in the scale of God's creation that it has only this animal power without any other.

Feeling is thinking in a broad sense of 'thinking', but we commonly distinguish it from thinking because it hardly deserves the name. Of all the kinds of thinking it's the one that is nearest to the passive and inert state of inanimate things.

A feeling must be agreeable or •uneasy or •indifferent [see Glossary on •those two words]. It may be weak or strong. It is expressed in language either by a single word, or by a combination of words that can be the subject or predicate of a proposition but doesn't by itself make a proposition. Why not? Because it doesn't imply either affirmation or negation; so it can't have the qualities *true* or *false* that distinguish propositions from all other forms of speech, and distinguish judgments from all other acts of the mind.

'I have such-and-such a feeling'—that is an affirmative proposition, expressing testimony based on an intuitive judgment. But the feeling is only one term of this proposition; to make a proposition, it has to be joined with another term by a verb affirming or denying.

Just as •feeling distinguishes the animal nature from the inanimate, so •judging seems to distinguish the rational nature from the merely animal.

We have a single **word**—'judgment'—to express this kind of operation, as we do for most of the mind's other complex operations; but a particular judgment can only be expressed by a **sentence**, specifically the kind of sentence that logicians call a 'proposition', in which there has to be a verb in the indicative mood either expressed or understood. [Here and below Reid is talking about a word that *names* a kind of operation; he calls this naming *expressing* so as to sharpen the contrast he is drawing.]

Every judgment must be true or false, and the proposition that expresses it can also be called 'true' or 'false'. The judgment is a determination of the understanding concerning what is true, or false, or dubious.

We can distinguish the •content [see Glossary] of a judgment that we make from the •act of the mind in making it. In mere feeling there's no such distinction. The content of a judgment must be expressed by a proposition, and the judgment that we form is always accompanied by belief, disbelief or doubt. If we judge the proposition to be true we must believe it; if we judge it to be false we must disbelieve it; and if we're uncertain whether it be true or false we must doubt.

The words 'toothache' and 'headache' express uneasy feelings; but to say that they express a judgment would be ridiculous.

'The sun is greater than the earth'—that's a proposition, and therefore the content of judgment; and when affirmed or denied, believed or disbelieved or doubted, it expresses a judgment; it would be ridiculous to say that it expresses only a feeling in the mind of the person who believes it.

When we consider them separately, feeling and judging are very different and easily distinguished. When we feel without judging, or judge without feeling, we would have

to be *grossly* inattentive to mistake the one for the other. When we consider them separately, feeling and judging are very different and easily distinguished. When we feel without judging, or judge without feeling, we would have to be *grossly* inattentive to mistake the one for the other.

But in many operations of the mind the two are inseparably conjoined under one name; and if we don't realise that the operation is complex, we may take one ingredient to be the whole thing and thus overlook the other.

In former ages the moral power by which human actions ought to be regulated was •called *reason*, and •regarded by philosophers and the vulgar [see Glossary] as the power of *judging* what we ought and what we ought not to do.

This is very fully expressed by Hume:

'Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason and assert that men are virtuous only when they conform themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, it is said, is obliged to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle [see Glossary] tries to steer him differently he ought to oppose it until it is entirely subdued, or brought into conformity with that superior principle, •reason•. Most moral philosophy, ancient and modern, seems to be based on this way of thinking.' (*Treatise of Human Nature*, II.iii.3)

That those philosophers attended chiefly to our moral faculty's *judging* power can be seen in the names they gave to its operations and in their whole way of talking about it.

The modern philosophy has led men to attend chiefly to their sensations and feelings, which has led them to regard as *mere feeling* complex mental acts of which feeling is only one ingredient.

As I pointed out in the preceding Essays: several mental

operations to which we give one name and consider as one act are made up of simpler acts inseparably united in our constitution, and that sensation or feeling is often one ingredient in these.

Thus the appetites of hunger and thirst are made up of an uneasy sensation and a desire for food or drink. Our benevolent affections contain both an agreeable feeling and a desire for the happiness of the object of our affection; and malevolent affections have ingredients of a contrary nature.

