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## Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind

By Thomas Reid

### ESSAY 2: THE WILL

#### Chapter 1: Observations concerning the will

Everyone is aware of having *a power to determine*, in matters that he thinks of as depending on his determination. We call this •power ‘will’; but often the name of a •power of the mind is also used to name any •act in which that power is exercised - and so it happens that ‘will’ is often applied also to the •act of determining, though that is more properly called ‘volition’. [Reid thinks of a volition as a mental act which, if all goes well, kicks off a sequence of events leading to the event that is willed in the volition, for example the rising of my arm if I have willed to raise my arm. He calls this act a ‘determining’ because he thinks of it as settling, fixing, making determinate what one is going to do.]

So ‘volition’ stands for the act of willing; and ‘will’ is used indiscriminately to stand for either the power of willing or the act of willing.

But the term ‘will’ has very often, especially in the writings of philosophers, been given a broader meaning that we must carefully distinguish from the one I have just given.

In the broad division of our ·mental· faculties into •understanding and •will, philosophers have classified our passions, appetites, and affections under the heading ‘will’, thus making ‘will’ stand not only for our determination to act or not to act but also for every motive and incitement to action.

It is probably this that has led some philosophers to represent desire, aversion, hope, fear, joy, sorrow - *all* our appetites, passions and affections - as different states of the will. I think that this procedure tends to run together things that are very different in their natures.

The •advice given to a man, and his •determination resulting from that advice, are so unlike that it would be improper to call them variants on one and the same thing, ·namely the so-called ‘will’·. Similarly, the •motives for action and the •determination to act or not to act are things that have nothing in common, and therefore oughtn’t to be shoved together under one name or represented as different states of a single thing.

When I write of ‘the will’ in this Essay, therefore, I shan’t apply it to any of the incitements or motives that can *influence* our determinations, but solely to the ·act of determination *itself*, and to the power to determine.

Mr. Locke has considered this operation of the mind more attentively, and identified it more accurately, than some very able authors who have written since he did.

He defines ‘volition’ thus: ‘Volition is an act of the mind knowingly exerting the control it takes itself to have over any part of the man, by employing it in, or withholding it from, any particular action.’ It may more briefly be defined as ‘the determination of the mind to do or not to do something that we think of as in our power’.

If I presented this as a strictly logical definition, it would be open to the objection that ‘determination’ is only another term for *volition*. But in response to that objection it should be noted that the simplest acts of the mind can’t be given logical definitions. [That is, definitions in which something complex is explained by separately setting out its conceptual parts, for example defining ‘circle’ as ‘figure that is two-dimensional, closed, and having every point on it equidistant from some one point’. Reid holds that *volition* is simple, not a complex made up of conceptual parts as *circle* is.] The way to form a clear notion of these ‘simplest mental acts’ is to attend carefully to them as we feel them in ourselves. If we don’t look inward in this way, no *definition* can give us a distinct conception of them.

For this reason, rather than carefully examining any definition of ‘will’ or ‘volition’, I shall offer some remarks about volitions which may lead us to reflect on *willing as it occurs in ourselves*, and to distinguish it from other acts of mind that are apt to be lumped together with it because of the ambiguity of some words. There will be five of these remarks, occupying the remainder of this chapter.

(1) *Every act of will must have an object.*

Someone who wills must will *something*, and the something that he wills is called the ‘object’ of his volition. Just as you can’t think without thinking of something, or remember without remembering something, so you can’t will without willing something. So every act of will must have an object; and the person who wills must have some more or less clear conception of *what* he wills.

This is what distinguishes things that are done voluntarily from things done merely from instinct or merely from habit. A healthy new-born child feels the sensation of hunger and, if applied to the breast, sucks and swallows its food perfectly. We have no reason to think that before it sucked for the first time it had a *conception* of that complex operation or of how to perform it. So we can’t properly say that the child *wills* to suck.

I could give countless instances of things done by animals without any previous conception of what they are to do - without the intention of doing it. They act by some inward blind impulse, which has a cause though we don’t know what it is. In such cases there is obviously an *end* or *purpose* intended by the action, but this is an intention that isn’t in the animal but in ‘God’, its Maker. The fox doesn’t dig into the hillside *intending* to catch a rabbit; rather, it has a blind impulse to dig then and there, and it has this because when God designed the fox *he* intended that it should catch and eat a rabbit.

Other things are done by habit, and they can’t properly be called ‘voluntary’. We shut our eyes several times every minute while we are awake; nobody is conscious of willing this every time he does it.

(2) *The immediate object of someone’s willing must be some action of his own.*

This distinguishes will from two other acts of the mind that are sometimes called ‘will’, which makes them liable to be confused with will properly so-called. These are *desire* and *command*. Mr Locke explained very well the distinction between will and desire, yet many later writers have overlooked it, treating desire as one kind of will. Desire and will have this in common: each must have an object of which the person has some conception; so each must be accompanied with some degree of understanding. But they differ in several ways.

The object of *desire* can be anything that we are led to pursue by appetite, passion, or affection; it may be an outcome that we think is good for us, or for others that we care about. I may desire bread, or water, or relief from pain; but to say that I ‘will bread’, ‘will water’, or ‘will relief from pain’ is simply *not English*. So there is a distinction in common language between desire and will. It is this: what you *will* must be an action, and indeed an action *of yours*; what you *desire* need not be your own action, and indeed need not be an action at all.

A man desires that his children may •be happy, and that they may •behave well. Their •being happy isn't an action at all; their •behaving well is an action of theirs, not of his.

·That isn't the whole difference between will and desire, for even with regard to our own actions we may desire what we don't will, and will what we don't desire - indeed, what we are greatly averse to. ·Here are three examples: •A thirsty man has a strong desire to drink, but for some special reason he decides not to gratify this desire. •A judge desires (out of human kindness or favouritism) that a criminal should live, but his regard for justice and for his duty as a judge leads him to condemn the man to death. •A man who doesn't *desire* a nauseating drink, and indeed is disgusted by it, may nevertheless take it for the sake of his health. So desire, even when its object is some action of one's own, is only an *incitement to will*; it is not itself a volition or act of the will. The mind's determination can be to do something other than what we desire to do. But as desire is often accompanied by will, we are apt to overlook the distinction between them.

