The Principles of Action

No. 3 of *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*

Thomas Reid

[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.—Other philosophers are referred to by surname only; Reid also gives their titles.—The frequency of extremely short paragraphs is Reid's work.

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Contents

Glossary

amiable: This meant 'likable', 'lovable', 'very attractive'. A good deal stronger than the word's normal meaning today.

art: In Reid's time an 'art' was any human activity that involves techniques or rules of procedure. 'Arts' in this sense include medicine, farming, and painting.

bad: This very often replaces Reid's adjective 'ill', e.g. in the phrase 'good and ill'. See also **evil**.

basic: Most occurrences of this replace Reid's 'original', which can't now carry the meaning it had at his time. In calling a human power 'original' he means that it is basic, fundamental, not derived from (or explainable in terms of) something lying deeper in the human constitution.

belief: Many occurrences of this, including the title of Part II chapter 8, replace Reid's 'opinion'. For him the two are equivalent, whereas for us their flavours are slightly different. The phrase 'belief and opinions' on page 47 seems to presuppose a difference, but Reid nowhere explains what it is.

contemn: This is not obsolete; it means 'have contempt for'.

culture: As used repeatedly in the final chapter of this work, 'culture' is to be thought of in connection with 'horticulture', 'agriculture' etc. It has nothing to do with being artistically or intellectually or socially cultured; it is all about cultivation, taking care of plants, making a good job of feeding and watering and pruning.

dignity: Excellence.

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

epitome: A reduced-scale model. (It nearly rhymes with 'litany'.)

evil: This replaces Reid's 'ill' when that is used as a noun. It has become fairly standard in English-language philosophy to use 'evil' to mean merely 'something bad', e.g. 'pain is an evil', and 'the problem of evil' meaning 'the problem posed by the existence of bad states of affairs'. It's just an oddity of English that 'good' works well as adjective or noun while 'bad' works only as an adjective. Don't load 'evil' in this text with all the force it has in English when used as an adjective. See also **bad**.

faculty: Your faculty of seeing (for example) is either **(i)** your ability to see or **(ii)** whatever it is about you that *gives* you the ability to see. Reid's stress on our need to trust the 'testimony' of our faculties, he seems to adopt **(ii)**, a choice that is underlined when on page 63 he speaks of faculties as 'engines'.

injury: In Reid's usage here, to do someone an injury is to hurt him *wrongly*, *unjustly*. That is why you can't believe that someone has done you an injury unless you are equipped with moral concepts—see page 34, the paragraph starting 'The very notion. . . '.

intercourse: This is used on page 20 in a context where sex is under discussion, but its meaning is not sexual. It has a very general meaning that covers conversation, business dealings, any kind of social inter-relations; 'sexual intercourse' named one species, but you couldn't drop the adjective and still refer to it.

lot: 'What is given to a person by fate or divine providence; *esp.* a person's destiny, fortune, or condition in life.' (OED)

mean: Low-down, poor, skimpy etc., in literal and metaphorical uses. Reid uses it here as a kind of intensifier—'mean or bad motives' [page 31], 'base or mean' [page 42], 'mean and despicable' [page 54].

object: In early modern usage, anything that is aimed at, wanted, loved, hated, thought about, feared, etc. is an *object* of that aim, desire, love, etc. *Anything*: it could be a physical object, but is more likely to be a state of affairs, a state of mind, an experience, etc.

principle: Of this work's 305 occurrences of 'principle', a few concern basic propositions—principles 'of false religion', 'of solid geometry', 'of the Epicurean sect', and so on. But the vast majority use 'principle' in a sense that was common then but is now obsolete, in which it means 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energizer', or the like. Reid sometimes speaks of a principle's 'impulse' and sometimes of its 'drawing' the person in a certain direction. He seems not to have given any thought to this choice between push and pull.

reflection: Reid sometimes uses this in a sense popularised by Locke, meaning 'looking in at the events in one's own mind'. But quite often he uses it in a sense that comes more naturally to us, in which reflection is just calmly thinking things over.

sagacity: Lively intelligence.

sated: utterly satisfied, glutted, full.