Those are cases where •sensation or feeling is inseparably conjoined with •desire. In other cases we find •sensation inseparably conjoined with •judgment or belief, and that happens in two different ways. In some cases the judgment or belief seems to result from the sensation and to be regulated by it. In others the sensation results from the judgment.

When we perceive an external object by our senses, we have a sensation conjoined with a firm belief in the existence and sensible qualities of the external object. And all the subtlety of metaphysics hasn't been able to separate items that nature has conjoined in our constitution. Descartes and Locke tried by reasoning to infer the existence of external objects from our sensations, but in vain. Later philosophers, finding no reason for this connection, tried to throw off the belief in external objects as being unreasonable; but this attempt is equally pointless. Nature has doomed us to believe the testimony of our senses, whether or not we can give a good reason for doing so.

This is a case where the belief or judgment is a result of the sensation, as the sensation is a result of the impression made on the sense-organ.

But in most of the mental operations in which judgment or belief is combined with feeling, the feeling results from the judgment and is regulated by it.

Thus, an account of the good conduct of a friend gives me a very agreeable feeling, and a contrary account would give me a very uneasy feeling; but these feelings depend entirely on my believing the report.

In hope there's an agreeable feeling that depends on believing or expecting that something good will come; fear is made up of contrary ingredients; in both, the feeling is regulated by the degree of belief.

In our respect for worthy people and in our contempt for worthless ones there's both judgment and feeling, and the feeling depends entirely on the judgment .

The same may be said of gratitude for help and resentment of injuries.

Let me now consider how I am affected when I see a man exerting himself nobly in a good cause. I am conscious that the effect of his conduct on my mind is complex, though it may be called by one name. I look up to his virtue, I approve, I admire it. In doing so I have pleasure indeed, or an agreeable feeling; this is granted. But I find myself interested [see Glossary] in his success and in his fame. This is affection; it is love and esteem, which is more than mere feeling. The man is the object of this esteem, whereas in mere feeling there is no object.

I'm also aware that this agreeable •feeling in me and this •esteem that I have for him depend entirely on the •judgment I form of his conduct. I judge that this conduct deserves esteem; and while I have that judgment I can't help esteeming him and getting pleasure from the thought of his conduct. Convince me that he was bribed, or that he acted from some mercenary or bad motive, and my esteem and my agreeable feeling will immediately vanish.

In the approval for a good action, therefore, there is indeed feeling, but there's also esteem for the agent; and both the feeling and the esteem depend on our judgment

regarding his conduct.

When I exercise my moral faculty on my own actions or those of others, I'm aware that I judge as well as feel. I accuse and excuse, I acquit and condemn, I assent and dissent, I believe and disbelieve and doubt. These are acts of judgment, and not feelings.

Every decision of the understanding concerning what is true or false is a *judgment*.

- I ought not to steal,
- I ought not to kill,
- I ought not to bear false witness

—these are *propositions*, and I'm as sure of their truth as I am of any proposition in Euclid. I am conscious that I judge them to be true propositions; and with regard to the operations of my own mind my consciousness is the final arbiter—there's nothing here to *argue* about. [What he is declaring to be beyond argument is *These mental operations are judgments*, not *These judgments are true*.]

I'm convinced that other men judge as well as feel in such cases, because they understand my expressions of moral judgments, and they express theirs using the same words.

Suppose that my friend says: **That man did well and worthily; his conduct is highly approvable.** This statement, according to all rules of interpretation [Reid's phrase], expresses his judgment of the man's conduct. This judgment may be true or false, and I may agree with it or dissent from it without giving offence—just as we can peacefully differ in other matters of judgment.

Suppose that in relation to the same case my friend says: **That man's conduct gave me a very agreeable feeling.**

If approval is nothing but an agreeable feeling, these two statements must have the very same meaning, neither of them expressing either more or less than the other. But there are two reasons why this can't be right.

(i) There is no rule in grammar or rhetoric, or any linguistic usage, by which these two statements can be construed so as to have the same meaning. The first plainly expresses an opinion or judgment concerning the man's conduct and says nothing of the speaker. The second testifies only to a fact concerning the speaker, namely that he had such a feeling.

(ii) The first statement can be contradicted without giving any reason for the speaker to take offence, because such contradiction is only a difference of opinion that no reasonable man should be offended by. But the second statement can't be contradicted without an affront: every man must know his own feelings, so denying that a man has a feeling that he says he has is accusing him of lying.