The *command* of a person is sometimes called his 'will', and sometimes his 'desire'; but when these words are used properly they signify three different acts of the mind.

The immediate object of •will is some action of our own;

the object of a •command is some action by someone else over whom we claim authority;

the object of •desire needn't be an action at all.

·It is usual when someone gives a command for all three of these acts occur: Because the command is a voluntary action, there must be a •will to give the command; what moves the person to that act of will is commonly some •desire. And the •command is the effect of the act of will. Because the three go together, it is common in language to give to one a name that properly belongs to another.

You may think that a command is only a linguistically expressed desire that the thing commanded should be done. But it is not so. For a desire can be expressed by language without there being any command; and there can be a command without there being any desire that the thing commanded should be done. This has actually happened. Tyrants have given burdensome commands to their subjects, ·not wanting them to obey; rather, wanting them to disobey·, so as to collect the fines they will impose for disobedience, or in order to have the pleasure of inflicting punishments.

Note also that a command is a •*social* act of the mind. It can exist only in communicating a thought to some thinking being; and therefore it implies a belief that there is such a being and that we can communicate our thoughts to him. Desire and will are •*solitary* acts, which don't imply any such communication or belief.

So the immediate object of volition must be some action of one's own.

(3) *The object of our volition must be something that we believe to be in our power and to depend on our will.*

A man may desire to visit the moon or the planet Jupiter, but he can't will or determine to do it, because he knows it isn't in his power. An insane person might try to visit the moon, but only if his insanity first made him believe it was in his power to do so.

A man in his sleep may be struck with paralysis, depriving him of the power of speech; on awaking he tries to speak, not knowing that he has lost the power to do so. But when he knows by experience that the power has gone, he stops trying.

The same man, knowing that some people have regained the power of speech after they had lost it through a paralytic stroke, may occasionally make an effort to speak. In this effort, though, there is not properly speaking a *will to speak*, but only a *will to test whether he can speak*.

Similarly, a man may exert his strength to raise a weight that is too heavy for him. But when he does this, it is always either because he thinks he *can* raise the weight, or because he is investigating *whether* he can raise it. Clearly, then, what we *will* must be believed to be in our power and to depend on our will.

(4) *When we will to do a thing immediately, the volition is accompanied by an effort to carry out the thing that we willed.*

If a man wills to raise a great weight from the ground by the strength of his arm, the effort he makes is proportional to the weight he determines to raise. A great weight requires a great effort, a small weight a lesser effort. We say indeed that to raise a very small body ‘needs no effort at all’; but I think this must be understood either as a figurative way of speaking in which very small things are counted as nothing, or as arising from our not attending to very small efforts and therefore having no name for them.

It isn’t hard to explain why our language should be like that. Great efforts of body or mind are accompanied by *difficulty*, and when they are continued for a long time they produce weariness, which requires the person to rest from them for a while. This *difficulty* and its consequences lead us to reflect on the endeavours and to give them a name. The name ‘effort’ is commonly given to them; whereas others - made with ease and leaving no effect that we are aware of - pass without our noticing them or naming them, though they are the same in kind and differ only in degree from the ones to which the name ‘effort’ is given.

This ‘easy’ effort is something that we *are* conscious of if we attend to it; and there is nothing in which we are in a more strict sense *active*.

(5) *In all determinations of the mind that are of any importance, there must be something in the preceding state of the mind that disposes or inclines the person to make that determination.*

If the mind were always in a state of perfectly balanced equilibrium, with no incitement, motive, or reason to act in one way rather than another, our active power would have been given to us in vain; for we would have no end to pursue, no rule to direct the exercise of our power. Either we would either be altogether inactive, and never will to do anything; or our volitions would be perfectly unmeaning and futile, being neither wise nor foolish, virtuous nor vicious.

So we have reason to think that every being to whom God has given some degree of active power has also been given some principles of action - principles to steer that power towards the end for which God intended it. [In this context, a ‘principle’ is something like a *force* or *cause* or *source* of action; it isn’t a proposition.]

It is obvious that in the constitution of man there are various principles of action suited to our state and situation. I’ll consider these in detail in Essay 3 [not on [www.earlymoderntexts.com](http://www.earlymoderntexts.com)]. In the present Essay I shall consider them only in a general way, wanting to examine how they relate to volition, and how volition is influenced by them.

## Chapter 2: The influence on the will of incitements and motives

We come into the world ignorant of everything, yet there are many things we must do if we are to survive and thrive. A new-born child may be carried in arms, and kept warm by his nurse; but he must suck and swallow his food for himself. And this must be done before he has any *conception* of sucking or swallowing, or of how they are to be performed. He is led by nature to do these actions without knowing what they are for or what he is up to in performing them. We call this *instinct*.

In many cases (·moving now to the situation of the adult·) there is no time for voluntary determination. Our motions must go on so rapidly that conception and volition, if they had to be brought to bear on every movement, couldn't keep up. In some cases of this kind, •instinct comes to our aid, and in others •habit. ·I shall give an example of each·.

When a man stumbles and loses his balance, the motion needed to prevent his fall would come too late if it were the consequence of thinking what needs to be done and making a voluntary effort to do it! The man regains his balance •instinctively.

When a man beats a drum or plays a tune, he doesn't have time to direct every individual beat or note by a voluntary determination; but the •habit that can be acquired by exercise serves the purpose just as well.

By instinct and by habit, therefore, we do many things without any exercise either of judgment or of will.

In other actions, the will is exerted, but without judgment.

