

A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals

Richard Price

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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. Price sometimes puts between sentences a dash like this—usually to indicate that the line of thought is changing direction a bit, but not enough to merit starting a new paragraph. Such dashes between sentences are all Price’s. So are all extra spaces between some pairs of paragraphs. Many of Price’s uses of the word ‘principle’ give it the meaning of ‘source’, ‘cause’, ‘drive’, ‘mechanism’ or the like. In this version, every occurrence of it in that sense of it will be written ‘principle_c’, suggesting ‘principle = cause’. A ‘principle’ without the subscript is a proposition.

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Preface

I am well aware that this work comes to the public with many disadvantages, and at a time when it isn't likely to get much attention from people. But the questions discussed in it are so important that if along with its many imperfections it has some merit, it can't be badly timed and will probably get a candid and careful reading from some people. The Notes that I include are mainly a result of my having set this work aside for several years, during which time I intermittently revised it.—By far my greatest intellectual debt is to Dr. Butler, the late Bishop of Durham. Whenever I have been conscious of following him in something I write, I either mention him or quote his words; and I am careful to do the same with respect to other writers as well. [The present version omits many of the footnotes in which Butler and others are quoted.]

The part of this work that I most want you to attend to, and that needs attention, is chapter 1, especially its section ii. If I fail in that section, then I fail in what I primarily set out to achieve in this book. But I would be sorry if you reached that conclusion without first going through the whole thing and comparing the different parts of it—you'll find that they

have a considerable dependence on one another. [In Price's day to 'compare' two things was not necessarily to *liken* them; it could be just to consider them together in order to see how they are related.]

•The result I try to prove in chapter I section iii will seem *obvious* to readers who haven't much studied the question of the foundation of morals, or who haven't looked at it in the light that I have placed it in. So obvious, indeed, that I'm afraid that those readers will find it hard to avoid the conclusion that in taking so much trouble to establish

•it I have merely been trifling [= 'pointlessly fooling around']. I sympathize with this view, because the •result in question *ought* to found obvious by everyone. I'm talking about the thesis that right and wrong, or moral good and evil, signify something that is really true of *actions* and not merely of *sensations*. Recent controversies, and the doubts of some of the wisest men, have made it necessary to defend this view with many arguments. My own belief in it is so strong that I can't help seeing it as a reproach to human reason that there is any *need* for these arguments.

Introduction

The readers of a book have a right to pass judgment on its merits; and a writer who objects to this, or isn't ready to face what comes of it, isn't properly equipped to *be* a writer. But it is not satisfactory that readers generally pass judgment on a book without spending much time thinking about what it says. Very few subjects are so straightforward that a competent judgment of them can be reached without care and attention. So what are we to think of those whom we continually see making free with their opinions on matters they have never thought about, and dogmatically answering the most difficult questions without thought or study? If they are ever right about anything it can be only by chance! They speak and think entirely at random, and therefore don't deserve to be taken seriously. As for those who *do* take some trouble to examine the issues, many even of *them* are as little entitled to be taken seriously; they are equally incompetent judges, equally careless and unthinking, and are led to their opinions by the most trifling arguments under the influence of passions that are harmful to the discovery of truth. It is a sad sight!

These considerations present a discouraging prospect to writers in general, and especially to ones who write on abstruse and controversial subjects. Most people don't *attend*; they think quickly and carelessly, yet decide boldly; and they mostly like or dislike according to their pre-conceived notions and prejudices and not •according to reason or •guided by any close and impartial consideration. All this is so true that an author who allowed himself optimistic hopes of success—whatever he might think of his doctrines or his arguments—would probably be letting himself in for humiliation. I should add that we are generally as much inclined

to •attach ourselves immoderately to our opinions as we are to •embrace them before thinking them out thoroughly.

Speaking for myself: I have such a sense of the truth of these remarks that there may be few people who are more pessimistic than I am about their chances of ever convincing one person that he has been guilty of error! The more we know of men, the more we find that in forming and maintaining their opinions they are governed by their temperaments, their interests, their moods and passions, and a thousand nameless causes and particular turns and casts of mind that •are bound to produce the greatest diversity of opinions among them and •make it impossible for them not to err. The fact is that none of us has the cool and calm temperament, the freedom from all wrong biases, the habit of attention and patience of thought, or the sharpness and competence in thinking, that are the proper guarantees against error. [Price quite often expresses emphatic assertions in the form of questions. Here is an example of that, and of the kind of way in which this version will often deal with such 'questions':]

Price's next sentence: How much then do modesty and diffidence become us? how open ought we to be to conviction, and how candid to those of different sentiments?

How we should understand it: That is all the more reason for us to be •modest and cautious in our opinions, to be •open to having our minds changed, and to be •fair and open with those whose beliefs are different from our own.

Indeed, when you think about the various ways in which error can slide into our minds—

- the many latent prejudices by which we're liable to be influenced,

- the countless facts about our own dispositions, and about the appearances of things, that can lead us astray without our noticing it, and
- the unavoidable darkness and infirmities of even the best and ablest men, often showing up in mistakes of the strangest kind

—such reflections are enough to lead a thinking man to distrust almost all his opinions.

But it would be unreasonable to go that far. Despite these difficulties and discouragements, •truth *is* still discoverable, and honest hard-working people can expect to have at least some success in their search for •it—at least on the most important points. The facts I have called attention to provide the strongest arguments for caution and care in enquiring, but none for despair or casual joking and lightly switching

opinions. They shouldn't make us sceptical, though they do demonstrate the folly of being dogmatic.

In this book most of the questions that are of any importance regarding morality and virtue will be considered—many in a different way from any previous treatment of them. I am somewhat shy about offering this work to the public because I am aware that it has many defects, and conscious of my liableness to the causes of blindness and error that I have mentioned. My principal aim has been to trace •the obligations of virtue up to •the truth and the nature of things, and these to •the Deity. The considerations I shall offer on this important matter have to a large extent satisfied my own mind, and this has led me to hope they may give some help to others enquiring into these matters.

Chapter 1

The origin of our ideas of right and wrong

In considering the actions of moral agents we have three different perceptions concerning them, and these must be carefully distinguished.

- (1) Our perception of right and wrong.
- (2) Our perception of beauty and ugliness. [chapter 2]
- (3) What we express when we say what actions, for better or worse, *deserve*. [chapter 4]

I shall examine each of these perceptions separately, with special emphasis on the first, with which I shall begin. . . .

i: What is the question concerning the foundation of morals?

[In Price's day, to be 'determined to' do something was to be made or caused or led to do it.] There are some actions that we all feel ourselves irresistibly determined to approve, and others to disapprove. There are some that we can't help thinking to be right, and others wrong. And of every action we are led to form some opinion—

- that it ought to be performed,
- that it ought not to be performed, or
- that it neither ought nor ought not to be performed—
i.e. it is indifferent.

The question we are to consider is: What is the power within us that determines us to make these judgments?

A very distinguished writer, the late Dr. Hutcheson, derives our moral ideas from a 'moral sense', meaning by this a power within us, different from reason, which makes certain actions pleasing to us and others displeasing. Hutcheson's view went like this [not a quotation from him]:

We are so made that certain impressions on our bodily organs arouse certain ideas in our minds, and certain outward forms when presented to us inevitably give rise to pleasure or pain. Similarly, we are so made that certain affections and actions of moral agents inevitably give rise to agreeable or disagreeable sensations in us, and get us to love or dislike them.

[•This work often uses 'form' to mean 'action', 'item of behaviour'—a sense that the word has since lost. 'Outward forms' are simply bits of physical behaviour. Occasionally, e.g. on page 7, Price seems to use 'forms' for any kind of particular item, not necessarily a particular *action*. •In this work, as in other writings of the same period, 'affection' means something like 'feeling that includes a desire or practical attitude'; see the paragraph starting 'This may give. . . ' on page 39. An 'affection' (in this sense) might be full of hate.]

He has indeed well shown •that we have a faculty ·or power· that determines us immediately to approve or disapprove of actions, setting aside any thought of private advantage; and •that the highest pleasures of life depend on this faculty. If he had left it at that, meaning by 'the moral sense' nothing but our moral faculty in general, there would have been little to object to in his position. But then what he was

saying wouldn't have been anything new—he couldn't have been regarded as the discoverer of it. ·Anyway, he *didn't* 'leave it at that'. •His choice of the term 'sense' as a label for this faculty, •his rejection of all the arguments that have been used to show it to be an intellectual power, and •the whole of his language on this subject—all these make it clear that he regarded the moral faculty as an upshot of the way our minds are constructed, an implanted and arbitrary principle_c that makes us like certain moral objects and dislike others, similar to the likes and dislikes created by our other senses. [Any principle_c resulting from how our minds are constituted is 'implanted' in us by God, and is 'arbitrary' in the early modern sense of 'chosen by someone'—in this case, chosen by God. It isn't implied that the choice is capricious or unreasonable.] In other words, if Hutcheson is right then our ideas of morality have the same origin as our ideas of the sensible qualities of bodies, the harmony of sounds, or the beauties of painting or sculpture—namely God's mere *choice* to make our mind and its organs responsive in a certain way to certain objects. [In Price's day, 'object' often had an *extremely* broad meaning. Any item *x*—any item at all—could be called an 'object' in the context of 'idea of *x*', 'think about *x*', 'respond to *x*', 'make a moral judgment about *x*', 'see or feel etc. *x*', 'have a belief about *x*', 'have a duty towards *x*'; e.g. 'moral objects' a few lines back, 'objects that the understanding perceives to be contingent' page 10.] According to those who accept this theory, virtue is *a matter of taste*. The moral terms 'right' and 'wrong' don't stand for anything **in the objects**—the actions or affections·—to which they are applied, any more than do 'agreeable' and 'harsh', 'sweet' and 'bitter', 'pleasant' and 'painful'; all they signify are certain effects **in us**. Our perception of right (wrong) or moral good (bad) in actions is merely the agreeable (disagreeable) emotion or feeling that certain actions produce in us. They are particular states of our minds—impressions they are made to receive

from contemplating certain actions, impressions that would have come from the contrary actions if the Author of nature had so chosen; and to suppose them to belong to those actions themselves is as absurd as to ascribe the pleasure or unpleasure that comes from observing a particular form to the form itself. According to this account, therefore, it is improper to say of an action that 'it is right', in about the same way as it is improper to say of an object of taste that 'it is sweet' or of pain that 'it is in fire'.

So this is the question that now confronts us: Is this a true account of virtue? Does it have a foundation in the nature of its object? Are right and wrong real features of actions or only qualities of our minds? In short, do 'right' and 'wrong' stand for •what actions are or only for •what sensations we get from actions because of the particular frame and structure of our natures?

Any attentive person who hasn't already thought about this question will, I am sure, be surprised at its being a subject of dispute, and will think that there is no need for what I am going to undertake. I have given the naked and just state of it [that sentence is verbatim Price]. . . . It is in fact the *only* question about the foundation of morals that can rationally and properly be made a subject of debate. We do have perceptions of moral 'right' and 'wrong', and those words must name either **(1)** the nature of the actions to which we apply them or **(2)** the nature of our feelings; and the power of perceiving them must be either **(1)** the power whose object is truth or **(2)** some implanted power or sense. If **(1)** is true, then morality is as unchangeable as all truth is; and if **(2)** is true, then morality is only what it appears to be to our senses, according to their various constitutions.

[We are about to meet the phrase 'positive laws'. That means 'laws that were laid down or ordained by *someone*'—it could be a human being or God.] As for theories that base morality on self-love, on positive laws and compacts, or on the Divine will: they must either

(a) mean that 'morally good' and 'morally evil' are only other words for 'advantageous' and 'disadvantageous', 'willed' and 'forbidden',

or else

(b) relate to a very different question—not to the question 'What is the nature and true account of virtue?' but 'What is the subject-matter of virtue?', i.e. what kinds of items are virtuous?¹

To the extent that the theories I have mentioned intend **(a)**, they afford little room for controversy. 'Right' and 'wrong', when applied to actions that are commanded or forbidden by the will of God, or that produce good or harm, don't mean merely that such actions are commanded or forbidden, or that they are useful or hurtful. Rather, they express an opinion concerning them and our consequent approval or disapproval of the performance of them. If that were not so, it would be obviously absurd to ask whether it is right to obey a command or wrong to disobey it, or whether it is right to produce happiness. The propositions *Obedying a command is right* or *Producing happiness is right* would be utterly trivial, because all they would mean is that obeying a command is obeying a command, or that producing happiness is producing happiness! Furthermore, on the supposition that 'right' and 'wrong' denote only the relations of actions to will and law, or to happiness and misery, there could be no dispute about the faculty that perceives right and wrong—it

¹ Bear in mind that the phrase 'foundation of virtue' is ambiguous. It may refer to **(i)** a consideration or principle implying virtue and proving it in particular cases, or **(ii)** a motive for the practice of virtue. I am using it in sense **(i)** only.

would have to be agreed by everything that *these* relations are objects of the investigations of reason.