If moral approval is a real judgment that *produces* an agreeable feeling in the mind of the person who judges, both statements are perfectly intelligible in their most obvious and literal senses. Their meanings are different, but they are so related that either can be inferred from the other, as we infer an effect from its cause, or the cause from its effect. I know that what a man judges to be a very worthy action gives him pleasure; and conduct that gives him pleasure must, in his judgment, have worth. But the judgment and the feeling are different acts of his mind, though connected as cause and effect. . . .

I ask you: in conversations about human characters aren't statements like the first one as frequent, as familiar, and as well understood as anything in language? And haven't they been common in all ages that we can trace, and in all languages?

So the doctrine that moral approval is merely a feeling without judgment carries along with it the consequence that there's a form of speech which

- concerns a common topic of discourse,
- is common and familiar in all languages and in all ages of the world, yet
- is meaningless or
- has a meaning that the rules of grammar and rhetoric won't let it legitimately have, a meaning that everyone knows how to express in plain and proper language.

That consequence, I think, is sufficient to sink any philosophical opinion from which it follows!

A particular language may have some oddity or even absurdity that was introduced by the whimsy or error of some eminent man and followed by servile imitators for a while, until it is detected and dropped as an embarrassment; but that the same absurdity should pervade all languages through all ages, and after being detected and exposed still keep its unembarrassed place in language—this couldn't happen while men are capable of thinking.

Incidentally, that same argument holds equally against other paradoxical opinions of modern philosophy that I earlier mentioned as connected with this one. I mean such opinions as that

- beauty and ugliness are not at all in the objects to which language universally ascribes them, but are merely feelings in the spectator's mind;
- secondary qualities are not in external objects, but are merely feelings or sensations in the perceiver;
- quite generally our external and internal senses are faculties by which we have sensations or feelings only, but by which we do not judge.

That every form of speech that language affords to express our judgments should always and everywhere be used to express what is no judgment; and that feelings that can easily be expressed in proper language should always be expressed in an improper and absurd manner—I can't believe this. So

I have to conclude that if language expresses *thought* then men judge concerning the primary and secondary qualities of body by their external senses, concerning beauty and deformity by their taste, and concerning virtue and vice by their moral faculty.

A truth as evident as this can't be obscured and brought into doubt except by misuse of words; and words *have* been misused on this subject. I have done my best to avoid this by using the word 'judgment' on one side and 'sensation' or 'feeling' on the other; because these words have been least liable to misuse or ambiguity. But perhaps I should comment on other words that have been used in this controversy.

Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* has employed two sections on it, entitled 'Moral Distinctions not derived from Reason' and 'Moral Distinctions derived from a Moral Sense'.

When habits don't lead him unawares to speak of 'reason' like other men, Hume limits that word to signifying only the power of judging in purely speculative [see Glossary] matters. Thus he concludes that

- 'reason of itself is inactive and perfectly inert';
- 'actions can be praiseworthy or blameworthy, but they can't be reasonable or unreasonable';
- 'it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger';
- 'it is not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin to prevent the least uneasiness of. . . a person wholly unknown to me';
- 'reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never claim to have any other role than to serve and obey them'. [All from *Treatise* II.i.1 and II.iii.3]

If we take the word 'reason' to mean what philosophers and the vulgar commonly mean by it, these maxims are not only false but licentious [see Glossary]. The only way to clear them

of this charge is to plead that he Hume has misused the words 'reason' and 'passion'.

To find what a common word means you don't go to philosophical theory but to common usage; and if a man takes the liberty of shrinking or extending the meanings of common words at his pleasure, he can—as Mandeville did—insinuate the most licentious paradoxes with the appearance of plausibility. (You might look at my 'The Will' chapter 2, and 'The Principles of Action', part II, chapter 1, where I discuss the meaning of the word 'reason'.)

When Hume derives moral distinctions from a moral sense, I agree with him in words but we differ about the meaning of 'sense'. Every power that has been labelled as a 'sense' is a power of making judgments about the objects of that sense, and that has *always* been recognised. So the moral sense is the power of judging in morals. But Hume wants the 'moral sense' to be only a power of feeling, without judging. I take this to be a misuse of a word.