Suppose a man knows that if he is to live he must eat. 'What shall I eat? How much? How often?' His reason can't answer any of these questions, so it can't give him guidance about how he should decide. Here again nature, as a kindly parent, makes up for the deficiency of his reason: it gives him *appetite*, which shows him when he is to eat, how often, and how much; and it gives him *the sense of taste*, which informs him of what he should eat and what he shouldn't. And these guides give him better directions than he could get from all the knowledge he could acquire if he didn't have appetite and the sense of taste.

As ·God·, the author of nature, has given us some spurs to action to make up for the deficiencies in our •knowledge, he has given others to make up for the deficiencies in our •wisdom and virtue.

The natural desires, affections and passions that are common to wise and foolish people, to virtuous and vicious ones, and even to the more thoughtful of the lower animals, very often serve to direct the course of human actions. Guided by these spurs to action, men can perform the most laborious *duties* of life with no thought of *duty*, and can do what is *proper* without caring about *propriety*; like a ship that is swept along her proper course by a favourable wind, without the skill or judgment of her crew.

Appetite, affection, or passion gives an impulse to perform a certain action. No judgment is implied in this impulse. It may be weak or strong; we can even take the case where it is irresistible, as it is in madness: madmen have their appetites and passions, but they lack the power of self-control, and so we attribute their actions not to the man but to the disease.

In actions that come from appetite or passion, we are partly passive, only partly active. So those actions are partly attributed to the passion; and if it is thought to be irresistible we don't attribute the actions to the man at all.

Even an American savage judges in this manner. When in a fit of drunkenness he kills his friend, as soon as he becomes sober he is very sorry for what he has done; but he pleads that drink and not he was the cause.

We think of the lower animals as having no higher principles [still meaning 'sources' or 'forces' or 'causes'] to control their appetites and passion; and for this reason they aren't subject to law. Humans are in a similar state when they are infants, and when they are mad or have a fever that makes them delirious. ·In those states· they have appetites and passions; but they lack what it would take for them to be moral agents who are accountable for their conduct and subject to moral approval or to blame.

In some cases a stronger impulse of appetite or passion may oppose a weaker one. Here again there may be determination and action without judgment. I shall give two examples.

Consider the case of a soldier who is ordered to climb up into a gap in the enemy fortifications, and is certain of immediate death - by summary execution for cowardice - if he retreats. This man doesn't need courage to go on; fear is sufficient. The certainty of immediate death if he retreats outweighs the probability of being killed if he goes on. The man is pushed by opposing forces, and he yields to the stronger of them without needing to put any effort into this and without needing to make any judgment.

A hungry dog is driven to act in the same way when meat is put before him and he is threatened with a beating if he touches it. Hunger pushes him forward, fear pushes him back with more force, and the stronger force wins.

So we see that even in many of our voluntary actions we may act under the force of appetite, affection, or passion, with no exercise of judgment, much in the way the lower animals seem to act.

But sometimes there is a calm in the mind when the gales of passion or appetite die down; and then the man is left to work his way in the voyage of life without the impulses that passion and appetite give. Then he calmly weighs goods and evils that are too far away to arouse any passion. He judges what is best on the whole, without feeling any bias drawing him to one side. He judges for himself in the same way that he would judge for someone else in his situation; and the determination he comes to is wholly attributable to the man himself and not in any degree to his passion.

Every man who has come to years of understanding, and who has given any thought to his own conduct and to that of others, has in his mind a more or less exact scale or measure of goods and evils. He makes an estimate of the value of health, of reputation, of riches, of pleasure, of virtue, of self-esteem, and of the esteem of his Maker. These things and their contraries have different degrees of importance in his cool and deliberate judgment.

When a man considers whether health should be preferred to bodily strength, whether fame should be preferred to riches, whether a good conscience and the approval of his Maker should be preferred to everything that can compete with it - this appears to me to be an exercise of *judgment*, and not any impulse of passion or appetite.

Something that is worth pursuing must have worth either intrinsically, on its own account, or as a means of procuring something intrinsically valuable. It's obvious that we use judgment in discovering what means are fit for attaining what ends; I think all philosophers agree about this. But some philosophers don't agree that it is also the role of judgment to appreciate the value of an end, or the preference due to one end above another. In determining what is good or bad, and among different goods which is best, they think we must be guided not by *judgment* but by some natural or acquired *taste* that makes us like one thing and dislike another.

Thus if one man prefers cheese to lobsters and another lobsters to cheese, it is pointless (say these philosophers) to apply judgment to find out which is right. Similarly, if one man prefers pleasure to virtue, and another virtue to pleasure, this is a matter of taste, and judgment has nothing to do with it. This seems to be the opinion of some philosophers.

I can't help having the opposite opinion. I think we may form a judgment both in the question about cheese and lobsters, and in the more important one about pleasure and virtue. When one man gets more enjoyment from the taste of cheese and another from lobsters, I agree that *this* difference doesn't bring in judgment; it depends only on the constitution of the palate.

But if we want to know which has the *better* taste, I think the answer must come from judgment; and that one doesn't need *much* judgment to come up with an answer that is quite certainly right, namely: the two tastes are equally good, and the men do equally well in preferring what suits their palate and their stomach.

Indeed, I think that the men themselves will agree perfectly in their judgment that both tastes are on an equal footing, and that neither has a just claim to preference.

So it seems that in this case the role of taste is very different from that of judgment, and that men who differ most in taste, may agree perfectly in their judgment, even regarding the tastes in which they differ.

To make the other case parallel with this, it must be supposed that the two men - the one who puts pleasure above virtue, and the one who reverses that order - agree in their judgment, and that neither sees any reason to prefer one course of life to the other.

If this is supposed, I shall grant that neither of these persons has reason to condemn the other. Each chooses according to his taste in matters which he *judges* not to involve a better and a worse.

But we should note that this supposition will be wrong if the case involves *people*, or indeed *moral agents* of any kind. Someone who can't see the *obligation* to be virtuous, when he uses his best judgment, may be called a 'man' but he isn't really one. He is incapable either of virtue or of vice, and isn't a moral agent.