science: In early modern times this word applied to any body of knowledge or theory that is (perhaps) axiomatised and (certainly) conceptually highly organised. That is why on page 61 Reid implies that there is a 'science' of morals.

second cause: For those with certain theological views, God is the first cause of everything that happens in the world; a 'second cause' is an ordinary down-to-earth cause such as heat causing butter to melt. It is a 'second' cause because God causes the butter to melt *through* bringing heat to bear on it. In Reid's single use of this phrase in the present work [page 67] he seems—a bit surprisingly—to be saying that the most fundamental aspects of the human constitution are produced by God *directly* and not through any manipulation of created mental or physical realities.

self-control: This replaces Reid's 'self-government' throughout.

social: In contrast to 'selfish', meaning 'motivated by a concern for the welfare of other people'.

speculative: This means 'having to do with non-moral propositions'. Ethics is a 'practical' discipline, chemistry is a 'speculative' one. When Reid speaks of 'speculation' he means 'disciplined study of some factual material that isn't immediately concerned with how anyone should behave'.

sympathy: Literally 'feeling with', as applied to any feeling. Sympathy is at work not only when your sadness saddens me but also when your happiness makes me happy. When on page 65 Reid says that if your friend acts badly that will give you 'a very painful sympathy indeed' in the form of a feeling like that of guilt, he is evidently assuming that your friend knows he has acted badly and is ashamed, and it's his shame that your sympathy locks onto.

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

vice, vicious: Morally wrong conduct, not necessarily of the special kind that we reserve 'vice' for these days, or the different special kind that we label as 'vicious'.

Part I: The Mechanical Principles of Action

Chapter 1: The principles of action in general

Nothing can be called an *action* by a man, in the strict philosophical sense, unless it's something that he previously conceived and willed or determined to do. In morals we commonly employ the word in this sense, and never impute anything to a man as *done by him* unless his will was involved. But when moral criticism isn't concerned, we call many things actions of the man though he hadn't previously conceived or willed them. Hence the actions of men have been divided into three classes—voluntary, involuntary, and mixed. By 'mixed' are meant actions that are under the command of the will but are commonly performed without any interposition of will. ['He didn't decide to do it, but he could have decided not to.']

We can't avoid using the word 'action' in this popular sense, without deviating too much from the common use of language; and it is in this sense that I am using it when I enquire into the principles [see Glossary] of action in the human mind.

By 'principles of action' I understand everything that incites us to act. If there were no incitements to action—·if nothing ever spurred us to act·—our active power would be useless. Having no motive to direct our active exertions, the mind would always be in a state of perfect indifference over whether to do this or do that or do nothing at all. Either •the active power wouldn't exercised at all or •its activities would be perfectly unmeaning and frivolous—not wise or foolish, not good or bad. To every action that is of smallest importance, there must be some incitement, some motive, some reason.

So it's a most important part of the philosophy of the human mind to •have a clear and accurate view of the various principles of action that the Author of our being has planted in our nature, to •arrange them properly, and to •assign to every one its rank.

It's through this that we can discover the purpose of our existence, and the part we are to play on life's stage. In this part of the human constitution, the noblest work of God that we know anything about, we can clearly see the character of him who made us, and how he wants us to employ the active power that he has given us.

I can't embark on this subject without great diffidence, observing •that almost every author of reputation who has attended to it has a system of his own, and •that no man has been so happy as to give general satisfaction to those who came after him.

There's a branch of knowledge that is rightly much valued, which we call knowledge of the world, knowledge of mankind, knowledge of human nature. I think that this consists in knowing from what principles men generally act; and it is commonly the fruit of natural sagacity [see Glossary] joined with experience.

A man of sagacity who has had occasion to deal in interesting matters with a great variety of persons of different age, sex, rank and profession, learns to judge what can be expected from men in given circumstances, and how to be most effective in getting them to act as he wants them to. Knowing this is so important to men in active life that it is called 'knowing men' and 'knowing human nature'.

This knowledge can be very useful to a man who wants to theorize about the subject I have proposed, but it's not by

itself sufficient for that purpose.

