

# Morals

No. 5 of *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*

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

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## Glossary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**licentious:** Outright immoral, wildly indecent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 1: The first principles of morals

Like all other sciences [see Glossary], morals must have first principles, and all moral reasoning is based on them.

In every branch of knowledge where disputes have arisen, it is useful to distinguish the first principles from the superstructure. They are the foundation on which the whole structure of the science rests, and anything that isn't supported by this foundation can't be stable.

In all *rational* belief, the thing believed is either •a first principle or •something inferred by valid reasoning from first principles. When men differ about such an inference, they have to appeal to the rules of reasoning, which have been unanimously fixed ever since the days of Aristotle. But when men differ about a first principle they have to appeal to another tribunal, namely the appeal-court of common sense.

How can we distinguish •genuine decisions of common sense from •counterfeit ones? I have discussed this in chapter 4 of "Judgment", the sixth of my *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*; I refer you to that discussion. What I want to point out here is this:

•First principles differ from •inferences through reasoning in the kind of evidentness [see Glossary] that they have, and must be tested by different standards when they are called in question. So when we are examining some •purported• truth it's important for us to know which of these two classes it belongs to. When they are run together, men are apt to demand *proof* for everything they think fit to deny; and when we try to prove by direct argument something that is really self-evident, our reasoning will always be inconclusive. It will take for granted either •the thing being proved or •something that isn't more evident than that; and

so instead of giving strength to the conclusion it will encourage doubts in the minds of people who didn't have them before.

In this chapter, therefore, I propose to point out some of the first principles of morals; I don't claim to give a complete list.

The principles I shall list relate either to •virtue in general, to •the different particular branches of virtue, or to •the relative weighting of virtues where they seem to interfere.

(i) Some things in human conduct merit approval and praise, others merit blame and punishment; and different degrees of approval or blame are due to different actions.

(ii) Something that is not even slightly voluntary can't deserve moral approval or blame.

(iii) Something done from unavoidable necessity may be pleasant or nasty, useful or harmful, but it can't be the object of blame or moral approval.

(iv) Men can be very blameworthy for not doing what they ought to have done, as well as for doing what they ought not to have done.

(v) We ought to use the best means we can to be well informed regarding our duty,

- by attending seriously to moral instruction;
- by observing what we approve and what we disapprove in the conduct of other men—ones we know and also historical figures;
- by often reflecting in a calm and dispassionate hour on our own past conduct, so that we may see what was wrong, what was right, and what might have been better;
- by deliberating coolly and impartially on our future conduct, as far as we can foresee the opportunities

we may have for doing good and the temptations to do wrong; and

- by having the following principle deeply fixed in our minds: just as moral excellence is the true worth and glory of a man, so the knowledge of our duty [see Glossary] is the most important knowledge, for every man in every station of life.

**(vi)** It ought to be our most serious concern to do our duty as far as we know it, and to fortify our minds against every temptation to deviate from it—

- by maintaining a lively sense of the beauty of right conduct and its present and future reward, and of the baseness of vice and of its bad consequences here and hereafter;
- by always having in our eye the noblest examples;
- by the habit of subjecting our passions to control by reason;
- by firm purposes and resolutions regarding our conduct;
- by avoiding occasions of temptation when we can; and
- by imploring the aid of Him who made us, in every hour of temptation.

These principles concerning virtue and vice in •general must appear self-evident to every man who has a conscience and has worked to exercise this natural power of his mind. I now proceed to others that are more •particular.

**1.** We ought to prefer a greater good that is distant ·in time· to a lesser good ·that is less far off·; and a lesser evil to a greater ·one that is further off in time·.

A concern for our own good dictates this principle, and our conscience doesn't have to come into it. We can't help •disapproving of anyone who acts contrary to it and •thinking that he deserves to lose the good that he wantonly threw away, and to suffer the evil that he knowingly brought on

his own head.

I have pointed out in my Essay 'The Principles of Action' •that the ancient moralists, and many modern ones, have deduced the whole of morals from this principle, and •that the principle does lead to the practice of every virtue if it is accompanied by a correct estimate of goods and evils according to their degree, their dignity, their duration, and the extent to which they are in our power. It leads more directly to the virtues of self-control, prudence, temperance, and fortitude; but it also leads, though less directly, even to justice, humanity, and all the social virtues, when their influence on our happiness is well understood.

It isn't the noblest principle of conduct, but it has a special advantage, namely that its force is felt by the most ignorant and even by the most morally abandoned.

Even if a man's moral judgment is rusty from disuse or corrupted by bad habits, he can't be indifferent to his own happiness or misery. When he has become insensible to •every nobler motive to right conduct he still can't be insensible to •this motive. To act solely from this motive may be called 'prudence' rather than 'virtue', but this prudence deserves some regard •on its own account and much more •because it is the friend and ally of virtue and the enemy of all vice and •because it speaks in favour of virtue in a way that is heard by those who are deaf to every other recommendation.

If a man can be induced to do his duty even out of a concern for his own happiness, he will soon find reason to love virtue for its own sake and to act from less mercenary motives. . . .

**2.** As far as nature's intention appears in the human constitution, we ought to accept that intention and act in accordance with it.

The Author of our being has given us not only •the power of acting within a limited sphere but also •various principles

[see Glossary] or springs of action—of different kinds and with different levels of dignity—to direct us in the exercise of our active power.