Authors for whom moral approval is a mere matter of *feeling* often use the word 'sentiment' to mean *feeling without judgment*. This is another misuse of a word. Our moral judgments can properly be called moral 'sentiments', because the English word 'sentiment' always stands for judgment accompanied by feeling—never mere feeling alone.

It used to signify opinion or judgment of any kind, but more recently it has come to be restricted to opinions or judgments that have a striking effect and produces some agreeable or uneasy emotion. So we speak of sentiments of respect, of esteem, of gratitude. But I never heard the pain of gout or of any other mere feeling called a 'sentiment'. . . .

All the words most commonly used by philosophers and by the vulgar to express the operations of our moral faculty—e.g. 'decision', 'determination', 'sentence', 'approval', 'disapproval', 'applause', 'censure', 'praise', 'blame'—include

judgment in their meaning. So when Hume and his followers use these words to signify *feelings* and nothing else, this is a misuse of words. If these philosophers want to speak about morals plainly and properly, they should *discard* these words whose established meanings in the language don't suit their purposes.

They should also discard from morals the words 'ought' and 'ought not', which properly express judgments and can't be applied to mere feelings. Here is what Hume has said about them:

'I can't forbear adding an observation that may be found of some importance. In every system of morality I have met with I have noticed that the author •proceeds for some time reasoning in the ordinary way to establish the existence of a God, or making points about human affairs, and then he suddenly surprises me by •moving from propositions with the usual copula "is" (or "is not") to ones that are connected by "ought" (or "ought not"). This seems like a very small change but it is highly important. For as this "ought" (or "ought not") expresses some *new* relation or affirmation, **(i)** it needs to be pointed out and explained; and **(ii)** a reason should be given for how this new relation can be—inconceivably!—a deduction from others that are entirely different from it. Authors don't ordinarily take the trouble to do this, so I recommend it to you; and I'm convinced that paying attention to this one small matter will •subvert all the vulgar systems of morality and •let us see that the distinction between vice and virtue is not based merely on the relations of objects, and is not perceived by reason.'

Notice the admission that 'ought' and 'ought not' express some relation or affirmation; but a relation or affirma-

tion that Hume thought to be •inexplicable or at least •inconsistent with his system of morals. So he must have thought that they oughtn't to be used in discussions of that subject.

He also makes two demands, and taking it for granted that they can't be met he is convinced that an attention to this is sufficient to subvert all the vulgar systems of morals.

(i) The first demand is that 'ought' and 'ought not' be explained. For anyone who understands English, there are surely no words that require explanation *less!* Isn't everyone taught from childhood on that he ought not to lie or steal or swear falsely? But Hume thinks that men never understood what these precepts mean, or rather that they are meaningless. If that is how things stand, then all the vulgar systems of morals *are* indeed subverted.

Samuel Johnson in his Dictionary explains the word 'ought' as meaning *being obliged by duty*; and I don't think it can be explained better than that. As for the moral relation expressed by this word, you can see what I thought needed saying about that in 'The Principles of Action', part III, chapter 5.

(ii) Hume also demands that a reason be given why this relation should be a deduction from others that are entirely different from it.

This demands a reason for something that doesn't exist. The first principles of morals are not deduced from anything. They are self-evident; and their truth like that of other axioms is perceived without reasoning or deduction. And moral truths that aren't self-evident are deduced not from •relations quite different from them but from •the first principles of morals.

On a topic that matters as much to mankind as morality does—and is the subject of so much conversation among the learned and the unlearned—it's surely to be expected

that writers will express their judgments and their feelings *properly*, i.e. consistently with the rules of language. If some opinion implies that the language of all ages and nations on this subject is improper, i.e. contrary to all rules of language, that is enough to refute it!

Men have always understood ‘reason’ to stand for the power by which we should regulate not only our speculative opinions but also our actions; so it’s perfectly proper to say that all vice is contrary to reason, and that we should use reason to judge what we ought to do as well as what we ought to believe.

Although all vice is contrary to reason, I don’t think we can properly define ‘vice’ as ‘conduct contrary to reason’, because this definition would apply equally to *folly*, which everyone distinguishes from vice.