Happiness requires something in its own nature or in ours to give it influence, and to make us want it and approve of pursuing it. Similarly, all laws, will, and compacts are effective only because of independent facts about what is right; so instead of being the constituents of right they owe their whole force and obligation to it.

After these preliminary remarks, I return to our question: What is the power or faculty within us that perceives the distinctions of right and wrong?

My answer is. **The understanding.** [Price always treats 'understanding' and 'reason' as equivalent terms. See for example footnote 2. He also equates them with 'intellect' and with 'intelligence'.]

To show that this is right, I must first explore in detail the origin of our ideas in general, and the distinct domains of the understanding and of the senses.

(ii): The origin of our ideas in general

Sensation and reflection have commonly been regarded as the sources of all our ideas, and Locke went to a lot of trouble to prove this. Greatly as I admire his excellent *Essay*, I don't think he was sufficiently clear or explicit on this subject. It is hard to work out exactly what he meant by 'sensation' and 'reflection'. At the start of his *Essay* he said that sensation is the effects arising from the impressions made on our minds by external objects, and that reflection is the notice the mind takes of its own operations. If those are right, it will be impossible to derive some of the most important of our ideas from sensation or reflection. But what Locke mainly meant, probably, was that all our ideas are either •derived immediately from those two sources or •ultimately based on ideas that are derived from them; which is to say that *they*

provide us with all the subjects, materials, and occasions of knowledge, comparison, and internal perception. This is far from saying that sensation and reflection are 'the sources' of all our ideas in any proper sense of 'source', but Locke seems to have thought otherwise. Despite all that he had to say about the mind's operations on its ideas, he doesn't seem to have thought that we have any faculty other than sensation and reflection that •could give rise to any simple ideas, or •could do more than compounding, dividing, abstracting, or enlarging ideas that are already in the mind. Well, be this as it may, I believe that the rival view that I am going to present will be found to be true.

I contend that we have a source of new ideas in •the power that understands, i.e. •the faculty within us that discerns truth, and that compares all the objects of thought and makes judgments concerning them. [At this point Price has a footnote, which is here raised into the main text.]

•START OF THE FOOTNOTE•

Please bear in mind that by 'ideas' I nearly always mean *simple* ideas, basic uncompounded perceptions of the mind. [An example of a 'compounded perception of the mind' is the idea of *squareness*, which is 'compounded' out of planeness, four-sidedness, rectangularity and equal-sidedness. An example of an uncompounded idea is the idea of *redness*, which is simple or uncompounded because there is no way of completing a definition of the form 'for something to be *red* is for it to be—and ...'.] I shall later be arguing that our ideas of right and wrong are of this sort. I should point out too that I am always using 'the understanding' in the most confined and proper sense of that phrase. Some writers have used it much more broadly, dividing all the powers of the soul into •understanding and •will, so that 'the understanding' covers all the powers of external and internal sensation, as well as those of judging and reasoning. . . .

The understanding performs actions of two kinds—intuition and deduction, I have in view intuition; but it's obvious that the writers who argue against referring our moral ideas to reason usually have in mind only deduction. [Intuition' as used here refers to *seeing at a glance* that necessarily P or that Q follows necessarily from P; while 'deduction' was *seeing through a several-step argument* that necessarily P or that Q follows necessarily from P.]

·END OF THE FOOTNOTE·

Because the question before us is 'Are our moral ideas derived from the understanding or from a sense?', we need first to do something that hasn't been given the attention it deserves, namely to say clearly how the nature and the domain of the senses differs from the nature and domain of reason. My first point about this is the following. The power that

- judges regarding the perceptions of the senses and contradicts their decisions, and that
- discovers the nature of the sensible qualities of objects, enquires into their causes, and distinguishes what is from what is not real in them,

must be a power within us that is superior to the senses.

It's obvious that one sense cannot judge regarding the objects of another sense—the eye can't judge harmony, or the ear judge colours. So the faculty that views and compares the objects of all the senses cannot itself be a sense. For example, when we consider sound and colour together, we observe in them •essence, •number, •identity, •diversity etc., and determine that their reality consists not in their being properties of external substances but in their being states of our souls. The power that takes note of all this and gives rise to these notions must be a power that can inspect *anything* and can acquaint itself with necessary truth and existence.

Sense consists in the way certain impressions force themselves upon us, independently of our wills; but it can't perceive what they are or where they come from. Sense lies prostrate under its object [Price's phrase]. Sense is only the soul's capacity for having its own state altered by the influence of particular causes. So it remains a stranger to the objects and causes affecting it.

If sense and knowledge weren't entirely different, we would settle for having sensible impressions—light, colours, sounds etc.—without enquiring any further into them, at least when the impressions were strong and vigorous. Whereas in fact we necessarily want some further acquaintance with them, and can't ever be satisfied until we have subjected them to the survey of reason. Here are four large differences between these two faculties. (1) Sense presents *particular* forms to the mind [see note on page 4], but it can't rise to any *general* ideas. It's the intellect that examines and compares the presented forms, rising above individuals to the level of universal and abstract ideas. This enables it to look *down* on objects, getting an infinity of particulars into one view, and enables it to discover general truths. (2) Sense sees only the *outside* of things, whereas reason acquaints itself with their *natures*. (3) Sensation is only a kind of *feeling* in the mind, whereas knowledge implies an active and vital *energy* of the mind. Feeling pain, for example, is the effect of sense; but the understanding is employed when pain itself is made an object of the mind's reflection, i.e. is held up before the mind in order to discover its nature and causes. Mere sense can't perceive anything in the most exquisite work of art except what is painted in the eye [Price's phrase]; it can't, for example, see that this is a picture of a plant or an animal. It is the intellect that must perceive in the art-work order and proportion, variety and regularity, design, connection, skill, and power; aptitudes, dependences, correspondences,

and the inter-relating of parts so as to serve a purpose, composing one perfect whole²—things that can never be represented on a sense-organ, and the ideas of which can't be passively communicated or stamped on the mind by the operation of external objects. **(4)** Sense cannot perceive any of the modes of thinking beings; these can be discovered only by the mind's survey of itself. [*Modes* are properties or qualities of things. Not essential properties: a mind's *thinking* isn't a mode of it. But also not particular episodes: a particular stab of pain suffered by a mind wouldn't be called a mode of it. Modes are universals; they are *ways things can be*.]

In short, we see that sense and understanding are totally different faculties of the soul—

- one dealing only with particulars, the other only with universals;
- one not discerning but suffering, the other not suffering but discerning.

[That involves a now rare sense of 'suffer' in which it means 'passively undergo'. Price is contrasting the understanding which actively *does* things with the senses that only passively undergo or are on the receiving end of things.] Understanding is the soul's power of surveying and examining all things, in order to make judgments about them. . . .

To get a better idea of •how small the scope of sense is (and this applies also to imagination, a faculty closely related to sense) and •how greatly we depend on our higher thinking powers for many of our basic ideas, I shall discuss six such ideas.

(1) The idea of **solidity** has usually been counted among the ideas we owe to sense; but it might be hard to show

that we ever have actual experience of *impenetrability*, which is an ingredient in our idea of solidity and is regarded as essential to all bodies. To show this we would have to be sure that we have at some time •made two bodies really touch and •found that they wouldn't penetrate one another; but •we aren't entitled to be sure of that, because •all the facts we know by observation *could* be explained without supposing that it *ever* happens that two bodies are in absolute contact. And even if we could conduct that experiment, a single experiment couldn't be a sufficient foundation for our absolute confidence that no two bodies *can* penetrate one another—nor indeed could a million experiments! Not to mention the fact that in any such experiment all we would perceive by our senses would be the •conjunction of two events, not their •necessary connection. [One event would be the coming into contact of the two bodies; the other, presumably, would be the bodies' either staying in that position or bouncing back.] Are we then to say that there isn't any idea of impenetrability? That two atoms of matter could occupy the same place •at the same time •while still keeping their distinct identities, neither of them annihilating the other? That all the atoms of matter in the universe could be crowded into the space now occupied by one? That the space occupied by these could become smaller and smaller, to infinity, without reducing *at all* the quantity of matter in the universe? We might have to say Yes to all of that, if it were certain that all our ideas about this are derived from sensation, and that reason had nothing to work on here except what is revealed by the senses. It often happens that two material substances *appear* to us to penetrate one another; and it is our reason which, on

² Cudworth in his *Treatise of Eternal and Immutable Morality* remarks that the mind is prompted by outer objects to perceive much more than is represented to it by sense, just as a learned man perceives in the best written book more than is perceived by an illiterate person or a non-human animal. [Price then quotes a long passage in which Cudworth likens a learned man's ability to •read wonderful things in a book to a thinking person's ability to •read God's wisdom and goodness in the universe.]

the basis of its own perceptions, concludes that those are misleading appearances and assures us of the universal and strict necessity of the contrary. The same power that perceives two particles to be •different also perceives them to be •impenetrable, because they can't be different without being impenetrable; it is self-evident that they can't occupy the same place at the same time without losing all difference from one another.

(2) Now let us consider **inertia**, i.e. the inactivity of matter. This too is a perception of reason rather than an idea conveyed to the mind by the senses. This property of matter is the basis for all our reasoning about it. To those who reject it, or who insist that all our knowledge of matter and motion must come from experience, i.e. the information conveyed to the mind through the senses, I put a question concerning the three axioms (or laws of motion) on which Sir Isaac Newton bases his philosophy: are they unsupported by evidence and devoid of meaning?—What is it that tells us that every body will continue for ever in the state of rest or motion it is in unless something produces an alteration of that state? that every alteration of a body's motion must be proportional to the force exerted on it and in the same line of direction as that force? and that a body's action on another body is always equal and contrary to the other body's action on it? In other words, what gives us our ideas of resistance and inactivity? Not experience! [Price now says that untutored sense-experience would seem to suggest that Newton's three laws are *false*. He continues:] Ideas so •contradictory to sense cannot be •derived from it. So they must be ascribed to a higher origin, namely, the understanding.

And another point: suppose that Newton's laws were constantly illustrated by experience as well as by the perceptions of reason, the backed-by-experience version of them would have to be very different from the backed-by-reason version

which is what they actually are. Even if experience and observation taught us always that the alteration of motion in a body is proportional to the force acting on it and is in the line of direction in which this force acts, the senses could only teach us this very imperfectly—they couldn't inform us of it with precision and exactness. They could only show us that what this law states is *nearly* the case, which is the same, strictly speaking, as its *not* being the case! The eye of sense is blunt. The conceptions of the imagination are rough and ready, falling infinitely short of the certainty, accuracy, universality, and clarity that belong to intellectual discernment.

(3) The idea of **substance**, similarly, is one to which our minds are necessarily carried, beyond what is suggested by mere sensation, which can show us nothing but accidents, sensible qualities, and the outsides of things. It is the understanding that discovers the general distinction between substance and accident [= 'between things and their properties'], and there is no doubt that it gets this right. There couldn't be a more *unavoidable* perception than that motion implies something that moves, extension implies something extended, and in general modes imply something modified.

[Although Price does not say so, the next paragraph was written with one eye on what Locke wrote in *Essay* II.xiv.3: 'There is a sequence of ideas constantly following one another in our mind. . . . Reflection on these appearances of various ideas one after another is what provides us with the idea of *succession*; and the distance between two any parts of that sequence, i.e. between the appearance of any two ideas in our minds, is what we call *duration*.' This makes *succession* basic and *duration* derivative from it; Price reverses that.]