From the constitution of every species of lower animals, and especially from the active principles that nature has given them, we can easily see what kind of life nature intended them to have; and they uniformly act the part their constitution leads them to, without reflecting on it or intending to obey its dictates. Man is the only inhabitant of this world who can observe his own constitution, see what kind of life it is made for, and act according to that intention or contrary to it. Only he can intentionally obey or rebel against the dictates of his nature.

In my discussion (in another work) of the principles of action in man, I showed that just as his natural instincts and bodily appetites are well adapted to the preservation of his natural life and to the continuance of his species, so also his natural desires, affections, and passions—when not corrupted by vicious habits, and when controlled by the leading principles of reason and conscience—are excellently fitted for rational and social life. Every vicious action involves some natural spring of action—too much of it, too little of it, or a wrong direction for it—and so any vicious action can rightly be described as *unnatural*. Every virtuous action agrees with the uncorrupted principles of human nature.

The Stoics defined *virtue* as *a life according to nature*. Some of them more precisely said *a life according to human nature insofar as it is superior to the nature of brutes* [see Glossary]. A brute's life is in accordance with its nature, but it isn't either virtuous or vicious. The life of a moral agent can't be in accordance with his nature without being virtuous. The conscience that is in every man's breast is the law of God written in his heart, which he can't disobey without acting unnaturally and being self-condemned.

In the various active principles of man—

- the desires for power, knowledge, and esteem [see Glossary];
- affection for children, for near relatives, and for the communities to which we belong;
- gratitude, compassion, and even resentment and competitive envy,

—nature's intention is very obvious, as I pointed out in discussing those principles in my Essay 'The Principles of Action'. And it's equally evident that reason and conscience are given us to regulate •the lower principles, so that •they can work together in a regular and consistent plan of life in pursuit of some worthy end. [That's why two paragraphs back Reid called reason and conscience 'leading principles'.]

**3.** No man is born for himself only. So every man ought to •see himself as a member of the common society of mankind and of the subordinate societies he belongs to—family, friends, neighbourhood, country—and to •do as much good and as little harm as possible to the societies of which he is a part.

This axiom leads •directly to the practice of every social virtue, and •indirectly to the virtues of self-control, which we need if we're to be equipped to perform the duty we owe to society.

**4.** In every situation we ought to act towards any other person in the way that we would think it right for him to act towards us if we were in his situation and he in ours; or, more generally, what we approve in others is what we ought to do in similar circumstances, and what we condemn in others we ought not to do.

[Reid distinguishes two propositions here as less and more general. They also differ in another way, which he probably didn't notice and didn't intend. Compare these two (a strong man pondering the morality of punching a weak one):

- (1) If I were weak and he were strong, I would think that he oughtn't to punch me.  
 (2) I think that if I were weak and he were strong he oughtn't to punch me.

It could easily be the case that (2) was true and (1) false. Reid's less general thesis is of form (1); his more general one is of form (2). He probably meant (2) for both.]

If there's any such thing as right or wrong in the conduct of moral agents, it must be the same for everyone in the same circumstances.

We all relate in the same way to him who •made us and •will hold us accountable for our conduct. . . . And we relate in the same way to one another as members of the great community of mankind. The duties arising from the different ranks and jobs and relations of men are the same for all in the same circumstances.

What stops men from seeing what they owe to others is not lack of judgment but lack of candour [see Glossary] and impartiality. They're quick-sighted enough in seeing what is due to themselves. When they are harmed or ill-treated, they see this and feel resentment. It's the lack of candour that makes men use one measure for the duty they owe to others, and a different measure for the duty others owe to them in similar circumstances. It is surely self-evident to every intelligent being that men ought to judge with candour—always, and especially in what concerns their moral conduct. The man who takes offence when he is harmed in his person, his property, or his good name, pronounces judgment against himself if he acts in that way towards his neighbour.

The fairness and moral compellingness of this rule of conduct is self-evident to everyone who has a conscience; and it is also the most comprehensive of all the rules of morality; so it truly deserves the honour paid to it by the

highest authority, namely that *it is the law and the prophets* [Matthew 7:12]

It covers every rule of justice—no exceptions. It covers all the relative duties, both the ones arising from the more permanent relations of

- parent and child,
- master and servant,
- magistrate [see Glossary] and subject,
- husband and wife,

and those arising from the more temporary relations of

- rich and poor,
- buyer and seller,
- debtor and creditor,
- benefactor and beneficiary,
- friend and friend,
- enemy and enemy.

[Reid collapses the last two into 'friend and enemy', but that can't be what he meant.] It comprehends every duty of charity and humanity, and even of courtesy and good manners.

Indeed, we don't have to force or stretch it to get it to cover even to the duties of self-government. Everyone approves in others the virtues of prudence, temperance, self-control and fortitude, so he must see that what is right in others must be right in himself in similar circumstances.

Anyone who invariably acts by this rule will never deviate from the path of his duty except through an error of judgment. And his errors will all be curable, because he'll feel [Reid's verb] the obligation that everyone is under to use the best means in his power to have his judgment well-informed in matters of duty.

You'll have noticed that this axiom presupposes than man has a faculty by which he can distinguish right conduct from wrong. It also presupposes that •by this faculty we easily see what is right and the wrong in •the conduct of• other men

that we have no special relation to, and that •we're very apt to be blinded by the bias of selfish passions when the case concerns ourselves. Every claim we have against others is apt to be magnified by self-love; a change of persons removes this prejudice, and makes the claim to appear in its right size.