Even the man of pleasure - the one who puts pleasure above virtue - when his judgment is unbiased, sees that there are some things that a man *ought* not to do even if he has a taste for them. If a thief breaks into his house and carries off his goods, he is perfectly convinced that the thief acted wrongly and deserves punishment, even if the thief has as much taste for the stolen goods as the householder has for the pleasures he pursues!

It is obvious that mankind through the ages have thought of our voluntary actions as being influenced by two parts of our constitution. In English we call these parts 'passion' and 'reason', and we find equivalent names for them in all languages.

Under the heading of 'passion' we include various spurs to action similar to those we observe in the lower animals and in men deprived of reason. They are variously called 'appetites', 'affections' and 'passions'; and ordinary language doesn't distinguish these accurately enough to prevent their being used rather indiscriminately. But they all have this in common: they draw a man toward a certain object, without his looking at it any further, as it were by violence. If the man has great self-control, he may be able to resist the violent pull, but not without a struggle.

Cicero's phrase for expressing the influence of passions etc. is: 'They whirl the man hither and thither', and Dr. Hutcheson says something similar: 'They agitate the mind and fill it with animal-like impulses' [Reid gives both of these in Latin]. Their influence can be felt without any exercise of reason or judgment. I see no difference between what philosophers say about *this* part of the human constitution and what ordinary folk think about it.

As for the *other* part of our constitution - the one commonly called 'reason', as opposed to 'passion' - there have been very intricate and abstruse disputes among modern philosophers as to whether it *ought* to be called 'reason' rather than being identified and named as some internal *sense* or *taste*.

I shan't here go into the question of whether it ought to be called 'reason' or something else. My topic is the influence this part of our constitution has on our voluntary actions.

On this point I think everyone must agree that this (i.e. what is called 'reason') is the *manly* part of our constitution, while the other (commonly called 'passion') is the *brute* part - that is, the part we share with the lower animals. What is called 'reason' works in a calm and dispassionate manner; and even those who hold that 'reason' is the wrong word for it explain its often being *called* that because its manner of operation is so like that of judgment or reason properly so-called.

Just as the likeness between this source of action and reason has led mankind to call it 'reason', so its *unlikeness* to passion has led people to see it as opposed to passion. They have considered this cool source - the one called 'reason' - as having an influence on our actions that is so different from the influence of passion that what a man does coolly and deliberately, without passion, is attributed solely to the man, whether it is good or bad; while what he does from passion is attributed in part to the passion. If the passion is thought to be irresistible, the action is attributed solely to it, and not at all to the man. If he had power to resist, and ought to have resisted, we blame him for not doing his duty; but his fault is reduced in proportion to the force of the passion.

Using this cool resource, we judge what ends are most worth pursuing, how far every appetite and passion may be indulged, and when it ought to be resisted. It directs us not only to resist the impulse of passion when it would lead us astray but also to avoid circumstances that might inflame passions. That is what Cyrus did when he refused to see a beautiful captive princess. In this he acted the part of a wise and a good man: firm in his love of virtue, and at the same time aware of the weakness of human nature and unwilling to test it too severely. Every circumstance that tended to inflame his desire - including his youth and the captive's great beauty - increases the merit of his conduct in resisting it.

Actions like that show the superiority of human nature, and the species-wide difference between it and the nature of the lower animals. In them we can see passions fighting with one another, and the strongest prevailing; but we don't see in their constitution any calm resource that is superior to every passion and able to govern the passions.

The difference between these two parts of our make-up can be further illustrated by some instances where passion is the winner.

If a man on great provocation hits another man when he ought to keep the peace, he will blame himself for what he did, and admit that he oughtn't to have given way to his passion. Everyone else will agree with his sober judgment. They think he acted wrongly in giving in to his passion when he could and should have resisted its impulse. If they had thought it was impossible for him to bear the provocation, they wouldn't have blamed him at all; but believing that it *was* in his power to resist his passion and was his duty to do so, they give him some share of the blame, while admitting that the blame is small in proportion as the provocation was great; so that the wrongdoing is attributed partly to the man and partly to his passion. But, if a man deliberately plans to harm his neighbour, devises the means for this, and carries them out, nothing mitigates the wrongness of his conduct: he bears the whole guilt of the evil that he intended and carried out.

If a man under torture reveals an important secret with which he has been entrusted, we pity him more than we blame him. Such is the weakness of human nature (so our thought goes) that even a good man's resolution might be overcome by what this man has been going through. If he has a strength of mind that even the agony of the rack cannot subdue, we admire his fortitude as truly heroic.

So it turns out that the common sense of men has led them to distinguish in the human constitution two parts that influence our voluntary determinations. (‘This is important because the common sense of men ought to have great authority in matters of common life.’) There is an irrational part which we share with the lower animals, consisting of appetites, affections, and passions; and there is a cool and rational part. The first often gives a strong impulse, but without judgment and without authority. The second always carries authority. All wisdom and virtue consist in following its dictates; all vice and folly consist in disobeying them. We may resist the impulses of appetite and passion, not only without regret but with self-applause and triumph; but the calls of reason and duty can never be resisted without remorse and self-condemnation.

The ancient philosophers agreed with the common folk in making this distinction within the sources of action. [Reid then adds some facts about Greek and Latin names for the two parts of the human make-up, and quotes Cicero on the cool, rational one.]

The reason for explaining this distinction here is that these two parts of human nature influence the will in different ways. Their influence differs not just in degree but in kind. *We feel* this difference, though we may find it hard to put it into words. Perhaps an analogy may help.

It is one thing to push a man from one part of the room to another; it is a very different thing to use arguments to persuade him move. He may yield to the force that pushes him, without any exercise of his rational faculties; indeed he *must* yield to it if he doesn’t bring an equal or greater force against it. His liberty is somewhat impaired by the push; and if he doesn’t have sufficient power to oppose it, his liberty is taken away entirely and his movement can’t be attributed to *him* at all. The influence of appetite or passion seems to me to be very like this. If we think the passion was irresistible, we attribute the action solely to it and not to the man. If he had the power to resist, but gave in to it after a struggle, we attribute the action partly to the man and partly to the passion.