(4) The idea of **duration** accompanies all our ideas; it is included in every notion we can form of reality and existence. What is suggested by the observation of the sequence of

thoughts following one another in our minds, or the constant flux of external objects, is *succession*. This, like every other idea, presupposes the idea of *duration*; but it is as different from it as are the ideas of motion and shape. Rather than saying—as Locke did—that the idea of duration is derived from that of succession, I think it would have been better to say that reflecting on the succession of ideas in our minds is the basis for our estimate of *how much* duration has intervened between two events.

(5) Similar remarks can be made regarding the idea of **space**. Like duration, this is included in every reflection we can make about our own existence or that of other things; because it's self-evident that saying that something *is nowhere* is the same as saying that it *doesn't exist*. Like everything else that exists at all, we exist in •time and •place; so that as self-conscious and thinking beings we must have ideas of •them.

Another point worth making about space and duration is that we perceive intuitively [see note in footnote on page 7] their *necessary existence*. The notion of annihilation is the notion of removing a thing from space and duration; to suppose that space and duration might be annihilated is to suppose that they might be separated from themselves! In the same intuitive manner we perceive they can have no limits, and from this we get the idea of *infinity*.

what Price wrote next: The very notion of bounds implies them, and therefore cannot be applicable to them, unless they could be bounded by themselves.

what he meant: The notion of x's being limited in space (time) involves the notion of there being space (time) *outside* the limit—the space (time) that x is limited *by*. So the notion of

space (time) itself being limited involves the •absurd• notion of space (time) being limited *by* space (time) outside the limit. These perceptions are plainly the result of the understanding's attention to necessary truth; and the account of how we come by our ideas of infinity and necessity in time and space. . . .also applies to how we come by our ideas of any other self-evident reality—e.g. of the equality between the opposite angles of two lines crossing one another, or of the identity of any particular object while it continues to exist.

There are other objects [see note on page 4] that the understanding perceives just as evidently to be *contingent*, or whose existence it sees to be not necessary but only possible.

Thus, the understanding, by attending to different objects and observing what is or is not true of them, acquires the ideas of *necessity*, *infinity*, *contingency*, *possibility*, and *impossibility*.

(6) The next ideas I shall discuss are those of **power** and **causation**. Some of the ideas mentioned above imply them; but we should attend to them separately and with care. At first sight it may seem utterly obvious that one way in which they get into our mind is by our observing the various changes that happen in our environment, and our constant experience of the events that occur when external objects are made to interact in this or that specific manner. [Thus Locke, *Essay* II.xxi.1.] And yet I am quite convinced that these ideas can't possibly be given to us by this experience alone.

What we observe by our external senses is, strictly speaking, merely that one thing *follows* another,³ or the constant *conjunction* of certain events. . . . That one thing is the *cause* of another, or *produces* it, we never see. And in countless instances where men commonly think they observe

³ Malebranche says various things to that effect; he is well known to have maintained that nothing in nature is ever the proper *cause* of anything else, only the *occasion*; according to him, God is the sole agent •or cause• of all effects and events. Hume has even more strongly emphasized that all we perceive is events following (•not causing•) one another, though with a different purpose.

causation at work it *isn't* at work! Suppose that nothing ever did contribute through its own force to the production of any new event; suppose (that is) that the apparent causes of things were *never* their causes but *always* only their occasions or concomitants; . . . we would still have the same ideas of cause and effect and power .as we do have now. Our certainty that *every new event requires some cause* doesn't depend on our experience any more than does any other intuitively known truth. The idea of every change includes within it the idea of its being an *effect*.

The necessity that everything that happens should have a cause is an essential principle, a primary perception of the understanding. Nothing is more obviously absurd than the notion of

- a change that has been derived from nothing,
- a change for which there is no reason,
- an existence that began but was never produced,
- a body that has ceased moving but hasn't been stopped.
- a body that has begun to move but hasn't been moved.

If someone says he denies this, nothing can be done to convince him except referring him to common sense. If he can't find *there* the perception I have mentioned, there can be no further argument with him, because the subject doesn't admit of argument. .Why doesn't it? Because there isn't anything more clearly true than the proposition in question, so there's nothing we can bring forward to support it. Someone might say: 'We do indeed have such a perception, but it comes from some power other than the understanding, .so that our having it isn't a reason to think it true.', but then I would demand to know why he doesn't say the same thing about *all* self-evident truth!

I have *not* said that we have no idea of power except from the understanding.

what Price wrote next: Activity and self-determination are as essential to spirit as the contrary are to matter;

what he meant: We are active; we get ourselves to move; and this is as essential to minds as it is essential to matter that it passively doesn't move unless something else moves it;

so our inward consciousness gives us the idea of the •particular sort of power implied in activity and self-determination. But the •universal source of the idea of

- power, as we conceive it to be necessary to the production of everything that happens,

and of our notions of

- connection, aptitude, and dependence in general,

must be the understanding. Some active or passive powers, some capacities for making changes or for being changed, are an essential part of our ideas of all objects. (These powers differ according to the different natures of the objects and the different relations amongst them.) An item that •can't do anything, that •isn't fit to serve any purpose, and •has no kind of dependence or aptitude or power belonging to it, can't be anything real or substantial. If all things were wholly unconnected and loose, if no one event or object ever, in any circumstances, implied anything beyond itself, all the foundations of knowledge would be destroyed. Everyone agrees •that things don't appear to us as loose and unconnected, and •that in countless instances we can't help regarding them as connected and inferring one from another. Why shouldn't this be accounted for by a real connection between the things themselves? Can there be *anyone* who thinks that there's no real connection, perceivable by reason, between •having an honest mind and •acting justly, or between •certain collisions and •changes in how bodies move?

Indeed, the whole meaning of 'accounting for' [= 'explaining'] a fact implies that in the nature of objects and events there is something that involves a *connection* between them, or

a *fitness* to influence one another in certain ways. Until we can discover this ‘something’ we are always aware that there’s more to be known. For as long as we only see one thing constantly accompanying or following another, without perceiving the real dependence and connection (as with gravitation, and the sensations that accompany certain impressions on our bodily organs), we can’t help being dissatisfied. Our state of mind about that is very different from the complete acceptance that we experience when we think about Newton’s laws of motion or any other facts in which we see the necessary connection and truth.

We always find that when we have adequate ideas of the natures and properties of any beings or objects, we at the same time perceive their powers and can predict, independently of experience, what they will produce in given circumstances and what will follow their interacting with one another in given ways. If we were thoroughly acquainted with the heart of a man, the nature of his temperament, and the structure of his mind, we wouldn’t need *experience* to tell us what he will do or how far he is to be trusted. Similarly, if we knew the inward fabric and constitution [or, as we might say, the molecular structure] of the bodies surrounding us on which all their properties and powers depend, we would know in advance what the result would be of any experiments we

could make with them. Just as from having a complete idea of the real essence of a circle we can deduce its various properties that depend on that essence. . . . And if we had perfect insight into the constitution of nature—the laws that govern it and the motions, texture, and relations of all the bodies that compose it—the whole chain of future events in it would be laid open to us. Experience and observation are useful only when we are ignorant of the nature of the object, and can’t in a more perfect, short, and certain way determine what the outcome will be of particular experiments, and what are the uses of particular objects.⁴ *Instinct* is an even lower and more imperfect means of making up for the same lack of knowledge.

With regard to all the ideas I have been discussing, and particularly **(6)** causation, it is worth pointing out that even if it were as difficult to discover their true origin as it is to derive them from the sources commonly assigned to them by writers on these subjects, it would surely still be very unreasonable to conclude that we have no such ideas. And yet that’s the very conclusion some have drawn! If then we do indeed have such ideas; and if they have a foundation in truth and are ideas of something that really exists, what difficulty can there be in allowing that they may be known to the understanding, the faculty whose object is truth? If

⁴ The conviction produced by experience is based on the same principle that assures us that there must be a cause of every event and some explanation of whatever happens. The frequent repetition of a particular event, e.g. the falling of a heavy body to the earth, makes us expect that it will happen again in future trials. That expectation is based on this: We see **intuitively** that there must be some reason or cause for this constancy of outcome, and we take it that this cause must operate regularly and constantly in given circumstances. On the same principle, if we observed a die being thrown very often and *always* falling with ‘6’ uppermost, we would conclude that the same thing would happen with any future throws of this die. And the more frequently and uninterruptedly we knew this had happened, the stronger would be our expectation of its happening again, because the more evident it would be that either •the die was marked ‘6’ on every side or •the thrower had some special skill or •there was something in the die’s constitution that made it turn with ‘6’ uppermost.—I have a suggestion—a surprising one, but I think it is true—about why some people have doubts and difficulties with this and some other points of the clearest nature. It is that when they say: ‘It is not *reason* that informs us that there must be some explanation of everything that happens and some established causes of constant and uniform events, and that order and regularity must come from design’, what they mean is that these propositions can’t be established by **deduction**. They are right about that, but only because the propositions are *self-evident*, known by **intuition**, so plain that there is nothing plainer from which they can be inferred!

we don't have any such ideas, or if they denote nothing real except the qualities of our own minds, I needn't say what an abyss of scepticism that will plunge us into.

Let me add, finally, that our *abstract* ideas seem most properly to belong to the understanding. They're undoubtedly essential to all its operations, because every act of judgment implies some abstract or universal idea. For them to be formed by the mind in the way they are generally said to be, it seems that the mind would have to have them already at the very time when it is supposed to be busy forming them. We are told, for example, that from any particular idea of a triangle we can form the 'abstract' general one; but doesn't the thought process required by this. . . . imply that the general idea is already in the mind? If it isn't, how can the mind know how to go to work, or what to think about?—Some have held that a universal idea isn't a special kind of idea, but rather an ordinary idea associated with a name that signifies a number of particular ideas resembling that one; but this can't be right, because unless we have a 'genuinely' universal idea we can't know *which* other ideas to allow into the group signified by the name, i.e. which particular objects had the resemblance necessary to bring them within the meaning of the name. Someone who reads a geometrical demonstration is aware that it relates to •something more than just the precise figure presented in the diagram. But if he doesn't know •*what* more, what use is the demonstration to him? How is his knowledge enlarged by it? How will he know afterwards what to apply it to?—It is true •that everything pictured in the imagination, and everything we observe by our senses, is particular; and •that while any general notions are present in the mind, the imagination is usually busy representing to itself some of the particulars that fall under them. But it would be strange to infer from *this* that the only ideas we have are particular ideas! That

wouldn't be much better than inferring from the fact that

- things are so tightly associated in our minds with their names that we can't separate them from their names

that

- our only notion of any thing is an idea of its name.

Or inferring from the fact that

- whenever we think about the sun, we are apt to have an image of a white bright circle

that

- our only notion of the sun is the idea of a white bright circle.

[At this point Price has a long footnote, which is here raised into the main text:]

START OF PRICE'S 'S FOOTNOTE

According to Cudworth, abstract ideas are implied in the cognitive power of the mind, which (he says) contains potentially within itself general notions of all things, notions that unfold and reveal themselves as proper circumstances occur—in much the way a future tree is potentially contained in a seed. I don't agree with those who condemn this as whimsical and extravagant, but I wouldn't like to have to defend it! . . .

Cudworth rejects as very absurd the opinion that universal ideas are formed out of particular ones by separating things' common properties from the ones that individuate them from one another; he says that it comes from a misunderstanding of Aristotle. As for the other opinion that

- universal ideas are only singular ideas tied to a common term, i.e. they are names without any meaning

—a view that used to be accepted by the appropriately named Nominalists [from Latin *nomen* = 'name'], and has recently been revived—he says that this is so ridiculously false that it doesn't deserve to be argued against. [Price now quotes a longish passage in which Cudworth starts from the premise

that God can ‘signify his will to men’, who can ‘signify their wants to God’. It would be an incredible coincidence if the ideas involved in such communications had one source for God and a different source for man. If we credit God with deriving his ideas from something other than himself, ‘we quietly fall into a kind of atheism’. So we have to think that God’s mind generates its own ideas, which makes it reasonable to think that our ideas are made in our minds and don’t owe anything to the world of matter. [Price now ends the footnote with another quotation from Cudworth:]

‘The philosophers whose ideas of *being* and *knowledge* are derived from body and sensation have a short method to explain the nature of **truth**. It is an invented thing made by every man for himself, which comes and goes, i.e. is remembered and forgotten. In the ·metaphysical· order of things truth comes at the bottom, not only below objects that we see and feel but even below our sensations of them. . . . Other reasoners. . . . represent **truth** not as the lowest but as the highest of beings; they call it immutable, eternal, omnipresent—attributes which all indicate something more than human. . . . For my part, when I read the detail about sensation and reflection, and learn the main outlines of how my ideas are all generated, I seem to view the human soul as resembling a crucible in which truths are produced by a kind of logical chemistry.’