**5.** To every man who believes in the existence, the perfections, and the providence of God it's self-evident that we owe him reverence and obedience. Correct opinions about the Deity and his works make the duty we owe to him obvious to every intelligent being, and also add the authority of a divine law to every rule of right conduct.

There's another class of axioms in morals by which we determine what choice to make when there seems to be a conflict between the actions that different virtues lead to.

There can't be any conflicts amongst **the different virtues**, because they are dispositions of mind (or determinations of will) to act according to a certain general rule. They dwell together most amicably, and give mutual aid with no possibility of hostility or opposition; taken altogether, they make one uniform and consistent rule of conduct. But between **particular actions that different virtues would lead to** there may be conflict. For example: a man is in his heart, generous, grateful and just; these dispositions positively strengthen one another; but on a particular occasion an action that generosity or gratitude calls for is forbidden by justice.

It's self-evident •that in all such cases unmerited generosity should give way to gratitude, and both should give way to justice. And also •that unmerited beneficence to people who aren't in distress should give way to compassion toward those who are miserable, and acts of piety should give way to works of mercy because God loves mercy more than sacrifice. [The implied equation of 'acts of piety' with 'sacrifice' is Reid's.]

At the same time we see that the acts of virtue that ought to take second place when there is a potential conflict have most intrinsic worth when there is no competition. It's obvious that there is more worth in pure and unmerited benevolence than in compassion, more in compassion than in gratitude, and more in gratitude than in justice.

I call these 'first principles', because they seem to me to have an intuitive evidentness that I can't resist. I can express them in other words. I can illustrate them by examples and authorities, and perhaps can deduce one of them from another. But I can't deduce •any of• them from other principles that are more evident. And I find that the best moral reasonings of authors I have read, ancient and modern, heathen and Christian, are based on one or more of them.

Men don't see the evidentness of mathematical axioms until they reach a certain degree of maturity of understanding. Before a boy can see the evidentness of the mathematical axiom that *equal quantities added to equal quantities make equal sums*, he must •form the general conception of *quantity*, and of *more* and *less* and *equal*, and of *sum* and *difference*, and have •have become accustomed to judge of these relations in matters of common life.

Similarly, our moral judgment (i.e. conscience) grows to maturity from an imperceptible seed planted by our Creator. When we have become able to contemplate the actions of other men, or to reflect on our own actions coolly and calmly, we begin to see in them the qualities of honest and dishonest, honourable and base, right and wrong, and to feel the sentiments [see Glossary] of moral approval and disapproval.

At first these sentiments are feeble, easily warped by passions and prejudices and apt to yield to authority. But in morals as in other matters, our judgment becomes stronger and more vigorous through use and the passage of time.

We begin to distinguish the dictates of passion from those of cool reason, and to see that it's not always safe to rely on the judgment of others. By an impulse of nature we venture to judge for ourselves, as we venture to walk by ourselves.

There's a strong analogy between •the body's progress from infancy to maturity and •the progress of all the powers of the mind. Each progression is the work of nature, and in each it can be greatly helped or harmed by proper education. It's natural for a man to be able to walk or run or jump, but if his limbs had been kept in chains from his birth, he wouldn't have been able to do any of those things. And for a man who has been trained in society and accustomed to judge his own actions and those of other men, it's equally natural for him to perceive right and wrong, honourable and base, in human conduct; and to such a man, I think, the principles of morals I have set out will appear self-evident. But there may be individual human beings who are so little accustomed to think or judge concerning anything but how to gratify their

animal appetites that they have hardly any conception of right or wrong in conduct, or any moral judgment; just as there certainly are some who don't have the conceptions and the judgment needed to understand the axioms of geometry.

From the principles I have presented the whole system of moral conduct follows so easily, and with so little help from reasoning, that every man of common understanding who *wants to know his duty can know it*. The path of duty is a plain one that isn't often missed by those who are upright in heart. It has to be like that because every man is obliged to walk along it. In some tricky moral cases there is room for dispute; but these seldom occur in practice; and when they do occur the learned disputant has no great advantage. The unlearned man who does the best he can to know his duty, and acts according to his knowledge, is innocent in the sight of God and man. He may err, but he is not guilty of immorality.

## Chapter 2: Systems of morals

If the knowledge of our duty is so available to all men, as I have been maintaining, it may seem hardly to deserve to be called a 'science' [see Glossary]. It may seem that there is no need for instruction in morals.

Then how does it come about that •we have many large and learned systems of moral philosophy, and systems of natural jurisprudence (i.e. the law of nature and nations), and that •in modern times most places of education have set

up public professions [see Glossary] for instructing youth in these branches of knowledge?

I think these facts can be explained, and the usefulness of such systems and professions can be justified, without supposing any difficulty or intricacy in the knowledge of our duty.

I am far from thinking that there's no need for instruction in morals. It's possible for a man to be ignorant of self-evident

truths throughout his life; to believe gross absurdities throughout his life. We know from experience that this often happens over things that don't matter much. It is even more likely to happen in contexts where ·self-interest, passion, prejudice and fashion are so apt to pervert the judgment.

Some ripeness of judgment is needed for seeing even the most obvious truths. Children can be made to believe anything, however absurd. Our judgment about things of a certain kind are ripened partly by time but much more by being exercised about things of that kind.

Judgment requires a clear, distinct and steady conception of the things about which we are judging, even if they are self-evident. Our conceptions are at first obscure and wavering. To make them distinct and steady we need the habit of attending to them; and this requires an exertion of mind to which many of our animal principles are unfriendly.