Now consider the other half of the analogy, where the man is only urged by arguments to move across the room. This is like the operation of the cool or rational source of action. It is clear in this case that, whether or not he yields to the arguments, the determination ‘to move’ is wholly his own act and is entirely to be attributed to him. Arguments, however strong, don’t diminish a man’s freedom. Arguments can give us a •cool conviction as to what we ought to do, but that is all they can do; whereas appetite and passion give an •impulse to act, and the stronger they are the more they reduce one’s freedom.

In most men the impulse of passion is more forceful than mere conviction. That is why orators who want to affect how people behave find that they have to •confront the passions as well as to •convince the understanding. In all systems of rhetoric these two have been considered as different parts of the orator’s task, using different means.

### **Chapter 3: Operations of mind that can be called ‘voluntary’**

The faculties of *understanding* and *will* are easily distinguished in thought, but are seldom if ever separated from one another in operation.

In most and perhaps all the operations of mind for which we have names in language, both faculties are employed, meaning that in most or all operations we are both *thinking* and *active*.

Whether it is *possible* for thought to exist without some degree of activity may be something that we aren’t equipped to find out; but I think that *in fact* they always go together in the operations of our minds.

I think there is probably some degree of •activity in the operations that we ascribe to the •understanding, which is why in all languages those operations have always been expressed by active verbs - I see, I hear, I remember, I apprehend, I judge, I reason. And it is certain that every act of •will must be accompanied by some operation of the •understanding, because someone who wills must be aware of what he wills, and awareness belongs to the understanding.

The operations I shall consider in this chapter have, I think, usually been assigned to the understanding; but we shall find that the will plays such a large part in them that they can properly be described as ‘voluntary’. There are three of them: •attention, •deliberation, and •fixed purpose (or resolution).

**•Attention•:**

One may *attend* to an object - whether an object of sense or of thought - in order to get a clear idea of it, or to discover its nature, its attributes, or its relations; and attention makes so much difference that without it one can’t get or retain a clear idea of any object of thought. If a man hears a discourse without attending to it, what does he carry away with him? If he sees St. Peter’s or the Vatican without attention, what account can he give of it later on? While two people are having an interesting conversation, a clock strikes within earshot and they don’t attend to it; what is the consequence? The next minute they don’t know whether or not the clock struck. Yet their ears were not shut! The usual impression was made on the organ of hearing and on the auditory nerve and brain of each; but because of their inattention the sound either •wasn’t perceived or •it was perceived but passed in the twinkling of an eye without leaving any trace in the memory.

A man doesn’t see what is in front of his eyes while his mind is occupied with something else. In the tumult of a battle a man may be shot through the body without knowing it until he discovers it from his loss of blood or of strength. The most acute sensation of pain can be deadened if the attention can be vigorously turned onto something else. A gentleman I know, when in the agony of an attack of gout, used to call for a chessboard. He was fond of chess, and acknowledged that as a game progressed and pulled in his attention, his feeling of pain lessened and the time seemed much shorter.

Archimedes, it is said, being intent on a mathematical proposition while Syracuse was being taken by the Romans, didn’t know of the city’s calamity till a Roman soldier broke in on his seclusion and gave him a deadly wound. Archimedes’ only lament was that he had lost a fine demonstration.

There is no need to multiply instances to show that when one faculty of the mind is intensely engaged with any object the other faculties are fast asleep, so to speak.

I would add the further remark that if there is such a thing as genius in matters of mere *judgment and reasoning*, it seems to consist chiefly in the ability to attend to a subject, keeping it steadily in mind until it can be accurately surveyed on all sides. There is a talent of *imagination* that leaps from earth to heaven and back again in a moment, and this may be favourable to wit and imagery; but the powers of *judging and reasoning* depend chiefly on keeping the mind to a clear and steady view of the subject.

Someone complimented Sir Isaac Newton on the force of genius that had made such improvements in mathematics and natural science; and he is said to have replied - modestly and judiciously - that if he had made any improvements in those sciences it was more through patient attention than through any other talent.

Whatever the effects are that attention can produce (and I think they go far beyond what is commonly believed), attention is for the most part in our power. Everyone knows that he can turn

his attention to this subject or to that, for a longer or a shorter time, and with more or less intensity of focus, as he pleases. Attending is a voluntary act, and depends on one's will.

But what I said earlier about the will in general is applicable to this particular exercise of it - namely, that the mind is rarely in a state of equilibrium in which it is left to turn its attention to the object that reason thinks is most deserving of it.. There is usually a bias toward some particular object as against all the others, not because of any judgment that it *deserves* our attention more, but because of some impulse or propensity, based on nature or habit.

It is well known that things that are new and uncommon, grand, or beautiful draw our attention much more than would be justified by how much they actually matter to us or by how much we think they do.

Whatever moves our passions or affections draws our attention, often more than we wish.

You desire a man not to think of an unfortunate event that torments him: there is no remedy for it; the thought of it serves no purpose except to keep the wound bleeding. He is perfectly convinced of all you say. He knows that he wouldn't feel the affliction if only he could *not think of it*, yet he hardly thinks of anything else. Strange! Happiness and misery stand before him, and depend on his choice, and with his eyes wide open he chooses misery and rejects happiness!

Yet he wishes to be happy, as all men do. How shall we reconcile this contradiction between his judgment and his conduct?

The explanation of it seems to me to be this: the afflicting event draws his attention so strongly, by a natural and blind force, that he lacks either •the power or •the vigour of mind to resist its pull, though he knows that yielding to it bring misery without any compensating good.

Acute bodily pain attracts our attention and makes it very difficult for us to attend to anything else, even when attention to the pain serves no purpose but to make it ten times worse. The man in the agony of gout who played a game of chess to draw his attention to something else was behaving reasonably in the interests of his real happiness; but it required a great effort to give his game enough attention to produce the intended effect.