A man of the world conjectures, perhaps with great probability, how a man will act in certain given circumstances, and that's all he needs to know. To go into detail about the various principles that influence the actions of men, giving them distinct names, defining them, and discovering the role and range of each, is the business of a philosopher and not of a man of the world; and indeed it's very hard to do, for several reasons ·of which I shall present two·.

(1) There are *so many* active principles influencing the actions of men. Man has been called an epitome [see Glossary] of the universe, and there is reason in that. His mind is greatly affected by his body, which is a part of the material system and is therefore subject to all the laws of inanimate matter. During some part of his existence, man's state is very like that of a plant. He rises by imperceptible degrees to the animal level, and finally to the rational life in which he is powered by the principles that belong to all three levels.

(2) Another reason why it is difficult to trace out the various principles of action in man is that a single action, indeed a single course and sequence of actions can come from very different principles.

Men who are fond of a hypothesis usually don't look for any proof of its truth other than the fact that it serves to explain the appearances that it was introduced to explain. This is a very slippery kind of proof in every part of philosophy, and never to be trusted; and it's least trustworthy when the appearances to be accounted for are human actions.

Most actions arise from a variety of principles working together in their direction; but we explain a given action purely in terms of the best of those principles or wholly in terms of the worst, depending on whether we have a favourable or unfavourable judgment of the person whose action it is. And we are similarly selective in how we explain *kinds* of action, depending on whether we have a favourable or unfavourable judgment of human nature in general.

The principles from which men act can be discovered only **(a)** by attention to the conduct of other men or **(b)** by attention to our own conduct and to what we feel in ourselves. There is much uncertainty in **(a)** and much difficulty in **(b)**.

Men differ greatly in their characters, and we can observe the conduct of only a few of the species. A man differs not only from other men, but from himself at different times and on different occasions; depending on whether he is

- in the company of his superiors, inferiors, or equals,
- being seen by strangers, or by friends or acquaintances only, or by no-one,
- in good or bad fortune, or
- in a good or bad mood.

We see only a small part of the actions of our friends and acquaintances; what we see may lead us to a •probable conjecture; but it can't give us •certain knowledge of the principles from which they act.

A man can know with certainty the principles from which he himself acts, because he is conscious of them. But to know this he has to reflect [see Glossary] attentively on the operations of his own mind, which is something people seldom do. It may be easier to find a man who has formed a sound notion of the character of man in general, or of his friends and acquaintances, than to find one who has a sound notion of his own character!

Most men are led by pride and self-flattery to think themselves better than they really are; and some, led perhaps by melancholy or from false principles of religion, think themselves worse than they really are.

So one needs a very precise and impartial examination of a man's own heart if one is to get a clear notion of the various principles that influence his conduct. We can judge how

difficult this is from the conflicting systems of philosophers on this subject, from the earliest ages to this day.

During the age of Greek philosophy, the Platonist, the Aristotelian, the Stoic, and the Epicurean each had his own system. In the dark ages [= approximately the 5th to 15th centuries CE] the Schoolmen and the Mystics had diametrically opposite systems. And since the revival of learning, no controversy has been more keenly agitated, especially among British philosophers, than the one about the principles of action in the human constitution.

The forces by which the planets and comets travel through the boundless regions of space have been determined, to the satisfaction of those who know anything about this; but the forces that every man is conscious of in himself and by which his conduct is directed haven't been determined with any degree of unanimity. ·Of thinkers who have addressed this topic·, different ones

- •admit no principle but self-love;
- •say that it all comes down to the pleasures of sense, in varieties differentiated by the association of ideas;
- •allow that there is disinterested [see Glossary] benevolence along with self-love;
- •reduce everything to reason and passion;
- •reduce everything to passion alone;

and there's just as much variety in views about the number and distribution of the passions.

The names we give to the various principles of action are so imprecise, even in the best and purest writers in each language, that on this account there's great difficulty in giving them names and arranging them properly.

The words *appetite*, *passion*, *affection*, *interest*, *reason*, can't be said to have one definite meaning. They are understood sometimes in a broader and sometimes in a narrower sense. The same principle is sometimes called by one of those names, sometimes by another; and principles of a very different nature are often called by the same name.