END OF THE FOOTNOTE

It is a fatal error that people run into when they confuse the understanding with the imagination, and deny reality and possibility to anything that the imagination can’t represent, however clear and certain it is to the understanding. The powers of the imagination are very narrow; if the understanding were confined to the same limits, nothing could be known and the understanding itself would be annihilated.—It is utterly obvious that one of these ·faculties·

often •perceives where the other is blind, •is surrounded with light where the other finds only darkness, and in countless cases •knows things to exist of which the other can’t form any idea. *Of course* the imagination can’t represent to itself *matter without colour*; but that is how it is perceived by the understanding, which announces without doubt or hesitation that colour is not a property of matter. Points, lines and surfaces, as mathematicians consider them, are entirely intellectual objects—never picked up by the senses and inconceivable to the imagination. Does this imply that there are no such things? Are we to believe that there cannot be any particles of matter smaller than we can imagine to ourselves, or that there is no degree of equality except what can be judged by the eye? This has been maintained! And on the same principles we must go on to say that

the mind itself and its operations are just what they appear to everyone’s reflection; it isn’t possible for us to go wrong in our thinking about what we have formerly done or thought, or what we will do or think in the future.

What an unattractive philosophy it is that thus explodes all independent truth and reality, reduces knowledge to particular states of sense and imagination, making these the measures of all things!

Here is an example of the stock of knowledge and new ideas that the understanding can derive from one object of contemplation.

Let us suppose someone who is sensorily confronted by one cubic inch of matter. If he has no intellect, he will stick for ever with that individual sense-perceptible object, never getting to anything more than what it immediately presents to him. Now add intellect, and let us observe what follows.

First, there will appear the ideas of •thing, •possibility, and •actual existence. Because every perception is the per-

ception *of* something, it implies some kind of reality distinct from and independent of itself. ‘Might not the perception be a perception *of* itself?’ Nothing could be more grossly absurd than that! If it were right, any examination might be identical with the thing being examined—the eye identical with visible objects; memory with the fact remembered, desire with the object desired. And yet this absurdity seems to be the basis for a system of scepticism that has been lately taught to the world.

I needn’t labour this. Every idea implies the possibility of the actual existence of its object; nothing being clearer than that there can’t be any idea of an impossibility, a conception of what cannot exist. These are obviously true intuitions of the intellectual faculty, which is unavoidably led to then by every object it thinks about.

[In the third edition—20 years after the first—Price appended an end-note relating to what he has just said.]

·START OF END-NOTE·

Dr. Reid, in his very valuable work on the intellectual powers of man, disputes this assertion (4th Essay, chapter 3). His principal reasons seem to be **(a)** that we can understand a proposition that expresses what is impossible, and **(b)** that in mathematical demonstrations we are often directed to suppose what is impossible. **(b)** But supposing is not the same as conceiving. I can be directed to •suppose any absurdity, but it doesn’t follow from this that I can •conceive any absurdity. A believer in transubstantiation may •suppose that Christ held his own body in his hand and gave it to his disciples; but if he claimed to have a clear and distinct •conception of this he would be making himself as ridiculous as if he were to say that he saw it happen.

(a) And a man can •understand what is meant by a proposition that expresses an impossibility—e.g. ‘The whole of something is smaller than a part of it’. But he certainly

doesn’t have any real •conception of this. He may think he has a clear •idea of an object when in fact he doesn’t, just as he may think that he has a clear •perception of an object when in fact he doesn’t perceive it. But just as in the latter case

•he must believe in the existence of what he thinks he perceives,

so in the former case

•he must believe in the possibility of what he thinks he conceives.

I must emphasize that my topic here is *the conception of objects* and not *the understanding of propositions*. Because impossibilities are not realities, conceptions of them would be conceptions of nothing.

·END OF END-NOTE·

·Continuing with the account of what the understanding can extract from a cubic inch of matter·: We may next observe that the *possibility* of the existence of matter implies the *actual* existence of space. Without space, matter could not be possible, nor could there be any idea of it. And our grasp of space’s status as necessary and inseparable from the idea of matter is our grasp of the *necessary existence of space*. And once we have the idea of space, we perceive its infinity.—From the idea of matter we are in the same way informed of the *necessary existence of duration*. By further examining our supposed portion of matter we shall find that we can conceive, without contradiction, of one part of it as being in one place and another part in another place, and that consequently it is divisible. For the same reason it will appear that this division can be continued, and that an intelligent mind can penetrate so far beyond all the boundaries of imagination that it perceives that there certainly can be no end to this division—which is to say that matter is infinitely divisible.

[In the third edition Price appended an end-note confessing (not a change of view, but) a loss of confidence.]

·START OF END-NOTE·

This property of matter—·infinite divisibility·—convinces me that I don't know what it is, and that the common ideas of it are extremely inadequate. The Scholastic maxim *Every entity is one* seems to me indisputable. What could something be that was neither ·one thing nor any ·number of things?

Isn't it absurd to say that one thing was moved by another, which was moved by another, and so on backwards to infinity, without any first mover? And isn't it equally absurd to say that a particle of matter can be divided into other particles, which can be divided into others, and so on downwards to infinity, without ever coming to a particle that is properly *one*—·meaning a particle that is indivisible·?

You might want to try this: 'There are atoms that have no pores, and therefore can't be divided except by the power of the Creator.' But such an atom would have parts, and it would be possible that one part should exist in one place and another part in another place; so that this 'atom' would really be a multitude of atoms, just as if its parts were actually separated. Whatever is really one can't be divided without being annihilated. This is true of the being that each person calls *himself*. No-one can conceive of *half of himself*.

Those are the difficulties that press my mind with respect to the nature of matter. But they have no effect on my belief in the existence of a material world. In this case, as in countless others, I feel my own ignorance, without being led to reject convictions that I am forced to accept without being able to explain them. ·Here is one of the other cases·: I know that my will moves my limbs. There is nothing more familiar to me—and nothing that I understand less!

·END OF END-NOTE·

From the same source—·our supposed piece of matter·—the understanding can further gain the ideas of ·cause and effect, and ·connection. Let it conceive of two of the separated parts as moving in a direct line towards one another, and consider what would follow. Because it can't conceive them to pass through one another, the understanding will unavoidably conclude that there will be contact and impulse [= 'a collision'], and also (as necessarily connected with these) some change in the motions of the colliding bodies.—To avoid these conclusions one would have to suppose that two bodies can

- penetrate one another, or
- move towards one another without meeting and pushing, or
- push one another without altering how they move or having any other effect.

Someone who has no difficulty conceiving any of those—well, what criterion can he be using to judge concerning what is true or false? and why will he refuse his assent to *any* absurdity that can be put to him?

But not only would the mind [here = 'the understanding'] thus perceive causation and necessary connection, but ·it could also make predictions on that basis·. Given the direction and momentum of the moving bodies before the collision, it could foretell the precise change of direction and momentum that the collision would produce; and could go on from that to working out—*a priori* and with no possibility of error—all the laws and effects of ·the collision of bodies, ·the division and composition of motions, and ·the resistance of fluids and centripetal forces, as they have been investigated by natural scientists.

And it is obvious that with this as a foundation the mind would gain the ideas of number and proportion, and lines and figures; and could proceed to arithmetic, geometry, and

all the different branches of mathematics.—In short, from this single subject of enquiry—the cubic inch of matter that we started out with—the mind can learn not only the elements and principles but the main part of the whole body of science.—Such is the fruitfulness of reason, and so great the injury it suffers by being kept within the limits of sense, imagination, or experience.⁵

When I consider these things I am amazed that people who are enquiring into the origin of our ideas overlook *the understanding*; although it isn't the temporally first of our idea-sources it is the most important source of them. It has indeed always been regarded as the source of •knowledge; but there has been too much neglect of the fact that it couldn't be a source of knowledge without also being a source of new ideas. The various kinds of •agreement and •disagreement between our ideas, which Locke says it is the understanding's job to discover and trace, are so many new simple ideas obtained by the understanding's discernment [Price's word]. Thus, when the understanding considers the two angles made by a straight line meeting another straight line, and perceives that they agree with two right angles, isn't this agreement simply **(i)** *equality*? And isn't the idea of **(ii)** this equality a new simple idea that the understanding has acquired, completely different from the ideas of the two angles, and denoting **(iii)** self-evident truth? [In that sentence,

Price seems to move from **(i)** the idea of equality to **(ii)** the idea of the equality of those two angles and from that to **(iii)** the proposition that the two angles are equal.]—In much the same way in other cases, . . .

how Price finished this sentence: . . . knowledge and intuition suppose somewhat perceived in their objects, denoting simple ideas to which themselves gave rise.

what he meant: . . . we know by intuition—i.e. by seeing it as self-evident—some truth about something, a truth involving an idea that the understanding comes to have *through* having this very intuition.

—This is true of our ideas of proportion, of our ideas of identity and diversity, existence, connection, cause and effect, power, possibility and impossibility; and—jumping ahead to something I shall discuss fully later on—our ideas of moral right and wrong. Proportion concerns quantity; right and wrong concern actions; and all the others concern everything. They are involved in the most considerable part of what we can want to know about things, and are the topics of most reasonings and treatises. [Price has a long footnote here, which is raised into the main text.]

•START OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE•

[The footnote quotes Socrates (in Greek) as accepting the general line Price has been taking here, including this:] 'For the perception of these things, a different organ or faculty is not appointed, but the soul itself in virtue of its own

⁵ And so false is the scholastic maxim *There is nothing in the intellect that wasn't first in the senses*.—Something that is relevant to this, though not directly relevant to my purposes in this chapter, is worth notice. It is the case, mentioned by Locke, of the man had been born blind, gained his sight, and was then required to distinguish between a globe and cube just by looking at them. I agree that this man wouldn't be able •readily or immediately to say which was the globe and which the cube, but it seems certain that •with the help of a little reflection he could tell which was which. First, let us vary the example and suppose that the born-blind man is confronted with—instead of the •globe and cube—a •square and a rectangular parallelogram of unequal sides. To both senses, touch and sight, the sides of one would appear equal and of the other unequal. So why should it be hard for him to determine that what he saw with equal sides was the square, and with unequal the oblong? Could he possibly suspect that *sight* is so fallacious a sense that it represents the most unequal things as equal, or represents a great multitude of things as *one* and vice versa? In the same way he could distinguish between a square and a circle, and therefore between a globe and a cube; and in this and many other cases he could determine how something he •saw would •feel, doing this *before* having any experience of feeling the item in question. . . .

power observes these general states of all things.’ . . . James Harris writes in his book *Hermes*: ‘Notice the order of things according to our later metaphysicians. •First comes that huge body, the sensible world. •Then this world and its attributes beget sensible ideas. •Then a kind of lopping and pruning of sensible ideas creates intelligible ideas, both specific and general. Thus, if they admitted that the mind came into existence at the same time as the body, until the body gave the mind ideas and awakened its dormant powers, it could at best have been merely a sort of dead capacity; for it couldn’t possibly have any innate ideas—i.e. ideas that it had when it first came into existence.—At another time we hear of bodies so exceedingly fine that their very fineness makes them capable of having sensation and knowledge, as if they had *shrunk into intellect* by their exquisite subtlety, which made them too delicate to be bodies any longer. But the intellectual scheme that never forgets •God regards every corporeal thing as coming from the primary mental •Cause. *That* is where it looks for the origin of intelligible ideas, even the ones that human beings have. Sensible objects may be God’s chosen medium to *awaken* the dormant energies of man’s understanding, but those energies themselves aren’t contained in sense, any more than the explosion of a cannon is contained in the spark that set it off.’