Other phrases that have been used on the same side of the question—‘acting contrary to . . .

- . . . the relations of things’
- . . . the reason of things’
- . . . the fitness of things’
- . . . the truth of things’
- . . . absolute fitness’

—and I see no reason for adopting any of them. In matters of language, common use has great authority, and these phrases don’t have it. They seem to have been invented by some authors who were trying to explain the nature of vice; but I don’t think they do that. If intended as definitions of vice they are wrong, because. . . they cover every kind of foolish and absurd conduct as well as conduct that is vicious.

I shall conclude this chapter with remarks about the five arguments that Hume has offered on this point in his *Enquiry*.

(1) He argues that the hypothesis he opposes can’t in any particular instance be intelligible, however plausibly it passes

itself off in general discourse. He writes: ‘Examine the crime [see Glossary] of ingratitude; anatomize all its circumstances and examine—using only your reason—what makes it bad or blameworthy. You won’t find any answer.’

I needn’t follow him through all the accounts of ingratitude that he thinks his opponents might give, because I agree with the account that he himself adopts: ‘This crime arises from a complication of circumstances which, when presented to the spectator, gets the **particular structure and fabric of his mind** to arouse the **sentiment** of blame.’

He thought this was a true and intelligible account of the criminality of ingratitude. So do I. So I think the hypothesis he opposes is intelligible when applied to a particular instance.

Hume must have thought that his account of ingratitude is inconsistent with the hypothesis he opposes, and couldn’t be accepted by those who hold that hypothesis. Why did he think this? It must have been because he took for granted one of these two things: (i) The **sentiment** of blame is only a feeling, without judgment. (ii) Whatever is aroused by the **particular fabric and structure of the mind** must be only feeling, and not judgment. I don’t agree with either of these.

It seems evident to me (i) that both sentiment and blame imply judgment; and that the sentiment of blame is a judgment accompanied by a feeling, and not a mere feeling without judgment.

And the second does no better, because (ii) every mental operation, whether judgment or feeling, has to be aroused by that particular structure and fabric of the mind that makes us capable of that operation.

It’s by the part of our fabric that we call ‘the faculty of seeing’ that we judge concerning visible objects; by taste, another part of our fabric, we judge concerning beauty and ugliness; by the part of our fabric that enables us to form

abstract conceptions, to compare them and perceive their relations, we judge concerning abstract truths; and by the part of our fabric that we call ‘the moral faculty’ we judge concerning virtue and vice. If someone had no moral faculty in his fabric, I grant that *he* couldn’t have the sentiments of blame and moral approval.

So there are judgments as well as feelings that are aroused by the particular structure and fabric of the mind. But there is this remarkable difference between them—i.e. between judgments and feelings—that every judgment is true or false; and though it depends on the fabric of a mind whether it *has* such a judgment or not, that fabric doesn’t affect whether the judgment is *true* or not. . . . Nothing like this can be said of mere feelings, because the they can’t be true or false. . . .

(2) The second argument amounts to this:

In moral deliberation, we must be acquainted beforehand with all the objects and all their relations. After these things are known, the understanding has no further room to operate. All that is left for us to do is to *feel* some sentiment of blame or approval.

Let us apply this reasoning to the work of a judge:

In a case that comes before him the judge must be made acquainted with all the objects and all their relations. After this, his understanding has no further room to operate. All that is left for him to do is to *feel* the right or the wrong; and mankind have absurdly called him a *judge* when he ought to be called a *feeler*.

To answer this argument more directly: When a man is deliberating—wondering whether to do *x*—after he knows all the objects and relations mentioned by Hume there is still something for him to do, namely to determine whether *x* ought or ought not to be done. In most cases, the answer will seem self-evident to a man who has been accustomed to

exercise his moral judgment; in some cases it may require reasoning.

Similarly, the judge after all the circumstances of the case are known has to judge whether the plaintiff has a just plea or not.

(3) The third argument is based on the analogy between moral beauty and natural beauty, i.e. between moral sentiment and taste. Just as beauty is not •a quality of the object but •a certain feeling in the spectator, so virtue and vice are not qualities in the persons to whom language ascribes them but feelings in the spectator,

But is it certain that beauty is not any quality of the object? This is indeed a paradox of modern philosophy, built on a philosophical theory; but it is so contrary to common language and common sense that it ought to overturn the theory on which it stands rather than getting any support from it. And if beauty really is a quality of the object and not a mere feeling of the spectator, the whole force of this argument goes over to the other side of the question.