All of us, though some more than others, are given to a *slackness* of thought that makes it very difficult to give an important topic the fixed attention that it deserves, even when no particular rival object is distracting our attention.

From all this, I think, it appears that •the attention we give to objects is mostly voluntary, that •a great part of wisdom and virtue consists in directing our attention properly; and that •however reasonable this appears to everyone's judgment, it sometimes requires as much of an effort of self-control as do the most heroic virtues.

### •Deliberation•

Another •mental• operation that can be called voluntary is *deliberation* about what we are to do or refrain from doing. Everyone knows that, concerning any part of his conduct, it is in his power to deliberate or not to deliberate about it, deliberate briefly or for a longer time, deliberate more carelessly or more seriously.

And when he has reason to suspect that his affections may bias his judgment, he may either •honestly use the best means in his power to reach an impartial judgment or •let his bias have its way and look only for arguments in favour of doing what his inclination leads him to do. . . .

The general rules of deliberation are perfectly evident to reason when we consider them abstractly. They are axioms in morals. •I shall state four of them•.

•We ought not to deliberate in cases that are perfectly clear. No man deliberates whether he ought to choose happiness or misery. No honest man deliberates about whether to steal his neighbour's property. •When the issue is important, the right choice is not clear, and there is time for deliberation, we ought to deliberate with more or less care depending on *how* important the matter is. •In deliberating we ought to weigh things in an even balance, and to give every consideration the weight that we soberly think it ought to have, and no more. This is to deliberate impartially. •Our deliberations should be brought to a conclusion in due time, so that we shan't go on deliberating when it is time to act.

These rules of deliberation seem to me as self-evident as the axioms of Euclid. To the extent that a man conforms to them in his deliberations, his own heart approves of him and he is sure of having the approval of ·God·, the searcher of hearts.

But though it is evident to reason how we ought to deliberate, it isn't always easy to do as we ought. Our appetites, affections and passions are opposed to all deliberation except the kind that is employed in finding ways to gratify *them*. Greed may lead one to deliberate on ways of making money, but it doesn't distinguish between honest and dishonest ways.

Indeed, we ought to deliberate about how far every appetite and passion may be indulged, and what limits should be set to it. But our appetites and passions push us on to the attainment of *their* objects by the shortest way and without delay.

Thus it happens that if we give in to their impulse we shall often break the rules of deliberation that reason approves. In this conflict between the dictates of reason and the blind impulse of passion, we must voluntarily reach a decision. When we side with reason, though in opposition to passion, we approve of our own conduct.

What we call a 'fault of ignorance' always comes from not deliberating sufficiently. When we don't take the trouble needed to become well informed, there is a fault: not the fault of acting according to the light we have, but of not using the proper means to *get* light. For if we judge wrongly after using the proper means of informing ourselves, there is no fault in acting according to that wrong judgment; the error was unavoidable.

The natural upshot of deliberation about any part of our conduct is a determination how we shall act; and if the deliberation doesn't reach this it has been wasted effort. [See note on 'determine' etc. in the first paragraph of this Essay.]

There are two kinds of case: •when the opportunity to act according to the determination is present, and •when it is some time off in the future. ·I shall discuss the former now; the latter will be treated under the heading 'Resolution'·.

When the opportunity is present, the determination to act is immediately followed by the action. For example, if a man determines to stand up and walk, he immediately does so unless he is forcibly stopped or has lost the power of walking. And if he sits still when he has the power to walk, this proves that he hasn't determined or willed to walk immediately.

Our determination or will to act doesn't always result from deliberation. It may be an effect of some passion or appetite, without judgment having played any part. And when judgment *does* come into the picture - ·meaning that there has been some deliberation· - we may determine and act either according to that judgment or contrary to it.

When a hungry man sits down to dine, he eats from appetite, very often without exercising his judgment at all: nature invites him and he obeys the call, just as the ox or the horse or an infant does.

When we are talking with someone we love or respect, we say and do civil things merely from affection or from respect. They flow spontaneously from the heart, without requiring any judgment. In such cases we act as lower animals do, or as children do before they have the use of reason. We feel an impulse in our nature and we yield to it.

When a man eats merely from appetite, he doesn't consider the pleasure of eating or its tendency to health. These considerations are not in his thoughts. But there is the other kind of case - a man who eats so as to enjoy pleasure of eating. Such a man reasons and judges. He takes care to use the proper means for satisfying an appetite. He is a critic in tastes, and makes fine distinctions between one taste and another. This man uses his rational faculties even in eating. Perhaps this is a trivial use of those faculties, but it's still something of which I think the lower animals aren't capable.

Similarly, a man may say or do civil things to someone else, not •from affection but •in order to serve some end by it or •because he thinks it his duty. To act with a view to some distant interest, or to act from a sense of duty, requires judgment and seems to be proper to man as a reasonable being; but acting merely from passion or appetite or affection doesn't require judgment and is something man shares with the lower animals.

For someone to act against what he judges to be for his real good upon the whole is •folly. To act against what he judges to be his duty is •immorality. It can't be denied that there are too many instances of each of these in human life. *I see and approve the better, and follow the worse* [Reid gives it in Latin] is a possible and indeed common state of affairs. Given that a man does what he really thinks wisest and best to be done, the more his appetites and affections and passions draw him the contrary way the more he approves of his own conduct and the more entitled he is to the approval of every rational being.

### •Resolution•

Of the operations of mind that I mentioned as being describable as voluntary, the third is a *fixed purpose or resolution* regarding future conduct. This naturally takes place when an action or course of action about which we have deliberated is not to be carried out right away, the time for acting being some distance into the future.

A fixed purpose to do, later on, something that we think will then be in our power is strictly and properly a determination of will, no less than a determination to do it immediately. Every definition of 'volition' fits this. Whether the opportunity for doing what we have determined to do is •present or at some distance into the •future is an accidental circumstance that doesn't affect the nature of the determination, and there is no good reason not to call the latter 'volition', just as we do the determination to something immediately. A purpose or resolution, therefore, is truly and properly an *act of will*.