•END OF PRICE’S FOOTNOTE•

In short. Just as bodily sight reveals visible objects to us, the understanding (the eye of the mind, and infinitely more penetrating than the bodily eye) reveals intelligible objects to us. And just as bodily vision is the inlet through which ideas enter the mind, so the understanding becomes the inlet of new ideas that the senses cannot provide. . . .

For several reasons, the classification of our ideas that I like best is the following.

(1) First, ideas that imply nothing real outside the mind, i.e. nothing real apart from the mind’s own feelings and sensations.

(2) Secondly, ideas that denote something distinct from sensation, and imply real and mind-independent existence and truth.

Each of these classes can be further subdivided: The first class into **(1a)** ideas that denote the immediate effects of impressions on the bodily senses without presupposing any previous ideas, e.g. all tastes, smells, colours, and so on, and **(1b)** ideas that arise only when prompted by other ideas, e.g. the effects in us of experiencing or thinking about order, happiness, and the beauties of poetry, sculpture, painting, and so on.

The second class can be subdivided into **(2a)** ideas that denote real properties of external objects, and the actions and passions of the mind, and **(2b)** those that I have described as derived immediately from intelligence. **(2a)** From the information that reaches •it through the organs of the body, and from •its observation of the necessary accompaniments of certain sensations and impressions, •the mind perceives the shape, extension, motion, and other primary qualities of material substances. By contemplating itself, it perceives the properties of spiritual substances, volition, consciousness, memory, and so on. It is essential to each of these ideas that it has an invariable archetype that actually exists and that it is supposed to fit. [Strictly, an ‘archetype’ is something from which *copies* are made, but Price here means only that each idea is *of* something other than itself, something that it *fits*, something that it is accurately *of*; he probably doesn’t think that either ‘x is y’s archetype’ or ‘y fits x’ means that y *resembles* x in some way. Why is the archetype ‘invariable’? Because Price is thinking not of (say) *the idea of this ball that I hold in my hand* but rather of *the idea of sphericalness*, an unchanging universal property.]

After the mind has been supplied, somehow or other, with ideas of any objects, those ideas become themselves objects to our faculty of intellect; and from this there arise a new set of ideas, which are perceptions of the intellect. Until that happens, whatever ideas we may have, we don't *understand* anything. Whatever subjects of knowledge there may be in the mind, nothing is *known*. [At this point Price has a long footnote which includes a reference to an end-note. This material is here raised into the main text.]

·START OF PRICE'S FOOTNOTE·

I think it would be best *never* to give the name 'ideas' to sensations themselves, any more than we call volitions or desires 'ideas'; but to confine the word to the mind's *conception of* or *notice of* any object. According to that usage, then, an *idea* would always imply something distinct from itself, ·namely its *object*· [see the note on page 4], and the proper classification of our ideas would sort them according to their different objects—•those whose objects are matter and spirit and their qualities, •those whose objects are• •the general contingent qualities of all things, and •those whose objects are• necessary truths. . . .

In short. There are three senses in which the word 'idea' has been used: **(1)** It has been used to signify **sensation** itself, so that tastes, sounds and colours are often called 'ideas'. There is no justification for using the word in this way. **(2)** It is also used to signify **the mind's conception** or apprehension of any object. I regard this as the soundest and most proper sense. **(3)** It is also used to signify **the immediate object of the mind** in thinking. This third sense of 'idea' comes from the notion that when we think of any object there is something immediately present to the mind that it perceives and contemplates. But what is this? Shall we call it a representation or image of the object? This, I think, is improper language. Must we then

deny the existence of an immediate object of the mind in thinking? When an abstract truth is contemplated, isn't the very object itself present to the mind? When millions of intellects contemplate the equality of every angle in a semicircle to a right angle, don't they all have the same object in view? Is this object nothing?

[In the third edition Price included in this footnote a reference to an end-note, as follows.]

·START OF PRICE'S END-NOTE·

Notice that I have all along tried to avoid speaking of an idea as the mind's *image* of the object we are thinking of. It is difficult not to fall sometimes into language of this kind; but it can be misunderstood. The deeply reflective Reid has accused it of laying the foundation of all modern scepticism.

I am always upset when I find that my opinions differ from Reid's. According to Hume, •the immediate object of the mind in perception is •the perception itself—which annihilates all external existence. Reid, if I understand him, asserts. . . .that there is no such object, and thus seems to me to annihilate all perception! When we investigate the properties of triangles or circles, aren't there present to our minds at that time objects that don't depend on our minds? ·Of course there are, and· we call these objects 'ideas'. Because this word usually signifies the apprehension or conception of an object, it oughtn't to be used to signify the object itself; but the poverty of language obliges us to do this, so it must be excused and care must be taken not to be misled by it, as I think Hume and some other writers have been.

In such cases, I have said, we call the objects present to our minds 'ideas'. If ideas have no existence, and nothing is present to our minds when we contemplate these objects, doesn't it follow that we then don't contemplate anything? The same question arises about our perception of external

objects. Since these objects are not themselves present to our minds when we perceive them, they must be perceived through ideas of them. And it doesn't follow from this that we can't be sure of the existence of external objects. All ideas imply the *possibility* of the existence of objects corresponding to them, and our belief in the *actual* existence of the objects of sense can be understood (as it is by Reid) as:

- impressions on our senses *forcing* belief on us at the moment of the impression, in a manner that we can't explain.

And this goes through better with the supposition of *ideas* than without it. Why? Because scepticism seems to be less favoured by supposing that in sense-perception something distinct from the mind and independent of it really is perceived than by supposing that in sense-perception nothing is perceived. [Price concludes this end-note by saying that the unavoidable question 'In sense-perception, *what* is it that is present to our minds?' has to be answered in a way that brings God into the story, implying that God is present with us and that we depend on him] more closely and constantly and necessarily than we are apt to suspect or can easily believe.

•END OF END-NOTE• •END OF FOOTNOTE•

Of all the kinds of ideas I have mentioned, the ones derived from the external senses are what non-human animals seem mainly to have, and perhaps they have no others. They think, and will, and remember; but aren't capable of attending reflexively to these operations so as to obtain ideas of them. They can hear all the sounds in music, and see all the lines and colours in a picture; but they don't perceive harmony or beauty. So it seems that all the ideas based on inward reflection, on a previous assemblage and comparison of ideas, and on intelligence, are to a large extent restricted to us humans.

Before we leave this topic it is important that I make this clear: The source of ideas that I have been emphasising—which I have variously referred to as 'understanding', 'reason', 'intellect' and 'the mind'—is different from the *power of reasoning*, and mustn't be confused with it. Reasoning is investigating certain relations between objects, ideas of which must already be in the mind; so it can't give rise to new ideas. No mind can be engaged in

- investigating it knows not what, or
- trying to learn something about an object of which it has no conception.

What happens with regard to ideas such as those of proportion, identity, connection and so on is that first we get these ideas from the view of objects to which they belong self-evidently, and then we employ deduction or reasoning to track down proportions, identities etc. in other contexts where they can't be perceived immediately.

iii: The origin of our ideas of moral right and wrong

[Re the use of 'simple' in this paragraph, see the note in footnote 2.]

Let us now return to our original question and apply the things I have been saying to our ideas of right and wrong in particular. It has to be grasped from the outset that our ideas of right and wrong are *simple* ideas; so they can't be acquired by attending to definitions of them, and must be ascribed to some power of immediate perception in the human mind. If you doubt this, try to construct definitions of them that amount to more than merely producing synonymous expressions as in 'right = correct', for example. The issue about the foundation of morals has involved a great deal of confusion, *most* of which has come from inattention to this matter. There can be no doubt that some actions are

ultimately approved, with no reason for the approval being givable; just as some ends are *ultimately* desired, with no reason for choosing them being givable. If this were not so, there would be an infinite sequence of reasons and ends, and therefore nothing could be approved or desired.

Taking it as granted that we have *some* power of immediately perceiving right and wrong, what I shall try to prove is that this power ·or faculty· is *the understanding*, which is what I said at the end of section i. The main obstacle to the acceptance of this has—I think and hope—been removed by what I said in section ii to show that the understanding is a power of immediate perception that gives rise to new original ideas. If *that* had been properly considered, I don't think there could have been many disputes about the source of our ideas of right and wrong.

But in order to present the case more explicitly and clearly (in the only way the question seems to admit of) let me

(1) point out that it implies no absurdity, and obviously *could* be true. It is undeniable that many of our ideas are derived from our *intuition* of truth, i.e. our understanding's discernment of the natures of things. So this could be the source of our moral ideas. It is at least *possible* that right and wrong denote what we understand and know concerning certain objects, just like proportion and disproportion, following-from and inconsistency, contingency and necessity, and the other ideas I have mentioned. [Price speaks of what *ideas* 'denote' = 'name' or 'stand for', as well as (more correctly) of what *words* denote. The present version doesn't try to sort all that out.]—And no-one has said anything in support of the view that this is *not* how things stand. What about Hutcheson's objections and reasonings in his *Enquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*? All that they show is something that I have already asserted, which doesn't in the least affect the present debate. That is, they show that the words 'right' and

'wrong', 'fit' and 'unfit', express simple and undeniable ideas. But Hutcheson hasn't said anything in support of his thesis that the power perceiving right and wrong etc. is really a •sense and not •reason, and that these ideas don't denote anything that is *true* of actions, anything about the *nature* of actions. He seems to have taken for granted that if virtue and vice are immediately perceived, they must be perceptions of an *implanted sense*. An amazingly hasty conclusion! For will anyone have the rashness to say that all powers of immediate perception must be arbitrary [see note on page 4] and implanted; or that simple ideas can't denote anything except the qualities and passions of the mind?—In short, whatever some writers have said to the contrary, it certainly has not yet been established that virtue is something ·that God has· *made for a purpose*, and is to be felt rather than understood. [We have just seen Price using 'vice', and starting on page 41 he will quite often use 'vicious'. For him and his contemporaries, these words cover *every* kind of moral wrongness. In our day, the noun is narrower than this in one way, and the adjective in another; try to keep these narrowings out of your mind.]

Just as •some propositions, when they are attended to, necessarily make all minds believe them; and just as •some ends, when their natures are perceived, immediately and necessarily make all beings desire them (I'll defend this later), so also it is very credible that •some actions, when their natures are observed, immediately and necessarily make all rational beings approve them.

I'm not interested in what follows from Hume's assertion that all our ideas are either impressions or copies of impressions, or from Locke's assertion that ideas are all derivable from sensation and reflection.—Hume's thesis

- is destitute of all proof,
- when applied in this and many other cases assumes the point in question, and

- when pursued to its consequences ends in the destruction of all truth and the subversion of our intellectual faculties.

—As for Locke's thesis: it needs *much* more explanation if it is to be consistent with any tolerable account of the origin of our moral ideas. To be convinced that all our ideas are *not* derivable from sensation and reflection (unless this is taken in a very broad and loose sense), all you need do is to look at how Locke derives our moral ideas 'from sensation and reflection'. He places the moral ideas among our ideas of relations, and represents rightness as signifying the conformity of actions to some rules or laws, which (he says) may be

- the will of God,
- the decrees of the magistrate, or
- the fashion of the country.

[For Price and his contemporaries, 'the magistrate' stood for whoever makes the laws of the land (and sometimes also whoever enforces them).] It follows from this that it is an absurdity •to apply 'right' to rules and laws themselves, •to suppose that the divine will is directed by •considerations of •rightness, or •to consider rightness as *being* a rule and law. There can be no doubt that this great man would have detested these consequences; and indeed it is clear enough that he was enormously tangled in his notions on this as well as some other subjects. But

(2) I know of no better way of settling this point—i.e. of satisfying everyone that rightness etc. are objective properties of actions—than by challenging those who doubt it to bring common sense to bear on the issue, and to consider the nature of their own perceptions.—Does it make sense to suppose that a person might perceive an external object and not know whether he was seeing it or feeling it? . . . There's no possibility of doubting in a case like that; it doesn't seem any harder to work out the answer in the present case.

Suppose that this question were raised:

What is the perception that we have of number, diversity, causation or proportion? Do our ideas of them signify truth and reality perceived by the understanding, or impressions made on our minds by the objects to which we ascribe them?