Hume writes: ‘Euclid has fully explained all the qualities of the circle, but has not in any proposition said a word about its beauty. The reason is evident. The beauty is not a quality of the circle.’

By the *qualities of the circle* he must mean its properties; and there are here two mistakes.

First, Euclid has *not* fully explained all the properties of the circle. Many have been discovered and demonstrated that he never dreamt of.

Secondly, The reason why Euclid didn’t say a word about the circle’s beauty of the circle, is not that beauty isn’t a quality of the circle, but the fact Euclid never strayed from his subject. His purpose was to demonstrate the mathematical properties of the circle. Beauty is a quality of the circle, not demonstrable by mathematical reasoning but

immediately perceived by a good taste. Speaking of it would be side-tracking from his subject, and that's a fault he is never guilty of.

(4) The fourth argument says that inanimate objects can have all the same relations to each other that we observe between moral agents.

If this were true it would be very relevant, but it seems to be thrown out rashly without any attention to its plausibility. If Hume had reflected even a very little on this dogmatic assertion he would have realised that there are a thousand counter-examples to it.

Can't one animal be tamer, or more docile, or more cunning, or more fierce, or more ravenous than another? Are these relations to be found among inanimate objects? Can't one man be a better painter, or sculptor, or ship-builder, or tailor, or shoemaker than another? Are these relations **between men** to be found among inanimate objects or even among lower animals? Can't one moral agent be more just, more pious, more attentive to moral duty, or more eminent in some moral virtue than another? Aren't these relations **between moral agents** ones that can't obtain between items of any other sort?

But let us turn now to the relations that are most essential to morality. When I say that *I ought to do A*, that *it is my duty to do A*, don't these words express a relation between me and a certain action in my power? a relation **between a moral agent and his moral actions** that can't obtain between inanimate objects and is well understood by all grown men and expressed in all languages?

When deliberating about whether to do A or B—I can do either, but can't do both—I may say that A ought to be preferred to B; for example that justice ought to be preferred to generosity; this expresses a moral relation **between two actions of a moral agent**, one that is well understood and

can't exist between objects of any other kind. . . .

(5) The last argument is a chain of several propositions that deserve to be looked at separately. They can be summed up in these four:

- (a) There must be *ultimate* ends [= 'goals'] of action, beyond which it is absurd to ask a reason of acting.
- (b) The ultimate ends of human actions can never be accounted for by reason. . .
- (c) . . . but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties.
- (d) As virtue is an end and is desirable just for itself, without fee or reward and merely for the immediate satisfaction it provides, there must be some sentiment that it touches—some internal taste or feeling, call it what you will—that distinguishes moral good and evil, embracing one and rejecting the other.

I entirely agree with (a). The ultimate ends of action are what I have called the 'principles of action', which in my 'Principles of Action' I tried to enumerate and to classify as •mechanical, •animal and •rational. [This is strange. In the work he refers to, Reid *of course* doesn't label ends or goals of action as 'principles'. The trio of kinds of principles [see Glossary] that he mentions here is a trio of *drives*; they concern inputs, not outputs. This strangeness occurs once more, about a page further on.]

Proposition (b) needs to be explained. I take it to mean that there can't be another end for the sake of which an ultimate end is pursued. If E is pursued as a means to F, then E is not an *ultimate* end.

You can see that this is what Hume meant by looking at his reasoning in support of it:

'Ask a man "Why do you take exercise?" and he will answer "Because I want to keep my health". Ask him "Why do you want health?" and he will readily reply

“Because sickness is painful”. If you now push on, and ask him “Why do you hate pain?”, he can’t possibly answer. This is an *ultimate* end, and is never regarded as a special case of something more general.’

To account by reason for end E, therefore, is to show another end F for the sake of which E is desired and pursued. And it’s certainly true that in this sense an ultimate end can’t be accounted for by reason, because something can’t be an ultimate end if it is pursued only for the sake of another end.

So I agree with Hume in this second proposition, which indeed is implied by the first.