The love of •truth calls for •it; but this still voice is often drowned by the louder call of some passion, or we are hindered from listening to it by laziness and desultoriness [= 'intellectual flightiness']. So men often remain throughout their lives ignorant of things that they could have known if they had merely opened their eyes and paid attention. . . .

I'm much inclined to think that if a man were reared from infancy without any society of his fellow-creatures, he would hardly ever show any sign of •moral judgment or of •the power of reasoning. His own actions would be directed by his animal appetites and passions, without cool reflection, and he couldn't improve himself by observing the conduct of other beings like himself.

The rational and moral powers of man might lie dormant without instruction and example, yet these powers are a part, and the noblest part, of his ·natural· constitution. ·There's no contradiction in this·. A seed's power of vegetation is part of its natural constitution, but it would lie dormant for ever

if it didn't have heat and moisture.

We probably get our first moral conceptions by attending coolly to the conduct of others, and observing what moves our approval and what moves our indignation. These sentiments spring from our moral faculty as naturally as the sensations of sweet and bitter spring from the faculty of taste. They have their natural objects. But most human actions are of a mixed nature, and look different depending on what angle they are viewed from. Prejudice for or against the person in question is apt to warp our opinion. Attention and candour are needed if we are to •distinguish good from bad, and without favour or prejudice to •form a clear and impartial judgment. We can be greatly aided in this by instruction. . . .

You'd have to be very ignorant of human nature not to see that the seed of virtue in the mind of man, like that of a tender plant in an unkindly soil, requires •care and culture [see Glossary] in the first period of life as well as •our own exertion when we come to maturity.

If the irregularities of passion and appetite are checked in good time, and good habits are planted; if we are aroused by good examples and shown examples in their proper colour; if our attention is prudently directed to the precepts of wisdom and virtue;. . . we'll nearly always be able to distinguish good from bad in our own conduct without the labour of reasoning.

Most people have little of this culture at the right time, and what they do have is often unskilfully applied; with the result that bad habits gather strength, and the mind is occupied with false notions of pleasure, of honour, and of interest. These people give little attention to what is right and honest. Conscience is seldom consulted, and so little exercised that its decisions are weak and wavering. Thus, although most truths in morals will appear self-evident to a mature understanding that is free from prejudice and

accustomed to judging the morality of actions, it doesn't follow that moral instruction is unnecessary in the first part of life or that it can't be very profitable later on.

The history of past ages shows that nations that are highly civilized and greatly enlightened in many arts and sciences may for centuries accept the grossest absurdities not only •with regard to the Deity and his worship but •with regard to the duty we owe to our fellow-men, and especially to children, to servants, to strangers, to enemies, and to those who differ from us in religious opinions.

Such corruptions in religion and in morals had spread so widely among mankind, and were so firmly settled by custom, that a light from heaven was needed to correct them. Revelation was intended not to supersede our natural faculties but to help us to use them. And I'm sure that the attention given to moral truths in *systems* of the kind I have mentioned has done a lot to correct the errors and prejudices of former ages, and may continue to have the same good effect in time to come.

Systems of morals can swell to an enormous size, but that's not surprising: the •general principles are few and simple, but the ••particular• application of them extends to every part of human conduct, in every condition, every relation, and every transaction of life. They're the rule of life to the magistrate [see Glossary] and to the subject, to the master and to the servant, to the parent and to the child, to the fellow-citizen and to the alien, to the friend and to the enemy, to the buyer and to the seller, to the borrower and to the lender. Every human creature is subject to their authority in his actions and words, and even in his thoughts. The principles of morals are in this respect like the laws of motion in the natural world: they are few and simple, but serve to regulate an infinite variety of operations throughout the universe.

And just as the beauty of the laws of motion is displayed most strikingly when we trace them through all the variety of their effects, so too the divine beauty and sanctity of the principles of morals appear grandest when we look comprehensively at their application to every condition and relation, and to every transaction of human society.

That is what systems of morals ought to aim at. They can be made more or less extensive, because their only natural limit is the wide circle of •human transactions. When the principles are applied to •these in detail, the detail is pleasant and profitable. It requires no profound reasoning, (except perhaps in a few disputable points). It can be agreeably illustrated by examples and •quotations from• authorities; it exercises •our faculty of• moral judgment and thereby strengthens it. And anyone who has given much attention to the duty of man in all the various relations and circumstances of life will probably be more enlightened about his own duty and more able to enlighten others.

The earliest writers on morals that we know delivered their moral instructions not in systems but in short unconnected sentences, i.e. aphorisms. They saw no need for processes of reasoning because the truths they delivered *had to be accepted* by anyone honest and attentive.

Later writers, wanting to improve the way of treating this subject, gave method and arrangement to moral truths by dividing them up into divisions and subdivisions, as parts of one whole. This procedure makes the whole easier to understand and remember; and it's this procedure that brings in the labels 'system' and 'science'.

A system of morals isn't like a system of geometry, where the later parts get their evidentness from the earlier ones, and a single chain of reasoning is carried on from the beginning, so that if the arrangement is changed the chain is broken and the evidentness is lost. It's more like a system

of botany or mineralogy, where the later parts don't depend for their evidentness on the earlier ones, and the whole arrangement is made to aid understanding and memory, not to make things evident.