To answer this question, wouldn't it be sufficient to appeal to every man's consciousness?—*Obviously* the answer would be that *of course* judgments we make involving any of these concepts are judgments about what is objectively the case out there in the world, not mere reports on the impressions that things have made on our minds. Yet these perceptions seem to me to have no better claim to be called 'perceptions of the understanding' than do •perceptions of •right and wrong.

It's true that our perceptions of virtue and vice are usually accompanied by impressions of pleasure or pain, satisfaction or disgust. But these are only effects and accompaniments, not the perceptions themselves. Confusing •perceptions of right and wrong with •these accompaniments would be as bad as confusing •a theorem in geometry with •the pleasure the geometer had when he discovered it! It may be that some emotion or other accompanies all our perceptions, but this is most notably true of our perceptions of right and wrong. And this has led to the mistake of thinking that they signify nothing but impressions; an error that some have extended to all objects of knowledge, thus being led into an extravagant and monstrous scepticism. I shall say more about this in the next chapter.

Returning now to my topic: compare •the ideas arising from your powers of sensation with •the ideas arising from your intuition of the natures of things, and ask yourself: Which of these is more like your ideas of right and wrong? We can safely let the answer to that question settle the debate. It is scarcely conceivable that anyone who impartially attends

to the nature of his own perceptions will decide that when he thinks *Gratitude is right* or *Beneficence is right* he isn't perceiving any truth about gratitude or beneficence, isn't *understanding* anything, but is merely receiving an impression from a sense! If someone were able to question whether his idea of equality was gained from sense or intelligence, he could soon be convinced by asking himself this: 'Aren't I sure that •certain lines or figures are *really* equal, and that •their equality must be perceived by all minds as soon as the objects themselves are perceived?'—In this same way we can satisfy ourselves concerning the origin of the idea of *right*: For don't we have a similar awareness that we discern rightness, as well as equality, *in* certain objects? What possible grounds could we have for assigning rightness to sense and equality to reason? Wouldn't a being who had intelligence but no senses, and who had happiness within his reach, approve of getting it for himself? Wouldn't he think this *right*—and wouldn't it *be* right? . . .

It seems utterly certain that every being must desire happiness for himself. Given that a being's nature is such that he *desires* happiness and is averse to misery, can he have absolutely no *approval* of actions that produce one or prevent the other? Is there nothing that any understanding can perceive to be wrong in a creature's bringing calamities and ruin upon himself or others? Is there nothing truly *wrong* in the absolute and eternal misery of an innocent being?—'It *appears* wrong to us.'—And what reason can you have for doubting that it *is* as it *appears*?—Suppose that a being, having been soothed with hopes of bliss and his expectations raised by encouragements and promises, found himself for no reason plunged into irretrievable torments—wouldn't he justly complain? Wouldn't the idea of *wrong* arise in his mind without his having any ·moral· sense to provide it?—Can goodness, gratitude, and veracity appear to any

mind under the same characters, with cruelty, ingratitude, and treachery? [That sentence is verbatim Price.]—Darkness may as soon appear to be light!

One might argue further from the fact that everyone naturally takes it that our ideas of right and wrong belong to the understanding, and denote qualities that actions actually have; but this line of argument wouldn't be useful because it will be easy to reply that •everyone has a similar opinion about the sensible qualities of bodies, and that men *very* commonly mistake their own sensations for the properties of the objects producing them, or apply to the object itself something that they find always accompanying it whenever it is observed. [Price writes here as though it were an uncontroversially soundly established fact that material things don't have colours etc., and that statements purporting to attribute such qualities to them ought to be replaced by statements about observers' sensory states.] Let it therefore be observed,

(3) that if right and wrong denote effects of sensation, it is utterly absurd to suppose them to be applicable to actions. That is,

the ideas of •right and wrong must be incompatible with the idea of •action,

just as

the idea of •pleasure is incompatible with the idea of •such-and-such a shape, and

the idea of •pain is incompatible with the idea of being-hit-by-a-rock.

—All sensations are states of consciousness, or feelings of a sentient being, which must be of a totally different nature from the particular causes that produce them. A 'coloured body' if we speak accurately is absurd in the same way as a 'square sound'. We don't need *experiments* to prove that heat, cold, colours, tastes and so on are not real qualities of bodies; because the *idea* of matter is incompatible with

the *ideas* of any of these qualities.⁶—But is there any such incompatibility between *action* and *right*? Or any such absurdity in affirming of an action that it is *right*?—Are those two ideas as different from one another as the idea of a sensation is from the idea of its cause?

On the contrary! The more we enquire, the more indisputable I think it will appear to be that when we say of some actions that they are right and of others that they are wrong, ·so far from being guilty of absurdity or self-contradiction· we are expressing a necessary truth. Some of the most careful enquirers think in this way, and find themselves compelled to believe that right/wrong is a real distinction that applies to the natures of actions. Can it be so difficult to distinguish the ideas of sensibility from ·those of· reason? to distinguish the passions of the mind from the intuitions of truth? Can we become *fond of* a theory of morals according to which our perceptions of moral good and evil in actions and conduct are all vision and fancy? Can't *everyone* see that 'right' and 'wrong' are absolutely unintelligible and devoid of sense and meaning when they are supposed to signify nothing true of actions, no essential inherent difference between one action and another? . . .

(4) Finally, think about this: All actions undoubtedly have a nature—i.e. some character certainly belongs to them—and there's something to be truly affirmed of them. This might be that some of them are right, others wrong. But if this is not allowed—if no actions are in themselves either right or wrong, or anything of a moral and obligatory nature that

could be an object to the understanding—what follows is this:

Actions in themselves are all indifferent [= 'neither morally required nor morally forbidden']. That's what is *essentially* true of them, and it is what they must be perceived to be by all understandings that are working properly.

But aren't we conscious that we perceive the contrary of this? And haven't we as much reason to believe the contrary as to put any trust at all in our own discernment [= 'our ability to make distinctions and see logical truths']?

Here is another way of putting it. Everything has a nature or essence from which such-and-such truths about it necessarily follow, which it is the understanding's role to perceive. Nothing whatever can be exempted from the understanding's inspection and judgment; it is the natural and ultimate judge of every thought, sentiment, and subject—so that its domain includes •actions, •purposes and •outcomes.—What is its judgment about •these?—One would think it impossible for anyone to reply confidently and cheerfully that his judgment—i.e. the judgment of his understanding—is that •they are all *essentially indifferent*, and that no one thing is fitter to be done than any other. This is very obviously not a judgment that *we* make; so if it is correct, our strong inclination to think otherwise is a flaw in our characters as rational creatures. Shouldn't we then work to suppress this inclination in ourselves, and to sweep out from our natures all the delusive ideas of morality, worth,

⁶ [In a footnote Price remarks that most of the facts that have been adduced as evidence that colours, smells etc. are not really in bodies are useless for that purpose, because if they were valid they would equally prove that shapes and sizes etc. are not really in bodies either. He then adds a point that has nothing to do with his present topic but (he says) he can't help bringing it in. It is a side-swipe at materialist theories of mind. When everyone agrees that sensible qualities aren't inherent in matter; it's strange (Price says) that some philosophers refuse to take the same line about thought and consciousness. He continues:] Is the notion of *conscious, thinking, reasonable matter* less absurd than that of *white matter* or *red matter*? . . . Is it less plain that shape, solidity, magnitude, motion, and juxtaposition of parts are not and cannot be desire, volition, and judgment than it is that they cannot be cold or sour or that any one thing is not and cannot be another?

and virtue? If the ruin of the world should follow—what of it? There would be nothing really wrong in this conduct.

A rational agent who •makes no moral judgments, who •can't perceive differences amongst actions in respect of their fitness and unfitness to be performed, and who •acts from blind *drives* without any *beliefs* concerning what he does, is unimaginable! And we'll find that however hard we try we *can't* •genuinely persuade ourselves that reason can have no role in judging and directing our conduct, or •exclude from our minds all notions of right and wrong in actions.

What deserves special notice here is this. If all actions and all dispositions of beings are in themselves indifferent, this must be known by God's all-perfect understanding; so *he* can't approve or disapprove of any of his own actions, or of any actions by his creatures. He must regard as completely morally neutral the end he pursues and his way of treating his creatures. What foundation, then, is left for his moral perfections? How can we think of God as pursuing universal happiness if we think that there's nothing *in* the nature of universal happiness for the choice of any being to focus on? Aren't we lessening his perfect character if we suppose him to be guided by mere unthinking inclination, with no direction from reason and no moral approval? . . .

From the arguments that I have been presenting we can draw the important conclusion that **Morality is eternal and immutable**. 'Right' and 'wrong', we find, denote what actions *are*. Now, whatever a thing *is*, it is by nature and necessity, not by will or decree or power. Whatever a triangle or circle is, *that's* what it is unchangeably and eternally. It doesn't depend on anyone's will or power whether •the three angles of a triangle shall be equal to two right angles, whether •the circumference of a circle shall be incommensurable with its diameter, or whether •matter shall be divisible, movable, passive, and inert. Every object of the understanding has

an indivisible and invariable essence, which is the source of its properties and countless truths about it. Omnipotence doesn't consist in a power to alter things' *natures* and to destroy necessary truth (for this is contradictory, and would imply the destruction of all wisdom and knowledge). Rather, omnipotence consists in an absolute command over all particular external existences—a power to create or destroy them or produce any possible changes among them.—Because the natures of things are immutable [= 'unchangeable' or, sometimes, 'unchanging'], whatever we suppose the natures of actions to be they must be *immutably*. If they are indifferent, this indifference is itself immutable, and there isn't and can't be any one thing that we *really* ought to do rather than doing something else. This also holds for right and wrong, and for moral good and evil, as far as they express real characters of actions. They must immutably and necessarily belong to the actions of which they are truly affirmed.

Thus, no *will* can make good and obligatory anything that wasn't so already and hadn't been so from eternity; nor can any will make right any action that isn't right in itself. What I mean by an 'action' is not

- the mere external effect produced, .i.e. the mere physical movement, but rather
- the ultimate principle_c of conduct, i.e. the decision of a thinking being considered as arising from the perception of some motives and reasons and intended for some end.

According to this sense of the word 'action', whenever the principle_c from which we act is different the *action* is different, even if the external effects that are produced are the same. If we attend to this, the meaning and truth of what I have just said will be easily seen.—Take the case of any action the performance of which is indifferent—i.e. something that the agent's circumstances don't make better

or fitter to be done than to be omitted. Isn't it clear that *if nothing in the situation changes* it's impossible for any will or power to make acting obligatory, just as it's impossible for any will or power to make two equal things unequal without producing any change in either of them? It's true that the doing of some •indifferent thing may become •obligatory because of a command from a being who has rightful authority over us; but it's obvious that in this case the command produces a change in the agent's circumstances, so that the action that it makes obligatory is not the action that previously was indifferent. The external effect—i.e. the physical movement—is indeed the same; but it's perfectly clear that actions that are the same in *this* sense, involving the very same ·physical· movements, may from the moral point of view be totally different because of differences in the ends aimed at by them and the principles of morality that apply to them.

When an action that would otherwise have been indifferent becomes obligatory through someone's promising to perform it, don't think that the promiser's will—or his breath!—alters the nature of things by taking something indifferent and making it *not* indifferent. In fact, the action that *was* indifferent before the promise is still indifferent; to suppose that after the promise that same action becomes obligatory involves a contradiction. All that the promise does is to alter the connection of a particular effect, or to cause that to be an instance of right conduct that was not so before. [That sentence is verbatim Price.] *Any* effect that we might produce can in this way fall under different principles of morality, coming to be connected sometimes with happiness and sometimes with misery, and thus coming to stand in different relations to the eternal rules of duty. [Notice that Price speaks here of 'effects that we might produce': he is saying that a given physical performance might change its moral status, but only through a

change in what *action* it expresses or involves or is 'produced' by. There is no question of changing the moral status of a single *action*.]

The position I have been taking is sometimes objected to on the grounds that something's moral status could be altered by positive laws [see note on page 5] or by promises; but now we can see that this objection has no weight. It turns out that when an obligation to a particular indifferent action arises from God's command or from positive laws, this doesn't show that obligation is the creature of will, i.e. that something that was indifferent has had its nature changed. The item that is obligatory after the divine command is obedience to God's will and just authority; and *that* was obligatory before the command—indeed, obligatory from eternity. [Price goes on to say that a command or a law couldn't make any moral difference unless there were already an obligation to obey *it*. He concludes:] It is *always* truth and reason that oblige, and not mere will. It is so far from being possible that any will or laws should create right, that they can't have any effect except in virtue of natural and antecedent right. . . .