The **(c)** third proposition is that ultimate ends recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties.

By ‘sentiments’ he must here mean feelings without judgment, and by ‘affections’ he means affections that don’t involve any judgment. Because surely any operation involving judgment can’t be independent of the intellectual faculties.

On this understanding of the proposition I can’t assent to it.

Hume seems to think that **(c)** follows from the proposition **(b)**. His thought is that because an ultimate end can’t be accounted for by reason (i.e. can’t be pursued merely for the sake of another end). therefore it can’t in any way depend on the intellectual faculties. I reject this inference, and can see no force in it.

I think that **(c)** not only doesn’t follow from **(b)** but also is contrary to truth.

A man may act from gratitude as an ultimate end; but *gratitude* involves a judgment and belief about favours’ having been received, so that it *is* dependent on the intellectual faculties. A man may act from respect for a worthy character

as an ultimate end; but this *respect* necessarily implies a judgment about the person’s worth, so that it too is dependent on the intellectual faculties.

[This paragraph contains the second occurrence of the strange equating of ‘principles’ with ‘ultimate ends’.] In my ‘Principles of Action’ I tried to show that along with

- the animal principles of our nature that require will and intention, but not judgment,
- there are also in human nature rational principles of action, or ultimate ends that have in all ages been called ‘rational’, and are entitled to that name not only from the authority of language but also because they can’t exist except in beings endowed with reason, and because in exercising them we have to use not only intention and will but also judgment or reason.

So until it is proved that an ultimate end can’t depend on the intellectual faculties, proposition **(c)** and all that hangs on it must fall to the ground.

Proposition **(d)** assumes with very good reason that virtue is an ultimate end, and desirable on its own account. If **(c)** were true, we would get from it and **(d)** that virtue has no dependence on the intellectual faculties. But as **(c)** is not granted or this conclusion is left without any support from the whole of the argument.

I wouldn’t have thought it worthwhile to spend so long on this controversy if I didn’t think that the theses I am opposing have important consequences.

If what we call ‘moral judgment’ isn’t really a judgment but merely a feeling, it follows that the moral principles that we have been taught to consider as an immutable law to all intelligent beings have no basis except an arbitrary structure and fabric in the constitution of the human mind—i.e. the structure that the human mind *happens* to have. Thus, by a change in our structure immoral things could become moral,

virtue could turn into vice, and vice into virtue. And beings with different feelings because of their different mental structures may have different—indeed *opposite*—measures of moral good and evil.

It follows that our notions of morals tell us *nothing* about the moral character of the Deity, which is the foundation of all religion and the strongest support of virtue.

Indeed, this opinion of Hume's seems to argue strongly against God's having a moral character, because a nature that is eternal, unchangeable and necessarily existent can't conceivably have any properties that are arbitrary or changeable. Hume seems perfectly consistent with himself in not accepting any evidence for God's moral attributes, whatever evidence there may be for his natural attributes.

On the other hand, if moral judgments are true and real judgments, the principles of morals stand on the unchangeable foundation of truth, and can't alter through any change in the 'fabric or structure' of those who judge concerning them. There may be—indeed there *are*—beings who aren't able to conceive moral truths or perceive the excellence of moral worth; just as there are beings who can't perceive mathematical truths; but no defect, no error of understanding, can make what is true to be false.

If it's true that

- piety, justice, benevolence, wisdom, temperance, fortitude, are in their own nature the most excellent and most amiable qualities of a human creature, and that
- vice has an inherent baseness that merits disapproval and dislike,

these truths can't be hidden from him whose understanding is unlimited, whose judgments are always true, and who must esteem everything according to its real value.

The judge of all the earth, we are sure, will act rightly. He has given us the power to perceive the right and the wrong in conduct, as far as our present state requires, and to perceive the dignity of one and the demerit of the other; and surely there can't be any real knowledge or real excellence in man that is not in his Maker.

We may therefore justly conclude that what we know in part, and see in part, of right and wrong, God sees perfectly; that the moral excellence we see and admire in some of our fellow-creatures is a faint but true copy of the moral excellence that is essential to God's nature; and that to tread the path of virtue is the true dignity of our nature, an imitation of God and the way to obtain his favour.