Morals have been methodised [Reid's word] in different ways. The ancients commonly arranged them under the four cardinal virtues of

- prudence,
- temperance,
- fortitude, and
- justice.

Christian writers, I think more properly, put them under the three heads of

- our duty to God,
- our duty to ourselves, and
- our duty to our neighbour.

One division may be more comprehensive, or more natural, than another; but the truths arranged are the same, and their evidentness is the same in all.

One final point about systems of morals: they have been made more bulky and more complex than they should be, in two different ways: •by mixing political questions with morals, which I think is improper because political issues belong to a different science and are based on different principles; and •by making the system include what is commonly (though I think improperly) called 'the theory

of morals'.

By the theory of morals is meant a sound account of the structure of our moral powers—i.e. of the powers of the mind by which we •have our moral conceptions and •distinguish right from wrong in human actions. This is indeed a complex subject, and there have been various theories and much controversy about it in ancient and in modern times. But it has little connection with the knowledge of our duty; and those who differ most over the theory of our moral powers agree over the practical rules of morals that those powers dictate.

You can be a good judge of colours and of the other visible qualities of objects while knowing nothing about the anatomy of the eye or the theory of vision; and you can have a very clear and comprehensive knowledge of what is right and what is wrong in human conduct without ever studying the structure of our moral powers. . . .

I don't mean to depreciate this branch of knowledge. It's a very important part of the philosophy of the human mind, and ought to be considered as such, but not as any part of morals. By calling it the 'theory of morals', and by making it a part of every system of morals, men may be led into a gross mistake that I wish to head off, namely thinking that a man must be a philosopher and a metaphysician if he is to understand his duty.

## Chapter 3: Systems of natural jurisprudence

Systems of natural jurisprudence, of the rights of peace and war, or of the law of nature and law of nations, are a modern invention which soon acquired such a reputation that many public establishments [here = 'university departments'] were set up for teaching it along with the other sciences. It has such a close relation to morals that it could serve as a system of morals, and is commonly put in the place of it, at least with regard to our duty [see Glossary] to our fellow-men. Systems of natural jurisprudence differ in name and form from systems of morals, but the substance is the same. This can be seen by giving a little attention to the nature of each.

The immediate purpose of morals is to teach the **duty** of men; the immediate purpose of natural jurisprudence is to teach the **rights** of men. Right and duty are very different things, which even have a kind of opposition to one another; but they are related in such a way that neither can even be conceived without the other—to understand either of them you must understand the other.

They are inter-related in the way that credit relates to debt [meaning: 'in the way that being-a-creditor relates to being-a-debtor']. All credit presupposes an equivalent debt, and similarly every right presupposes a corresponding duty. . . .

A **right action** is an action that conforms to our duty. But when we speak of **the rights of men** the word 'right' has a different and a more artificial meaning. It is a legal technical term which stands for all that a man may lawfully **(i)** do or **(ii)** possess and use or **(iii)** require someone else to do.

This comprehensive meaning of 'right' and of the Latin equivalent *jus*, though long adopted into common language, is too artificial to have been in common language from its beginning. It is a term of art [= 'technical term'] invented by

students of civil law when that became a profession [see Glossary].

The whole end and object of law is to protect the subjects in everything that they can lawfully **(i)** do, or **(ii)** possess, or **(iii)** demand. The professionals have brought this threefold object of law under the word *jus* or 'right' . . . . Of these three, **(i)** can be called the 'right of liberty', **(ii)** can be called the 'right of property', and **(iii)** is called 'personal right', because it concerns some particular person(s) of whom the demand may be made.

It's easy to see what the duties are corresponding to the various kinds of rights. What I have a right to do, you have a duty not to prevent me from doing. If I have a right to some property, you ought not to take it from me or interfere with my use and enjoyment of it. And if I have a right to demand that you do x, you have a duty to do x. Rights and duties are not just necessarily connected; in fact they are only different expressions of the same meaning, comparable with

- I am your debtor, you are my creditor;
- I am your father, you are my son.

So men's rights and duties correspond so tightly that. . . .you could substitute a system of one for a system of the other.

It might be objected:

'Although every right implies a duty, not every duty implies a right. It could be my duty to give humane help to someone who doesn't have any right to demand that I do so. So a system of the rights of men, though it teaches all the duties of strict justice, omits the duties of charity and humanity; and it's a very lame system of morals that omits those!'

Well, there is a strict notion of •justice in which it is distinguished from •humanity and •charity, but it also has a more extensive meaning in which it includes those virtues. The ancient moralists, both Greek and Roman, included beneficence in the cardinal virtue of 'justice'; and the word is often used in this extended sense in common language. It's also common enough for 'right' to be used in an extended sense in which it covers every proper claim of •humanity and •charity as well as the claims of •strict justice. But it's as well to have different names for these two kinds of claims; so writers on natural jurisprudence have used 'perfect rights' as a label for the claims of strict justice, and 'imperfect rights' as a label for the claims of charity and humanity. Thus, all the duties of humanity have imperfect rights corresponding to them, as those of strict justice have perfect rights.

Another objection that may be brought:

'There is still a class of duties to which no right, perfect or imperfect, corresponds. We are duty-bound to pay due respect not only to •what someone else truly has a right to but also to •something that we mistakenly think he has a right to. If someone has a horse that he stole and therefore has no right to, while I believe the horse to be really his, it's my duty to pay the same respect to this conceived right as if it were real. So here's a moral obligation on one party with no corresponding right for the other.'