To remedy this confusion of names one might invent new ones; but few people are entitled to this privilege, and I shan't lay claim to it! But I'll try to class the various principles of human action as clearly as I can, and to point out their specific differences; giving them names that will deviate as little as possible from the common use of the words.

Some principles of action require no attention, no deliberation, no will. I'll call these 'mechanical'. A second class of principles we can call 'animal', as they seem common to man and other animals. A third class can be called 'rational', because they are exclusive to man as a rational creature. ·These three kinds of principle of action are, respectively, the topics of the three Parts of this Essay·.

Chapter 2: Instinct

The mechanical principles of action, I think, fall into two species—instincts and habits.

By 'instinct' I mean a natural blind impulse to act in a certain way, without having any end in view, without deliberation, and very often without any conception of *what* we are doing.

For as long as a man is alive, he breathes by alternately contracting and relaxing certain muscles through which the chest and thus the lungs are contracted and dilated. There's no reason to think that a new-born infant •knows that breathing is necessary to life in its new state, •knows how to do it, or even •has any thought or conception of the operation of breathing; and yet as soon as he is born he breathes with perfect regularity, as if he had been taught and acquired the habit by long practice.

By the same kind of principle, a new-born child, when its stomach is emptied and nature has brought milk into the mother's breast, sucks and swallows its food as perfectly as if it knew the principles of that operation and had acquired the habit of working according to them.

Sucking and swallowing are very complex operations. Anatomists describe about thirty pairs of muscles that must be employed in every pull; and each of those muscles must be served by its own nerve, and can't do anything except through some influence communicated by the nerve. The exertion of all those muscles and nerves is not simultaneous; they must follow along in a certain order, and their order is as necessary as the exertion itself.

This regular sequence of operations is carried on according to the most delicate rules of art [see Glossary] by the infant who has neither art nor science nor experience nor habit.

It's true that the infant feels the uneasy [see Glossary] sensation of hunger, and that it stops sucking when this sensation is removed. But who informed it that this uneasy sensation might be removed, or by what means?

It's obvious that the infant knows *nothing* of this, because it will suck a finger or a twig as readily as the nipple.

It's by a similar principle that infants cry when they are in pain; that they are afraid when left alone, especially in the dark; that they start when in danger of falling; that they are terrified by an angry face or angry tone of voice, and are soothed and comforted by a placid face and by soft and gentle tones of voice.

In the animals that we know best and regard as the more perfect of the brute-creation, we see much the same instincts as in the human species, or very similar ones that are suited to the particular state and manner of life of the animal.

Besides these instincts, brute animals have others that are exclusive to their species—instincts that equip them for defence, for offence, or for providing for themselves and their offspring. And as well as providing various animals with various weapons of offence and defence, nature has taught them how to use these weapons: the bull and the ram to butt, the horse to kick, the dog to bite, the lion to use his paws, the boar his tusks, the serpent his fangs, and the bee and wasp their sting. The manufactures of animals (if we can call them that) present us with a wonderful variety of instincts belonging to particular species, whether of the social or of the solitary kind:

- the nests of birds, so similar in situation and architecture within the species, so various in different species;
- the webs of spiders and other spinning animals;
- the ball of the silk-worm;
- the nest of ants and other mining animals;
- the combs of wasps, hornets and bees;
- the dams and houses of beavers.

The instinct of animals is one of the most delightful and instructive parts of a most pleasant study, namely natural history. It deserves to be more cultivated than it has yet been.

Every manufacturing art among men was invented by some man, improved by others, and brought to perfection by time and experience. Men learn to work in it by long practice, which produces a habit. The arts of men vary in every age, and in every nation, and are found only in those who have been *taught* them.

The manufactures of animals differ from those of men in many striking particulars.

No animal of the species can claim the invention. No animal ever introduced any new improvement or any variation from the previous practice. Each member of the species has equal skill from the outset, without teaching or experience or habit. Each one has its art [see Glossary] by a

kind of inspiration. I don't mean that it is inspired with the principles or rules of the art; what I'm saying it is inspired with is the ability and inclination to work perfectly in the art without any knowledge of its principles, rules or purpose.