One last point before I bring this chapter to a close: The opinion that our ideas of morality are derived from the senses is far from being entirely modern. Some ancient philosophers (notably Protagoras and his followers) had a similar view; but they extended it much further, denying that there is absolute and immutable truth in *any* of the sciences, and asserting everything to be relative to perception. It does indeed seem to be a fairly natural transition, from •denying absolute moral truth to •denying all truth; from •making right and wrong, just and unjust, dependent on perception to •asserting the same of everything that we ordinarily count as objects of the understanding. If someone rejects the reality of rightness in beneficence, and of wrongness in producing needless misery, why shouldn't the same steps lead him to deny the certainty

of other self-evident principles? . . . If he distrusts his reason in one case, why shouldn't he also distrust it in the other? If he relates moral perceptions to a *sense*, why shouldn't he join Protagoras in basing all knowledge on sense?—The consequences of

(1) making **all the principles of knowledge** arbitrary and contrived ·by God·, supposing that all we perceive of the natures and relations of things really denote sensory states of our minds,

can't be much worse than the consequences of

(2) making **morality** arbitrary and contrived ·by God·, supposing that the objects of our moral discernment are really states of our minds.

Where (1) overthrows all truth, (2) overthrows the part of truth that is most important and closest to our interests. Where (1) destroys the necessary wisdom and intelligence of God (because the very idea of a *mind* and of *knowledge* is impossible if there is nothing permanent in the nature of things, nothing necessarily true, and therefore nothing to be known), (2) just as thoroughly destroys his moral perfections.⁷

One argument that Protagoras apparently made great use of in maintaining his opinions was that •colours, tastes, sounds and the other sensible qualities of bodies exist only when they are perceived, and therefore •colours etc. are not qualities inherent in bodies but merely constantly changing sensations produced by the action of the perceived object on

the sense-organ; from which he inferred that •a single object often appears to different people to have different qualities, and that •no two people have exactly the same ideas of any one sensible quality of any object. This thesis is not very consistent [Price's phrase] with another of Protagoras's views, namely that consciousness and understanding really come down to mere matter and motion; ·but he did nevertheless hold both theses, and from them· he concluded that all things are in a perpetual flux, and that nothing is true or false. . . .in itself, but only relative to the perceiving mind. Several passages in Plato's *Theætetus* indicate that Protagoras applied this ·line of thought· particularly to moral good and evil. . . . If you want a fuller discussion of this matter, see that Dialogue of Plato's, or Cudworth's *Treatise of Immutable and Eternal Morality*.

Such is the agreement, in this instance, between the opinions of modern times and those of Socrates' time! That is what tends to come from accepting the account of •morality that I have opposed; it is astonishing how far some who have accepted it have extended it to our •other perceptions, and have revived or even exceeded the wildest doctrines of ancient scepticism. They have

•represented as mere qualities of our minds the primary as well as the secondary qualities of matter, cause, effect, connection, extension, duration, identity, and almost everything about which there can be knowledge;

⁷ Suppose someone conducts an enquiry like my present one, into what necessity is being referred to when we say 'It is necessary there should be a cause of whatever begins to exist'. He asks: (i) 'When we say this, are we only expressing a feeling of sense or some state of our own thoughts, and not a judgment of the understanding?' and (ii) 'Is it indeed true that there is no such necessity in the natures of things?'—If these questions are answered in the affirmative, there is an end of all knowledge, and we are plunged into the abyss of atheism.—Modern scepticism has not stuck at this; and it has the considerable excuse that in taking this line it has merely extended further what some writers (decent people!) have defended with respect to moral rectitude.—But for as long as men retain common sense, such opinions can't possibly gain ground. •The faculty by which we distinguish self-evident truths from obvious contradiction may be called into question by the refinements and subtleties of very clever men, but •it can't ever lose its authority—no real and lasting conviction could be produced against it.

- confused ideas with the objects of ideas;
- maintained that *existing* and *being perceived* are universally the same; and
- asserted the impossibility of everything except impressions.

According to them there is neither matter, nor morality, nor God, nor any kind of external existence left. All our discoveries and boasted knowledge vanish, and the whole universe is reduced to a figment of the imagination. Every sentiment of every being is as right as every other. Because nothing is present to our minds besides •our own ideas, we can't have any conception of anything distinct from •them; no beings but ourselves;⁸ no distinction between past and future time; no possibility of remembering wrongly or foreseeing wrongly. For these sceptical philosophers the wisest man is the one who has the most fertile imagination, the one whose mind is stored with the greatest number of notions. Do his notions conform to the truth of things? That question (they say) cannot even be *raised*. . . . It is high time to leave these sceptics to themselves.

[In the third edition Price appended an end-note relating to what he has just said.]

•START OF END-NOTE•

The point that I try to prove in chapter 1 section iii seems to me, when I look back over it, to be so obvious that I'm afraid

I shall be thought to have trifled in this section, wasting my time and attention. It is indeed a reproach to human reason that there should be any occasion for *showing* that when we say of certain actions that they are right (wrong) we express truth and not merely an impression of pleasure (pain),

After the publication of the first two editions of the present work, Adam Smith (the author of the valuable work on the wealth of nations, and a writer above any praise from me) published his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the chief purpose of which is to prove that our perceptions of moral distinctions have the same sources in our natures as *sympathy* does, i.e. that moral approval and disapproval are a species of fellow-feeling with moral agents, by which we are made to enter into their views and emotions and to share in their pleasures and pains. As for the ·general· thesis that our basic notions of moral good and evil are derived from sensation and not from reason, i.e. that they are feelings of some sort and not perceptions of the intellectual faculty, Smith says that he thinks this has been so abundantly proved by Hutcheson as to make it amazing that there is still any controversy about it.

This opinion, delivered in this way by such an able writer, would influence me more than it does if it weren't for the contrary opinion of another equally able writer, Thomas Reid. I get particular satisfaction from the fact that my views agree

⁸ And not ourselves either! Why not? Because (according to these philosophers) existing is the same as being perceived; so perceptions themselves can't exist unless there can be perceptions of perceptions ad infinitum. And there is another reason also. According to this system, the only idea of what we call 'ourselves' is the contradictory and grotesque idea of a series of successive and separable perceptions, none of which last through time—i.e. none of which *exist*—and all this without any substance that perceives.—And there is another point: Although this scheme takes away the distinction between past and future, and doesn't allow for anything really existing independently of perception, it also depends on—is based on—the contrary of both of those! It supposes that there *have* been past impressions of which all ideas are copies; and that certain objects *have* been observed as conjoined in past instances, which has given the imagination the habit of moving from one of them to the other—which is what these philosophers say that reasoning consists in. I wouldn't have troubled you with a mention of these extravagances if it weren't for the fact that some of them have been started •by Berkeley, who has followed his principles through to a system of scepticism that clearly includes them all; and •by another highly talented writer, Hume.

with Reid's on all the most important points. At the end of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, he declares an intention to make the active and moral powers of man the

subject of a future publication; and all enquirers after truth must hope that nothing will prevent him from doing that.

·END OF END-NOTE·

Chapter 2

Our ideas of the beauty and ugliness of actions

Having considered our ideas of •right and wrong; I come now to consider our ideas •of beauty and its contrary. [Price calls its contrary 'deformity', which in this version is replaced by 'ugliness', a word that Price doesn't use.] Of the three kinds of sentiment or perception regarding actions that I listed at the start of chapter 1, this is the second. I needn't say much to show that it is different from the first of the three. We are plainly conscious of more than the bare discernment of right and wrong, i.e. the cool judgment of reason concerning the natures of actions. We often say of an action not only that it is right but that it is 'amiable'; and of another action not only that it is wrong but that it is 'odious' and 'shocking'. [Current English has no one word expressing what Price means by 'amiable'. To get the general idea, think of 'That was amiable' as short-hand for something like 'What a lovely thing to do!'] Everyone must see that these words express the delight—or in the other case the horror and detestation—that *we feel*, and consequently signify not •any real qualities or characteristics of actions but rather •the particular pleasure or pain caused in us when we consider the actions.

What is the true account of these perceptions? Mustn't they arise entirely from an arbitrary [see note on page 4] structure of our minds such that when we observe certain ob-

jects we experience certain sensations and feelings? And if that's so, don't we *now* have to bring in the notion of a •moral• sense? Can perceptions be connected with particular episodes of pleasure and pain in the perceiving mind in any way except through implanted principles_c?

I answer that there *can* be such a connection, and that in many cases there *is* one, especially in this present case •of perceptions of moral beauty and ugliness•.

It isn't possible for us to discover why or how the impressions made by external objects on our bodily organs produce the sensations that always come with them. The same is true of the sensations and feelings produced by the objects of many of our internal senses. In such instances we can't conceive of any connection between the effects in us and their apparent causes; and the only explanation we can give is: 'That is how we are built; God saw fit to relate particular objects to our faculties in those ways rather than in some others.' But in many cases we *don't* have this need to bring in God's choices. Some objects have a *natural* aptitude to please or displease our minds. The situation is the same with regard to the mental world as it is with the world of bodies. With regard to the latter, although

- there are events that we can't explain, and countless instances where we know that x caused y though we don't know anything about *how* because we don't know enough about the inward structure and constitution of x and y,
- there are also causes that operate in a manner that we do understand, and events between which we discern a necessary connection.

So one possible explanation of the sentiments we are now examining is: 'Certain actions have natures such that when they are perceived they *must* result certain emotions and feelings.'

It seems to me beyond question that some objects have a natural aptitude to please or offend; there is a *necessary* congruity or incongruity between these objects and the contemplating mind.—What are we to say of *supreme and complete excellence*? Here are three accounts:

- (1) When we call something 'supremely and completely excellent' all we mean is that it causes in us a particular kind of sensation.
- (2) Supreme and complete excellence is real and objective, and instances of it can it be contemplated without emotion. For the 'supremely and completely excellent' character of God to appear amiable to us, we have to have a special *sense*, because pure and abstract reason is indifferent to it.
- (3) All that is needed for us to love and admire God's character is *knowing* it. The more it is known, and the better it is understood, the more it delights.

•It seems clear that (3) is by far the most plausible of these. Consider the example of a being who •has reason, •knows what order and happiness are, and •surveys a universe where perfect order prevails: to get pleasure from this prospect, I don't think he'll need any arbitrary mental structures or

special moral senses! Similarly with his being offended by the prospect of universal confusion and misery.

Here's another example: your own happiness and misery are undeniably objects that you can't contemplate with indifference! More about this in chapter 3.

What is true in these and other instances is especially clearly true in our present case. Of all the cases of correspondences and connections among things, all the cases where one event has a tendency to produce another, none is plainer than the fact that virtue is *naturally* adapted to please every observing mind, and vice the contrary.—I can't perceive an action to be right without approving it; and I can't approve it without being conscious of some degree of satisfaction. I can't perceive an action to be wrong without disapproving it; and I can't disapprove it without being displeased by it. So right actions *as such* must be welcome to us and wrong ones unwelcome to us. [In that sentence and a few others later on, 'welcome' replaces Price's 'grateful', used in a now obsolete sense.] Right actions *must* appear amiable, and wrong ones *must* appear unamiable and base.—Goodness, faithfulness, justice, and gratitude *cannot* appear to *any* mind in the same way that cruelty, treachery, injustice and ingratitude do. To all who perceive and compare these 'two kinds of actions' they must have opposite effects: the first group must be liked, the second disliked; the first must be loved, the second hated. And it isn't *possible* that these sentiments should be reversed. To behold virtue is to admire it. To behold it in its intrinsic and complete importance, dignity, and excellence is to have supreme affection for it. On the other side: to perceive vice is the very same as to blame and condemn it. To perceive it in its naked form and malignity is to dread and detest it above all things.

Self-approval and self-reproach are the chief sources of private happiness and misery. They are connected with—

and entirely dependent on—awareness of practising or not practising virtue. Self-approval can't be separated from the memory of having done well, and self-condemnation is inseparable from the memory of having done wrong. For a being who is obliged to be perpetually reflecting on himself, nothing can matter more than to be at peace with himself and to be able to bear the survey of his past actions. So virtue and vice are, from the natures of things, the immediate and principal and most constant and intimate causes of private happiness and misery.