To fill this gap in the system of rights, so that right and duty always correspond, writers in jurisprudence have resorted to something like what is called a 'legal fiction'. They give the name 'right' to the claim that even the thief has to the goods he has stolen, while the theft is unknown, and to all similar claims based on the ignorance or mistake of the people concerned. And to distinguish this from a genuine right, perfect or imperfect, they call it an 'external right'.

Thus it appears that although a system of the •perfect rights of men, or the rights of strict justice, would be a lame substitute for a system of human duty, when we add to it •imperfect and •external rights it comprehends the whole duty we owe to our fellow-men.

But it may be asked, Why should men be taught their •duty in this indirect way, by reflection, as it were, from the •rights of other men?

Well, this indirect way may be thought to be more agreeable to the pride of man, because we do see that men of rank would rather hear of their obligations of honour than of their obligations of duty (although the dictates of true honour and of duty are the same); the reason for this preference being that 'honour' puts a man in mind of what he owes to himself whereas 'duty' is a more humbling idea. For a similar reason, men may attend more willingly to their rights that put them in mind of their dignity than to their duties that suggest their dependence. And we do see that men who don't attend much to their duty give great attention to their rights.

Whatever truth there may be in this, I think that better reasons can be given why systems of natural jurisprudence have been developed and put in the place of systems of morals.

Systems of civil law were invented centuries before we had any system of natural jurisprudence; and the former seem to have suggested the idea of the latter.

Because of the weakness of human understanding, no large body of knowledge can be easily grasped and remembered unless it's arranged and methodised, i.e. reduced to a system. When the laws of the Roman people were greatly multiplied and the study of them became an honourable and lucrative profession, it became necessary for them to be methodised into a system. And the most natural and obvious way of methodising law was found to be according

to the divisions and subdivisions of men's rights that the law aims to protect.

The study of law produced not only systems of law, but a language proper for expressing them. Every art [see Glossary] has its terms of art—its technical terms—for expressing the conceptions that belong to it; and the civil-law specialist must have terms for expressing accurately the divisions and subdivisions of rights, and the various ways in which they can be acquired, transferred, or extinguished, in the various transactions of civil society. He must have precisely defined terms for

- the various crimes by which men's rights are violated,
- the different types of legal actions, and
- the various steps in the procedure of law-courts.

Those who have for years been immersed in a profession are very apt to use its technical terms when speaking or writing on subjects are in any way like it. And this can be useful, because terms of art are usually better defined and more precise in their meaning than the words of ordinary language. These people also find it very natural to shape and arrange other subjects, as far as their nature permits, into a method similar to that of the system that fills their minds.

So it is to be expected that a civil-law specialist, wanting to give a detailed system of morals, would use many of the terms of civil law, and mould morality as far as possible into the form of a system of law or of human rights.

This was justified by the necessary and close relation of rights to duty that I have pointed out. And moral duty had long been thought of in a legal way, being considered as a •law of nature, a •law written not on tablets of stone or brass but on the heart of man, a •law of greater antiquity and higher authority than the laws of particular states, a •law that is binding on all men of all nations, which is why Cicero called it 'the law of nature and of nations'.

The idea of a system of this law was worthy of the genius of the immortal Hugo Grotius, who was the first who •carried it out in such a way as to draw the attention of the learned in all the European nations, and •led several monarchs and states to establish public professions for the teaching of this law.

The multitude of commentators and annotators on this work of Grotius, and the public establishments to which it gave rise, are sufficient guarantees of its merit.

It is indeed so well designed and so skilfully carried through, so free from the scholastic jargon that infected the learned at that time [early 17th century], so thoroughly aimed at the common sense and moral judgment of mankind, and so agreeably illustrated by examples from ancient history and by authorities from the sentiments of ancient authors, heathen and Christian, that it must always be admired as the chief work of a great genius on a most important subject.

[In this paragraph, the numbering is Reid's.] The usefulness of a sound system of natural jurisprudence can be seen in the following half-dozen facts. **(1)** The terms and divisions of the civil law enable writers on natural jurisprudence to expound the moral duty we owe to men in more detail and more systematically than before. **(2)** It is the best preparation for the study of law, because. . . it uses and explains many of the terms of the civil law that is the basis for the law of most of the European nations. **(3)** It is useful to lawgivers, who ought to make their laws conform as much as possible to the law of nature. And it points out the errors and imperfections of human laws (there are bound to be some, as in everything that men make). **(4)** It is useful to judges and interpreters of the law, because when there are rival interpretations preference should go to the interpretation based on the law of nature. **(5)** It is of use in civil controversies between states, or between individuals who have no common superior. In

such controversies the appeal must be made to the law of nature; and the standard systems of that, especially that of Grotius, have great authority. **(6)** For sovereigns and states who are above all human laws it is very useful to be solemnly reminded of the conduct they are morally bound to observe towards their own subjects, towards the subjects of other states, and towards one another, in peace and in war. The better and the more generally the law of nature is understood, the more each violation of it will bring disgrace.

Some authors have thought that systems of natural jurisprudence ought to be confined to the perfect rights of men because the duties corresponding to the imperfect rights—the duties of charity and humanity—can't be enforced by human laws, but must be left to men's judgment and conscience, with no compulsion. But the systems that have won the greatest public applause haven't followed this plan, and I think there are good reasons for that. **(1)** Because a system of perfect rights couldn't serve the purpose of a system of morals, which surely is an important purpose of any system of natural jurisprudence. **(2)** Because in many cases it is hardly possible to fix the precise limit between justice and humanity, between perfect and imperfect rights.