The more intelligent animals can be taught to do many things that they don't do by instinct. What they're taught to do they do with more or less skill depending on their intelligence and their training. But in their own arts they don't need teaching or training, and their art is never improved or lost. Bees gather their honey and their wax, and fabricate their combs and rear their young, neither better nor worse today than they did when Virgil so sweetly sang about their works.

The work of every animal is—like the works of nature—perfect in its kind, and can stand up under the most critical examination of the physicist or the mathematician. I can illustrate this with an example from the animal last mentioned.

It's well known that bees construct their combs with small cells on both sides, fit both for •holding their store of honey and for •rearing their young. If the cells are to have the same size and shape, with no useless gaps between them, there are only three possible shapes for them to have—equilateral triangle, square, and regular hexagon. (Mathematicians know well that no fourth shape is possible.) Of these three, the hexagon is the best for convenience and strength; and bees, as though they knew this, make their cells regular hexagons.

[Reid devotes a page to explaining several other features of the cells that can be shown mathematically to be optimal for strength, economy of materials and effort, and so on. He then proceeds with a rhetorical question:] Shall we ask here who *taught* the bee the properties of solids, and how to solve these mathematical problems? If a honeycomb were a work of human art, everyone with common sense would unhesitatingly conclude that he who invented the construction must have understood the principles on which it is constructed.

We needn't say that bees know any of these things. [Reid wrote '. . . that bees know none of these things'; obviously a slip.] They work most geometrically without any knowledge of geometry, rather as a child who, without any knowledge of music, makes good music by turning the handle of an organ. The art is not in the child, but in the man who made the organ. Similarly, when a bee makes its combs so geometrically the geometry is not in the bee but in the great Geometrician who made the bee and settled the number, weight and measure of everything.

To return to instincts in man: the most remarkable ones are those that appear in infancy, when we are ignorant of everything necessary for our preservation, and would therefore perish if we didn't have an invisible Guide who leads us blindfold along the path we would choose if we had eyes to see it.

Besides the instincts that appear only in infancy and are intended to make up for our lack of understanding in that early period, there are many that continue through life and make up for defects of our intellectual powers in every period. I'll call your attention to three classes of these.

(1) There are many things that are necessary for our preservation, and we know that they are but we don't know how to do them.

A man knows that he must swallow his food before it can nourish him. But this action requires the co-operation of many nerves and muscles about which he knows nothing; and if his swallowing had to be directed solely by his understanding and will, he would starve before he learned how to perform it.

Here instinct comes to his aid. All he needs do is to *will to swallow*. All the required motions of nerves and muscles immediately take place in their proper order, without his knowing or willing anything about them.

Whose *will* do these nerves and muscles obey? Not his, surely, to whom they belong. He doesn't know their names, their nature, or what work they do; he has never given them a thought. They're moved by some impulse the cause of which is unknown, without any thought or will or intention on his part. That is, they are moved instinctively.

This is to some extent the case with every voluntary motion of our body. I will to stretch out my arm. The effect immediately follows. But we know that the arm is stretched by the contraction of certain muscles, which are contracted by the influence of the nerves. I don't know anything or think anything about nerves or muscles when I stretch out my arm; yet this nervous influence and this contraction of the muscles—not summoned by me—immediately produce the effect that I willed.

Compare that with this: a weight is to be raised, which can be raised only by a complication of levers, pulleys, and other mechanical powers that are behind the curtain and entirely unknown to me. I will to raise the weight; and no sooner is this act of will performed than the machinery behind the curtain goes to work and raises the weight. If such a thing happened we would conclude that there's a person behind the curtain who knew my will and put the machine in motion so as to carry it out.

My willing to stretch out my arm or to swallow my food is obviously very similar to this. And we are so strangely and wonderfully made that whoever stands behind the curtain and sets the internal machinery going is hidden from us. But we *do* know that those internal motions are not willed or intended by us, and are therefore instinctive.

(2) We need instinct, even in adult life, when a kind of action must be performed so often that intending and willing it every time would occupy too much of our thought and leave no room for other necessary employments of the mind.