Our purposes are of two kinds which might be called 'particular' and 'general'. By a 'particular' purpose I mean one that has for its object an individual action, limited to one time and place; by a 'general' purpose I mean a purpose aimed at a course or sequence of actions, intended for some general end or guided by some general rule.

Thus, I may purpose to go to London next winter. When the time comes I carry out this intention if I still have it; and then when I have gone to London my purpose of going there no longer exists. That is how it is with every particular purpose.

A general purpose may continue for life; and after many particular actions have been done because of it, it may still exist and regulate future actions. Thus, a young man purposes to follow the profession of law or medicine or theology. This general purpose directs the course of his

reading and study. It directs him in his choice of companions and his choice of amusements. It determines his travels and where he lives. It influences his clothing and manners, and has a considerable effect in forming his character.

Other fixed purposes have an even greater effect in forming the character. I mean ones concerning our moral conduct.

Consider a man who has exercised his intellectual and moral faculties far enough to have acquired clear notions of justice and injustice and of the consequences of both, and after appropriate deliberation has formed a fixed purpose of sticking firmly to justice and never touching the wages of wickedness.

Isn't this what we would call a *just man*? We regard the moral virtues as being present in the mind of a good man even when he has no opportunity to exercise them. Well, what *is* it in the mind that we can call the virtue of justice, when it is not exercised? The only thing it can be is a fixed purpose or determination to act according to the rules of justice whenever there is an opportunity to do so.

Roman law defined justice as *A steady and perpetual will to give to every man his due*. When the opportunity for doing justice is not present, this can only mean a steady *purpose*, which is very properly called a 'will'. Such a purpose *if it is steady* is bound to produce just conduct; for every known violation of justice shows a change of purpose, if only a temporary one.

What I have said about justice can easily be applied to every other moral virtue - so easily that there is no need to give examples. The moral virtues are all fixed purposes of acting according to a certain rule.

This makes it easy for us to distinguish, in our thoughts at least, the •moral virtues from the •natural affections that have the same name. Thus, *benevolence* is a principal •virtue, which is entitled to an even higher degree of approval than justice is (though it isn't as essential to the existence of society as justice is). But there is also a •natural affection of benevolence, which is common to good and bad men, to the virtuous and the vicious. How are these to be told apart?

In practice, indeed, we *can't* tell them apart in other people, and we find it hard to do so even in ourselves - that is, hard to know whether one's kindly action towards a friend comes from a principled virtue or from a natural affection. That is in *practice*, but in *theory* nothing is easier. The •virtue of benevolence is a fixed purpose or resolution to do good when we have the opportunity, acting from a conviction that it is right and is our duty. The •affection of benevolence is a tendency to do good, from natural constitution or habit, without regard to rightness or duty.

There are good temperaments and bad ones that are a part of the constitution of the person who has them, and are really involuntary, though they often lead to voluntary actions. A good natural temperament isn't a virtue, nor is a bad one a vice. A man *born* under a judgment of disapproval because he has the misfortune of a bad natural temperament - what a hard thought that is!

The physiognomist [= 'expert reader of people's characters in their face'] saw in Socrates' features the signs of many bad dispositions, which Socrates acknowledged that he felt within him; but he conquered them, which made the triumph of his virtue all the greater.

In men who have no fixed rules of conduct, no self-control, the natural temperament can be varied by countless chance happenings. The man who is *now* full of affection and benevolence suddenly feels a strange turnover in his mood when some unwelcome event ruffles him or perhaps when an easterly wind blows! His kind and benevolent affections give place to jealous and

malignant ones, which are as readily indulged as the others were and for the same reason, namely because he *feels like* indulging them.

We may observe that men who have exercised their rational powers are generally governed in their opinions by •fixed principles of belief; and men who have achieved the most in the way of self-government are governed in their behaviour by •general fixed purposes. Without the former there would be no steadiness and consistency in our •belief; without the latter there would be none in our •conduct.

When a man reaches years of understanding he forms for himself - drawing on his upbringing, the company he keeps, and his studies - a set of general principles, a *creed* that governs his judgment on particular points that come up. If he encounters new evidence that tends to overthrow any of his accepted principles, he will need a great deal of open-mindedness and love of truth to examine it impartially and ·perhaps· change his judgment. Most men, when they have settled their principles on the basis of what they regard as sufficient evidence, can hardly be led to re-examine them seriously.

They get a *habit* of believing them - a habit that is strengthened by repeated acts, and remains immovable even when the evidence on which their belief was at first grounded has been forgotten.

This is what makes conversions, whether from religious or from political principles, so difficult.

A mere prejudice that someone grew up with sticks to him as tightly as a proposition of Euclid sticks to a man who long ago forgot the proof of it. Indeed, the two are on a similar footing. We hold to each because we have held to it for so long, and think we first accepted it on good evidence, though we can't remember what it was.

When we know a man's principles, we judge by *them*, rather than by the level of his understanding, what he will decide on any point that is connected with them.

Thus, the judgment of most men who judge for themselves is governed by •fixed principles; and I think that the conduct of most men who have any control over themselves and any consistency of conduct is governed by •fixed purposes.

A well-bred man may in his natural temperament be proud, passionate, and vengeful, and in his morals be a very bad man; yet, in good company he can stifle every passion that is inconsistent with social politeness and elegance, and be polite, modest and agreeable even to people whom in his heart he despises or hates. Why is this man, who can command all his passions when he is in company, a slave to them in private? The reason is clear: he has a fixed resolution to be •a socially polite and elegant man, but has no such resolution to be •a virtuous man. He has fought against his most violent passions a thousand times before mastering them in company. The same resolution and perseverance would have given him the command of them when alone, ·thus turning him into a good man·.