Like the colours in a prismatic image, they run into each other so that the best eye can't fix the precise boundary between them. **(3)** As wise legislators and magistrates ought to aim at making the citizens good as well as just, all civilized nations have laws that are intended to encourage the duties of humanity. Where human laws can't enforce them by punishments, they may encourage them by rewards. The wisest legislators have given examples of this; and no-one can tell how far this branch of legislation may go.

\* \* \* \* \*

The substance of the four following chapters—i.e. the remainder of this work—was written long ago and read in a literary society. I wanted in them to justify some points of morals from metaphysical objections urged against them in the writings of David Hume. If they succeed in that, and at the same time serve to illustrate the account I have given of our moral powers, I hope you won't think it is improper to place them here, and that you'll forgive some repetitions, and perhaps anachronisms, caused by their being written at different times and on different occasions.

## Chapter 4: For my action to deserve moral approval, must I believe that it is morally good?

No part of philosophy is more fine-spun and complex than the so-called '**theory** of morals'. In ancient times, the Epicurean, the Aristotelian and the Stoic each had a different theory of morals, and almost every notable modern author has a system of his own.

And no part of philosophy is plainer and easier to understand than the **practical** part of morals. There is indeed no branch of human knowledge in which there is such general agreement among ancients and moderns, learned and unlearned.

From this disagreement over theory and agreement about the practical part we can infer that the 'practical' rules of morality have a firmer foundation than the theory does. And it's easy to see why this is so.

To know what is right and what is wrong in human conduct, all we need is to •listen to the dictates of our conscience when the mind is calm and unruffled, or •attend to the judgment we form about other people in similar circumstances. But to judge concerning the various theories of morals we have to analyse and dissect (so to speak) the active powers of the human mind, and especially to analyse accurately the conscience or moral power by which we tell right from wrong.

(The conscience is like the eye in many ways including this: learned people and unlearned ones see objects equally clearly. The learned are in no position to dictate to the unlearned in matters where the eye is judge; and there isn't any disagreement about such matters. But to dissect the eye and lay out the theory of vision is a hard thing to do, and even the most skillful people have disagreed about it.)

From this remarkable disparity between our conclusion in the theory of morals and in the rules of morality we can I think infer that wherever we find any disagreement between •the practical rules of morality that have been received all down the centuries and •the principles of any of the theories advanced on this subject, the practical rules ought to be the standard by which the theory is to be corrected. It is unsafe and unphilosophical to bend the practical rules so as to make them fit a favourite theory.

The question to be considered in this chapter can be settled relatively easily and certainly because it belongs to the practical part of morals. And if it is answered in the affirmative, I think it may serve as a touchstone to test some celebrated theories that are inconsistent with •that answer and that have led the theorists to oppose •it by very subtle metaphysical arguments.

Every question about what is or isn't a proper object of moral approval belongs to practical morals, and I want to such a question raise here: To deserve moral approval must an action be done in the belief that it is morally good? . . .

When a moral agent does something, his conscience either

- (1) says that his action is good, or
- (2) says that it is bad, or
- (3) says that it is indifferent [= 'neither good nor bad'], or is entirely silent about it

That's a complete list, I think. If his conscience is perfectly silent, the action must be very trivial, or appear to be so. That's because conscience—in those who *have* a working conscience—is a practical faculty that busies itself with every

part of our conduct, whether or not we want to hear from it. ·So I shan't say much about the silent-conscience case, and will lump it in with the judgment-of-indifference case.·

(3) If a man does something in perfect simplicity—no moral pros or cons, he just *does* it—without the least suspicion of its being bad, his heart cannot condemn him for it, nor will anyone who knows his heart. If his action resulted from a false opinion which came from some previous blameworthy carelessness or inattention, I don't clear him from blame regarding that earlier episode. I'm talking about the •present action and the frame of mind in which it is done; •past events don't come into it. And in this present action there's nothing that merits moral disapproval or moral approval, because the person didn't intend anything good or anything bad. And this holds also when the man's conscience pronounces the action to be indifferent.

(2) If I do something that my conscience declares to be bad or dubious, I am guilty in my own eyes and deserve the disapproval of others. If it turns out that what I thought to be bad was really good or neither-good-nor-bad, that doesn't make me less guilty because I did it believing it to be bad, and this is immoral.

(1) If I do what my conscience says is right and my [see Glossary], that will have contributed to my willingness to do it. (What if I hear my conscience but give no weight to what it says? That isn't conceivable: no man, I think, is so morally adrift that believing something to be his duty doesn't increase *somewhat* his speed and confidence in doing it.) The more weight the rightness of the action has in getting me to do it, the more I approve of my own conduct. And if my worldly ·self-interest, my appetites or my inclinations pull me strongly in the opposite direction, my defying them and following the dictates of my conscience adds to the moral worth of the action.