We must breathe several times a minute, whether awake or asleep. We must often close our eyelids in order to keep the eye moist. If these things required particular attention and volition every time they are done, they would occupy all our thought; so nature gives us an impulse to do them as often as is necessary, without any thought at all. They take no time; they don't interrupt, even slightly, any exercise of the mind; because they are done by instinct.

(3) We also need the aid of instinct when an action must be done so suddenly that there's no time to think and decide. When a man loses his balance, either on foot or on horseback, he makes an instantaneous effort to recover it by instinct. The effort would be in vain if it waited for the decision of reason and will.

When something threatens our eyes, we wink hard by instinct; and we can hardly avoid doing so, even when we know that the stroke is aimed in fun and that we are perfectly safe from danger. I have seen this tried for a bet, which a man was to win if he could keep his eyes open while another jokingly aimed a punch at them. The difficulty of doing this shows that there may be a struggle between instinct and will, and that it's hard to resist the impulse of instinct even by a strong resolution not to yield to it.

Thus the merciful Author of our nature has adapted our instincts to the defects and weaknesses of our understanding. [Reid recapitulates the three kinds of case he has been discussing. Then:]

Another thing in the nature of man that I take to be partly though not wholly instinctive is his proneness to imitation.

Aristotle observed long ago that man is an imitative animal. He is so in more than one way. ·and I shall mention just three of them·. •He is disposed to imitate what he approves of. •In all arts men learn more, and learn more agreeably, by example than by rules. •Imitation by the chisel, by the pencil, by description in prose and poetry, and by action and gesture, have been favourite and elegant entertainments of the whole human species. In all these cases, however, the imitation is intended and willed, so it can't be said to be instinctive.

But I think that human nature disposes us to imitate those among whom we live, when we don't desire or will it.

Let a middle-aged Englishman take up residence in Edinburgh or Glasgow; although he hasn't the least intention to use the Scots dialect, but a firm resolve to preserve his own pure and unmixed, he'll find it hard to do what he intends. Over the years he will gradually and unintentionally come to have the tone and accent of those he converses with, and even to use their words and phrases; and nothing can preserve him from this—unless he really hates every Scoticism, which might overcome the natural instinct. . . .

I can see that instinctive imitation has a considerable influence in forming •the special features of provincial dialects, •the special features of voice, gesture, and manner that we see in some families, •the ways of behaving that go with different ranks and different professions; and perhaps even in forming national characters, and the human character in general.

There have been recorded cases of wild men brought up from their early years without the society of any of their own species, but so few of them that we can't reach conclusions from them with great certainty. But the ones I have heard of have this in common: the wild man gave only slight indications of the rational faculties, so that his mind was hardly distinguishable from that of the more intelligent of the brutes.

There's a considerable part of the lowest rank in every nation of whom it can't be said that they or anyone else has worked on cultivating their understanding or forming their ways of behaving; yet we see an immense difference between them and the wild man. This difference is wholly an effect of society; and I think it is largely though not wholly an effect of undesigned and instinctive imitation.

It may be that not only our actions but even our judgment and belief is sometimes guided by instinct, i.e. by a natural and blind impulse.

When we consider man as a rational creature, it may seem right that all his beliefs should be based on evidence, probable or demonstrative; and it seems to be commonly taken for granted that it is always real or apparent evidence that determines our belief. . . . But I suspect that this is wrong, and that before we grow up to the full use of our rational faculties we do and *must* believe many things without any evidence at all.

The faculties that we have in common with brute animals develop earlier than reason does. We are *irrational animals* for a considerable time before we can properly be called rational. The operations of reason come into play very gradually, and we can't trace in detail the order in which they do so. To track the progress of our developing faculties we would have to use •our power of reflection [see Glossary], but •that comes too late to do the job. Some operations of brute animals look so like reason that they aren't easily distinguished from it. Whether brutes have anything that can properly be called 'belief' I can't say; but their actions show something that looks very like belief.

If there's any instinctive belief in man, it is probably of the same kind as what we ascribe to brutes, and may be

radically different in kind from the rational belief that is based on evidence; but I think it must be granted that there is in man something that we call 'belief' and that isn't based on evidence.