A •fixed resolution retains its influence on •conduct even when the motives for it aren't in view, in the same way as a •fixed principle retains its influence on •beliefs when the evidence for it has been forgotten. We could call the former a •habit of the will, the latter a •habit of the understanding. It is chiefly by such habits that people are governed in their opinions and in their behaviour.

A man who has no general fixed purposes may be said to have, as Alexander Pope says (unjustly, I hope!) that most women have, 'no character at all'. He will be honest or dishonest, benevolent or malicious, compassionate or cruel, depending on where the tide of his passions and

affections sweeps him. But I think that few adults are like this; they are, so far as their conduct is concerned, the weakest and most contemptible of our species.

A fairly steady man may change his general purposes once or twice in his lifetime, seldom more. He may start with the pursuit of pleasure in early life, switch to ambition, then to greed. But every man who uses his reason in the conduct of life will have some end that he puts before all others. He steers his course towards this end; his projects and his actions are regulated by it. If he didn't have such a principal end, his conduct wouldn't hang together as a unity. He would be like an ocean-going ship that isn't heading for any port and not under anyone's command, but left to the mercy of winds and tides.

I noted earlier that there are moral rules respecting the •attention we ought to give to objects, and respecting our •deliberations - rules that are as evident as mathematical axioms. The same thing holds for •our fixed purposes, whether particular or general.

Isn't it self-evident that after due deliberation we ought to resolve to perform the action (or the course of conduct) which appears to our sober judgment to be the best and most approvable? That we ought to be firm and steady in keeping to such resolutions while we are sure they are right, but to be open to conviction and ready to change course when we have good evidence that they are wrong?

Fickleness, inconstancy and pliability at one extreme, and wilfulness, inflexibility, and obstinacy at the other - these are moral qualities respecting our purposes that everyone sees to be wrong. A manly firmness based on rational conviction is the proper middle way that every man approves and reveres.

## Chapter 4: Corollaries

From what I have said about the will, several things follow, of which I shall discuss three.

(1) It appears that while some acts of the will are transient and momentary, others are permanent and may continue for a long time or even through the whole course of our rational life.

When I will •to stretch out my hand, that act of the will is at an end as soon as my hand moves; it begins and ends in a moment. But when I will •to attend to a mathematical proposition, to examine the demonstration of it and the consequences that can be drawn from it, this act of the will may continue for hours. It *must* continue as long as my attention continues, for nobody attends to a mathematical proposition longer than he wills to.

The same thing holds for deliberation concerning any proposed action or general course of conduct. We *will to* deliberate as long as we *do* deliberate; and that may be for days or for weeks.

A fixed purpose or resolution, which we have shown to be an act of the will, can continue for a great part of one's life, or for the whole of what remains of one's life after reaching the age at which such a resolution can be formed.

For example, a merchant may resolve that after trading has brought him a fortune of a certain specified size he will give up business and retire to live in the country. He may continue this resolution for thirty or forty years, and finally act on it; but he doesn't continue it for any longer than he wills, for at any time he can change his resolution.

So there are acts of the will that are *not* transient and momentary - ones that can continue for years and grow into a habit.

This is all the more worth pointing out because a very eminent philosopher [Hume] has denied it, asserting that all the acts of the will are transient and momentary, and has inferred from that thesis some very important conclusions about what constitutes the moral character of man.

(2) A second corollary is that nothing a man is or does can justly be accounted either virtuous or immoral unless his will is involved it.

No blame can attach to a man for what is altogether involuntary - that is so self-evident that no arguments can make it more evident. The practice of all criminal courts in all enlightened nations is based on it. You may think of this objection: 'By the laws of all nations, children often suffer for the crimes of their parents in which they played no part.' The answer to this is easy; 'it comes in two parts':

*First*, parents are connected with their children so closely that the punishment of a parent must hurt his children, whether or not the law wants this to happen. If by the hand of justice a man is fined or imprisoned, or loses life, limb, estate, or reputation, his children are bound to suffer in consequence. *Secondly*, when laws do intend to punish innocent children for their fathers' crimes, such laws either are •unjust or are •to be considered as acts of policy rather than of legal justice, being intended as an improved device for deterring parents from committing crimes of the kind in question. In this latter sort of case, the innocent children are sacrificed to the public good - like the device for preventing the spread of plague by shutting up the healthy people along with the diseased ones in a house or ship that has the infection.

By the law of England, if a man is killed by an ox goring him or a cart running over him, with no fault or neglect by the owner, the ox or cart is confiscated by the state and given to the church. The lawmakers surely didn't mean to punish the ox as a criminal, let alone the cart! Clearly their intention was to inspire the people with a sacred regard for human life. . . .

If judges *ever* judged a man to be guilty and fit for punishment for something that they acknowledged to be entirely involuntary, all the world would condemn them as being ignorant of the first and most basic rules of justice.

I have tried to show that •in our attention to objects in order to form a right judgment about them, •in our deliberation about particular actions or about general rules of conduct, and •in forming our purposes and resolutions as well as in carrying them out, the will has a principal share. If we could find a man who throughout his life had

- given proper attention to things that concern him, had
- deliberated impartially about how to behave, and had
- formed his resolutions and carried them out according to his abilities and his best judgment,

surely such a man could hold up his face before God and man and plead 'Not guilty' to everything. Such a man must be acquitted by God, the impartial judge, whatever his natural temperament was, whatever his passions and affections, as long as they were involuntary.

(3) All virtuous habits, as distinct from virtuous actions, consist in fixed purposes of acting according to the rules of virtue as often as we have opportunities to do so.

We can conceive a man to have a greater or lesser degree of steadiness in holding to his purposes or resolutions; but it is impossible that the general tenor of his conduct should be contrary to them.

The man who has a determined resolution to do his duty on every occasion, and who keeps steadily to his resolution, is a perfect man. The man who has a determined purpose of following a course of action that he knows to be wrong is a hardened offender. Between these extremes there are many intermediate degrees of virtue and vice.