It should be remembered here that the effects produced by considering virtue and vice must be different in different beings, and different even in the same being in different circumstances. The pleasure received from virtuous actions, (that is the sense of beauty in them) must be varied by countless causes, both in the circumstances of the actions and in the understandings and conditions of the perceiver. •Pain or sickness, •the influence of implanted biases and propensities, •many different conditions of the temperament, and •associated ideas can lessen or prevent effects that would otherwise follow the perception of moral good and evil. But the *essential* tendencies don't alter; morally good actions must always be acceptable to every healthy rational mind, and can't ever of themselves offend; and morally evil actions must always be disagreeable, and can't ever of themselves please.—Of course a single object of moral discernment (•e.g. an action or a person's character), however it is naturally disposed to affect a percipient, will affect different reasonable people differently because of differences in their frames of mind or the clarity of their perceptions. •This is just a special case the very general fact that the effects produced by *any* cause depend on the particular circumstances in which it operates, and must differ as these differ.

These observations seem to lead to an idea of *God's happiness* that may deserve to be just mentioned. If the foundations of happiness were something that someone has constructed for a purpose, it would be impossible to conceive how the Being who is himself the cause of all things and thus the maker of all constructions, and who can't draw anything from any source outside himself, could be happy. But I have shown that some objects of contemplation *naturally* produce delight, and some perfections or qualities *imply* blessedness. A •being who has reason is capable of greater happiness than a being who only has senses, because •he has in himself the sources of greater enjoyment; and the more wisdom and reason a being has, the higher is the bliss he is capable of. So there is in the natures of things a stable and permanent foundation for happiness. And God's happiness may result necessarily and wholly from what he *is*—from his having in himself all truth, all good, all perfection, all that blesses.—But in discussing this topic we are in over our heads; I suspect that we are falling into some gross misconceptions when we think of God as a happy being.

I return now to my main topic. The points I have made here won't account for *all* our feelings relating to virtue and vice. The lowest levels of reason are sufficient to reveal moral distinctions in general, because these distinctions are •self-evident, and are •included in the ideas of certain actions and characters, so that they must appear to anyone who is capable of thinking about actions in any way at all. But how completely they appear to someone, and how accurately and strongly he discerns them, and thus how much influence they have on him, must be in proportion to •the strength and improvement of his rational faculties and •his acquaintance with truth and the natures of things. And *our* intellectual faculties are in their infancy!

That is why men need to have instinctive determinations as aids to the rational principle_c, i.e. as aids to the intellectual discernment of right and wrong.—The dictates of mere reason are slow and deliberate, so that on their own they would be much too weak. The condition in which we are placed makes it necessary for us to have many urgent passions, and these inevitably interfere with our sentiments of rightness, thereby exposing us to moral danger. We can't be defended against this by unaided reason, because our reason is so imperfect. Our maker has, therefore, wisely provided remedies for reason's imperfections by giving us a constitution in which *balance* can be preserved, by tying our intellectual perceptions sensations to instincts that give them greater weight and force. [In Price's day, perhaps more than now, 'imperfect' could mean 'incomplete' or 'not yet fully developed'; and so it does here. When Price says that human reason is imperfect, in its infancy, and slow, he isn't alleging any *positive defect*.]

So here is the situation in a nutshell: When we contemplate the actions of moral agents, we have both a perception of the understanding and a feeling of the heart. And the feeling depends on two causes: partly on how *we* are constituted, but principally on the essential congruity or incongruity between moral ideas and our intellectual faculties. [The 'principally. . .' phrase in that is verbatim Price.]

It may be hard to determine exactly where the line falls between these two sources of our mental feelings, or to say how far the effects of one are blended with those of the other. There's no doubt that we would have felt and acted differently from how we now do if the decisions of our reason had been left entirely without support; and it isn't easy to imagine how pernicious to us this would have turned out to be. On my theory it can't be doubted that both the causes I have mentioned are at work in us; and the great question in morality is not 'Do we owe a lot to implanted senses and

determinations?' but 'Do we owe everything to them?'

When Hutcheson in his *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* tried to derive all our ideas of virtue from an implanted sense, this was probably because he didn't pay proper attention to the distinction I have been insisting on

between *honestum* and *pulchrum* [Latin],
between 'right' and 'morally beautiful',
between the moral discernment of the mind and the sensations that come with it.

He always describes moral good and evil in terms of the effects accompanying the perception of them. The rightness of an action is, for him, the same as its welcomeness to the observer; and wrongness the same as its unwelcomeness. But it is utterly evident that right is as different from pleasure, and wrong as different from pain, as

- a cause is different from its effect,
- what is understood is different from what is felt, and
- a proposition's absolute truth is different from its agreeableness to the mind.

—It can't be denied that **(a)** some degree of pleasure is inseparable from the observation of virtuous actions. But to infer from this that **(b)** the discernment of virtue is *nothing but* the reception of this pleasure is just as unreasonable to infer—as some have done—from the premise that **(a)** whenever solidity, extension, and shape are perceived they are accompanied by some sensations of sight or touch, without which those qualities can't be conceived by the imagination, the conclusion that **(b)** those qualities are *nothing but* particular kinds of sensation.

An able writer on these subjects [John Balguy] tells us that after some doubts he finally became convinced that all beauty, whether natural or moral, is a species of absolute truth because it results from or consists in the necessary

relations and matchings of ideas. It is not easy to say what this means. I'll come to natural beauty shortly. As for moral beauty, one would think that the meaning of the phrase 'moral beauty' must involve its standing for a *real quality* of certain actions. But the word 'beauty' seems always to refer to the getting of pleasure; so the beauty of an action or character must signify its. . . . being apt to please us when we perceive it; and it is wrong to think that an object's beauty consists in anything more *in the action* that just *this aptness*, as distinct from the objective goodness or rectitude on which the beauty depends. . . .

It may be worthwhile to point out that in everyday speech the adjectives 'beautiful' and 'amiable' are applied only to actions and characters that please us *highly* because of the especially high degree of moral worth and virtue that we find in them. All virtuous actions must be pleasing to an intelligent observer; but they don't all give enough pleasure to be entitled to those descriptions.—Later on I'll discuss in detail the nature and origin of our ideas of the different degrees of virtue and vice in actions.

These remarks, slightly modified, also apply to natural beauty. The general source of natural beauty, according to Hutcheson, is •*uniformity amidst variety*. Why is •this pleasing? I think it's because •it is adapted by its nature to please.—There seems to be no more call for an implanted *sense* for natural beauty than there is for moral beauty.—I have shown that some things are *necessarily* satisfactory to our thoughts and carry in themselves a power to give pleasure when observed or thought about. In many particular cases this pleasure is lost. Sometimes, indeed, the influence of counteracting causes can make regular and harmonious forms downright offensive; but they *can't* offend as such, i.e. can't offend-because-they-are-regular-and-harmonious. The pain never comes from *them*, but only from some malady in

the mind or some disagreeable idea associated with them.

The following notable facts probably contribute to the satisfaction our minds get from things that are regular, and to our preference for them. **(1)** Regular things are more easily viewed and comprehended by our minds. Everyone knows how much harder it is to retain in the memory a multitude of things that are unconnected and lie in confusion than it is to remember that many things laid out according to a rule and plan. It is *order* that unites the parts of a complicated object so that we can grasp it all at once, clearly and with satisfaction; whereas if it lacked order it would be not one object but a crowd of them, and our conceptions of it would be broken and confused between many different parts that didn't correspond to one another and would need a separate idea for each. Regularity enables us to measure and fix variety; it enables our mind to (so to speak) conquer infinity itself. To see this, think about abstract truths and the general laws of nature; or contrast a thousand equal lines •arranged as a regular polygon with the same lines •all jumbled together.

(2) Order and symmetry give objects their stability and strength, fitting them to be useful for good purposes. What strength would an army have without order? What does the health of animal bodies depend on but the due order and adjustments of their various parts? What happiness could there be in the world if it were a chaos?

(3) Regularity and order are evidence of skill and design. Regular and orderly objects bear the stamp of intelligence, and this may be one of the principal causes of their agreeableness to us.

Confusion is nothing but the negation of regularity and order, and it isn't positively displeasing except •where we expected order or •where the confusion seems to come from weakness and lack of skill.

You don't need me to tell you that brutes [= 'non-human animals'] are incapable of the pleasures of beauty because those beauties come from comparing objects and noticing analogy, design, and proportion among them, which the faculties of brutes aren't capable of.

It has been said that what pleases us in beautiful objects it is just variety, and that the uniformity is only needed to make the variety clearly perceivable by the mind. One might as well say that what pleases us is just uniformity, and that variety is only needed for the uniformity to be exhibited and displayed in a higher degree!

I have called attention to the opinion [of John Balguy] that natural beauty is a real quality of objects.—It seems impossible conceive the objects themselves to have anything more than

- a particular order of parts—a particular structure—and
- the powers arising from that structure, powers that include certain relationships to our perceptive faculties.

If we call *this* 'beauty' then beauty is indeed a non-relational inherent quality of certain objects—one that exists whether or not any mind discerns it. But surely order and regularity aren't beauty—they are *causes of* beauty.

It may be worth your while to think about how far my account of the pleasures received from contemplating moral good and natural beauty can be applied also to the pleasures received from many other sources—the approval of our fellow-creatures, the greatness of objects, the discovery of truth and increase of knowledge.

I will only add that in such enquiries as these we are forced to consider the nature and origin of our notions of perfection and excellence.

There are people who think that actions and characters don't really, objectively, differ from one another in excellence and worth. How will they account for our preferences for some actions and characters over others?⁹

Probably by bringing in the notion of a *sense* and of sense-deception. Their account will go like this:

We do have ideas of different degrees of perfection in different objects, but those are all an illusion. To the eye of right reason, the entire range of existence is in this respect entirely on a level. The very notion of intrinsic excellence and . . . of different degrees of objective perfection and imperfection implies an impossibility—it is self-contradictory.

—How *could* anyone accept such an opinion? When we conceive of a thinking being as having a more *noble and perfect* nature than a clod of earth, are we *wrong*? Is it because of an implanted power or *sense* that we distinguish thinking beings as higher than clods of earth? And is that why we esteem God's nature as infinitely surpassing all other natures in *excellence and dignity*? The truth is this: The ideas of *excellence* and *dignity*, like the others discussed in chapter 1, are ideas of the understanding. They come from the understanding's knowledge of the comparative essences of things; and they arise necessarily in our minds when we consider certain objects and qualities, because they denote not what *we feel*, but what such objects and qualities *are*.

⁹ We have the ideas of greater decency and dignity in some pleasures than in others—e.g. in the pleasures of the imagination or the understanding as against those of the bodily senses. Hutcheson, after remarking on this, seems unsure how to explain it. Perhaps it should be attributed to a general view that the former pleasures are *innocent*, in which case (he says) our preference for the mental pleasures over the bodily ones is a deliverance of the *moral sense*. But he allows that these distinctions between higher and lower pleasures come from perceptions of a different sort—perceptions that should be regarded as forming their own special class of sensations.

Nature contains an infinite variety of existences and objects, and we can't think about them as being different from one another without conceiving of them as having various degrees of *perfection*. It isn't *possible* to contemplate and compare

living things with dead matter,
reason with brute-animal,
happiness with misery,
virtue with vice,
knowledge with ignorance,
power with weakness, or
God with inferior beings

without acquiring the ideas of *better* and *worse*, *perfect* and

imperfect, *noble* and *ignoble*, *excellent* and *base*.—One step up from •nothing is •unformed matter; the next step takes us to •vegetative life, and a step up from there takes us to •sentient animal life, and from there we move up to •happy and active intelligence, of which there are countless different degrees and different orders and classes of beings, rising without end, above one another. Every step our thoughts take up this scale conveys the notion of a higher excellence and worth, until at last we arrive at uncreated and complete excellence. If this is not *intellectual* perception, but *sensation* merely, then it could be that our ideas of nature have it backwards, so that the dust under our feet has the supreme excellence that we now attribute to God! . . .