We need to be informed of many things *before* we're capable of taking in the evidence that supports them. If we withheld our belief until we were at least somewhat capable of weighing evidence, we would lose all the benefit of the instruction and information that we need in order to acquire the use of our rational faculties.

Man would never acquire the use of reason if he weren't brought up in the society of reasonable creatures. The benefit he gets from society comes •from imitating what he sees others do and also •from the instruction and information they communicate to him. Without these he couldn't acquire the use of his rational powers—indeed he couldn't even survive.

Children have a thousand things to learn, and they learn many things every day—more than will be easily believed by those who have never given attention to their progress.

The learner should take things on trust is a common saying. [It comes from Aristotle; Reid gives it in Latin.] Children have everything to learn, and they can't learn if they don't believe their instructors. They need a greater stock of faith from infancy to age 12 or 14 than at any later time; but how are they to *get* this stock that is so necessary to them? If their faith *depended on* evidence, their stock of faith would be *proportional to* their stock of real or apparent evidence. But actually •their faith must be greatest at the time when •their evidence is least. They believe a thousand things before they ever give a thought to evidence. Nature makes up for the lack of evidence by giving them an instinctive kind of faith without evidence.

They believe implicitly whatever they are told, and confidently accept the testimony of everyone, without ever thinking of a reason why they should do so.

A parent or a master might command them to believe; but that would be pointless, because belief is not in our power. But in the first part of life it is governed by mere testimony in matters of fact, and by mere authority in all other matters, just as it is governed by evidence in the years of maturity.

What produces this belief in a child is not the •words of the testifier, but his •belief; for children soon learn to distinguish jokes from things that are said seriously. What appears to them to be said as a joke produces no belief. They glory in showing that they are not to be fooled! When the signs of belief in the speaker are ambiguous, it's enjoyable to see how alertly they examine his features so as to learn whether he really believes what he says or is only counterfeiting belief. Once they have settled this, their belief is regulated by his. If he is doubtful, they are doubtful; if he is assured, so are they. . . .

An example of belief that appears to be instinctive is the belief which children show even in infancy that an event that they have observed in certain circumstances will happen again in like circumstances. A six-month-old child who has once burned his finger by putting it in a candle's flame won't put it there again. And if you make a show of putting it in the flame by force, you see the plainest signs that he believes he'll meet with the same calamity.

Hume has shown very clearly that this belief is not an effect either of reason or of experience. He tries to explain it in terms of the association of ideas. Though I am not satisfied with his account of this phenomenon I shan't examine it here because all I need for my present point is that this belief isn't based on evidence, real or apparent—which I think he clearly proves.

A person who has lived in the world for long enough to observe that nature is governed by fixed laws may have

some rational ground for expecting similar events in similar circumstances; but this can't be the case of the child. So his belief is not grounded on evidence; it is a result of his constitution.

And that would still hold if it were a product of the association of ideas. For what is called 'the association of ideas' is a law of nature in our constitution, which produces its effects without any operation of reason on our part and in a manner of which we are entirely ignorant.

Chapter 3: Habit

Habit differs from instinct not in its nature but in its origin—habit is acquired, instinct is natural. Both count as *mechanical* principles because they operate without will or intention, without thought.

Habit is commonly defined as *an ability to do something easily, as a result of having done it frequently*. This definition is sufficient for the habits involved in a practical skill; but the habits that can properly be called 'principles of action' must supply more than an ability; they must give an inclination or impulse to perform the action; and there's no doubt that in many cases habits do have this power.

When children spend time in improper company, they acquire ever so many awkward habits in their manner, motion, looks, gesture and pronunciation. They usually acquire such habits through an unplanned and instinctive imitation, before they can judge what is and what isn't proper and becoming.

When they understand a little better, they can easily be convinced that such-and-such a thing is unbecoming; and they may decide to avoid it; but once the habit is formed, such a general decision is not enough on its own; for the habit will operate without intention; and particular attention is necessary on every occasion to resist the impulse of the habit until it is cured by the *habit* of opposing it.

It's because of the force of habits, acquired early by imitation, that a man who grows to manhood in the lowest rank of life and is then raised by fortune to a higher rank very rarely acquires the air and manners of a gentleman.

When to •the instinctive imitation that I spoke of earlier we join •the force of habit, it's easy to see that these mechanical principles have a large share in forming the manners and characters of most men.

The difficulty of overcoming vicious [see Glossary] habits has been a common topic of theologians and moralists down through the centuries; and we see too many sad examples of this to permit us to doubt it.

There are—morally speaking now—good habits as well as bad ones; and it is certain that the regular performance of what we approve doesn't just make it •easy for us to do but makes us •uneasy when we don't do it. This is the case even when the action's goodness comes purely from the belief of the performer. A good illiterate Roman Catholic doesn't sleep soundly if he goes to bed without telling his beads and repeating prayers that he doesn't understand.

Aristotle held that wisdom, prudence, good sense, science and art [see Glossary], as well as the moral virtues and vices, are habits. In giving this name to all those intellectual and moral qualities perhaps he meant only that they are all strengthened and confirmed by repeated acts; and *that* is undoubtedly true. When I consider habits as principles of action I'm taking the word 'habit' in a narrower sense than that. I see it as a feature of our constitution that when we have become accustomed to do something, we acquire not only the ability to do it with ease but also a proneness to do it on similar occasions; so that it requires a particular will and effort to •refrain from doing it, but often requires no will

at all to •do it. We are carried by habit as by a stream in swimming, if we make no resistance.

Every art provides examples both of the power of habits and of their usefulness, and none more than the commonest of all arts, the art of speaking.

Articulate language is spoken not by nature but by art. It's no easy matter for children to learn the simple sounds of language—I mean to learn to pronounce the vowels and consonants. It would be much harder if they weren't led by instinct to imitate the sounds they hear; for it is vastly more difficult to teach the deaf to pronounce the letters and words, though experience shows that it can be done.

What makes this pronunciation so easy at last that was so difficult at first? It is habit.

The moment a good speaker conceives what he wants to express, the letters, syllables and words arrange themselves according to countless rules of speech, while he never gives these rules a thought. What can explain this? He means to express certain sentiments; in order to do this properly he has to select the right words out of thousands, and he does this with no expense of time or thought. The words selected must be arranged in a particular order, according to countless rules of grammar, logic and rhetoric, and accompanied with a particular tone and emphasis. He does all this as it were by inspiration, without thinking of any of these rules and without breaking any of them.

If this linguistic skill weren't so common, it would appear more wonderful than a man dancing blindfold amidst a thousand burning plough-shares without being burnt. Yet it can all be done by habit.

It seems clear that just as •without instinct the infant couldn't live to become a man, so also •without habit the man would remain an infant through life, and would be as helpless, as incompetent, as speechless, and as much a child in understanding at threescore as at three.

I see no reason to think that we'll ever know what the operative cause is either of instinct or of the power of habit. Both seem to be parts of our basic [see Glossary] constitution. Their purpose and use is evident; but we can't assign any cause of them except the will of him who made us.

This may be easily accepted with regard to instinct, which is a natural propensity; but it is equally true with regard to the power and inclination that we acquire by habit. No-one can show a reason why our doing a thing frequently should •make it easy to do or •make us likely to do it.

The fact is so well known and so constantly on view that we're apt to think that no reason should be sought for it, any more than a reason for why the sun shines. But there must *be* a cause of the sun's shining, and there must be a cause of the power of habit.

We see nothing analogous to it in inanimate matter, or in things made by human art. A clock doesn't work better, or require less force to work, just because it has been going for years. A field doesn't increase in fertility through its custom of bearing crops!

It is said that trees and other plants, by growing long in an unkindly soil or climate, sometimes acquire qualities by which they can bear its inclemency with less damage to themselves. This is a vegetable-kingdom phenomenon that has some resemblance to the power of habit; but I don't know of anything that resembles habit in inanimate matter. A stone loses nothing of its weight by being long supported, or made to move upward. However long or violently a body is tossed about, it loses nothing of its inertia and doesn't acquire the slightest disposition to change its state.