When a man acts on the basis of a wrong belief, if his error is invincible moralists all agree that he isn't to blame. ['invincible' = 'incurable', but Reid's real topic here is not ways of getting out of the error but ways of not getting into it.] If his error is due to some previous carelessness or inattention, the moralists seem to differ. But this apparent disagreement isn't real. For where does the fault lie in this case? Everyone must agree that the *only* fault was that the man didn't work hard enough to have his judgment well informed. So moralists who look at the action and the previous conduct that led to it as one whole find something to blame in the whole; and they are entirely right about that. Moralists who take this whole to pieces, and consider what is blameworthy and what is right in each piece, attach blame to what preceded this wrong judgment and is approval to what followed it; ·and they are entirely right too.·

[Reid now gives a couple of examples as intuitive support for the thesis he has been arguing for up to this place in the chapter, namely that (i) believing your action to be right is **sufficient** for your being right to perform it. This chapter's title, however, is the question whether (ii) believing your action to be right is **necessary** for your being right to perform it; and in the next paragraph Reid switches, abruptly and without comment, from (i) to (ii). Of the three ensuing objections that he answers, (a) is an objection to (i), whereas (b) and (c) are objections to (ii). And the chapter's closing page clearly takes 'the principle I have tried to establish' to be (ii) and not (i).]

These judgments strike me as being as intuitively evident as mathematical axioms. Anyone who has reached years of understanding, and who has exercised his faculties in judgments concerning right and wrong, sees their truth as he sees daylight. Metaphysical arguments brought against them have the same effect as arguments casting doubt on

the senses: they may puzzle and confuse us, but they don't convince us. It seems evident—obvious—therefore that the only actions that can truly be called virtuous, or deserving of moral approval, are ones that the agent believed to be right, and which he performed at least partly because of that belief.

(a) It may be objected that this principle implies that it makes no difference to a man's morals what his opinions are, provided he acts in conformity with them. It is easy to answer this. Morality requires not only that a man should •act according to his judgment but that he should •do his best to ensure that his judgment is according to truth. If he fails in either of those, he deserves blame; but if he doesn't fail in either of them, I don't see what he can be blamed for.

When a man must act and has no more time to deliberate, he ought to act by the light of his conscience even when he is in an error. When he has time to deliberate, he ought to do what he can to be rightly informed. When he has done so, he may still be in an error; but it is an invincible error and oughtn't to be charged against him as a fault.

(b) A second objection is that we *immediately* approve of benevolence, gratitude, and other primary virtues, without considering whether they are motivated by a belief that they are our duty. And the laws of God place the sum of virtue in •loving God and •loving our neighbour, without specifying that we do it from a conviction that we ought to do so.

The answer to this objection is that the primary virtues such as

- the love of God,
- the love of our neighbour,
- justice, and
- gratitude

are by the constitution of human nature *necessarily* accompanied by the conviction that they are morally good. So we

can safely assume that these things are never separated, and that every man who practises these virtues does so with a good conscience. In judging men's conduct we don't suppose things that can't happen; and God's laws don't give decisions regarding impossible cases, which is what they would be doing if they said anything about a man who thought it contrary to his duty to love God or to love mankind. [Reid then quotes some fragments from the New Testament in support of this thesis. Then:]

(c) The last objection I shall mention is a metaphysical one urged by Hume. A prominent thesis in his system of morals is that *justice is not a natural virtue but an artificial one*. To prove this he has exerted the whole strength of his reason and eloquence. The principle we are now considering stood in his way, so he takes trouble to refute it.

He writes [the quotations are all from *Treatise* III.ii.1]:

'Suppose someone lends me a sum of money on condition that it be repaid in a few days. After the few days have passed he asks for his money back. I ask: What reason or motive do I have to restore the money? Perhaps it will be said that my •regard for justice and •hatred of villainy and knavery are sufficient reasons for me.'

And this, he agrees, would be a satisfactory answer to a civilized man who has been trained up according to a certain discipline and education. But, he says, 'If you gave this answer to a man in his rough and more natural condition (if you're willing to call such a condition "natural") he would reject it as perfectly unintelligible and sophistical.'

'For what do this honesty and justice consist in? Not surely in the external action. So it must consist in the motive with which the external action is performed. This motive can't be a respect for the honesty of the action, because it's a plain fallacy to say that

- a virtuous motive is required to make an action honest, *and*
- a respect for its honesty is the motive for the action.

We can't have a respect for the virtue of an action unless the action is already virtuous.'

And in another place he writes:

'To suppose that the mere respect for the virtue of the action is what made it virtuous is to reason in a circle. An action must be virtuous *before* we can have a respect for its virtue. So there must be some virtuous motive antecedent to that respect. This isn't merely a metaphysical subtlety.'

I'm not concerned here with how this reasoning is used to support Hume's opinion that justice is not a natural but an artificial virtue. I'm considering only its role as opposition to the principle I have been trying to establish, namely that for an action to be truly virtuous the agent must have some respect for its rightness.

The whole force of the reasoning seems to amount to this:

When we judge an action to be good or bad, it must have *been* good or bad in its own nature before that judgment was made; otherwise the judgment is false. But if the action is good in its nature, the agent's judgment can't make it bad, and if it is bad in its nature, the agent's judgment can't make it good. To deny either of these would be to credit our judgment with a strange magical power to transform the nature of things; it would be to say that my judging a thing to be what it isn't makes it really to be what I erroneously judge it to be.

I think that that gives the objection in its full strength. In answer to it I have two things to say.

(1) If we couldn't *untie* this metaphysical knot I think we might fairly and honestly *cut* it, because it ties an absurdity onto the clearest and most indisputable principles of morals and of common sense. For I appeal to any man whether any principle of morality, or any principle of common sense, is clearer and more indisputable than what the apostle Paul wrote: *There is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth [see Glossary] any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean* [from the King James version, *Romans 14:14*]. But the metaphysical argument makes this absurd. For, says the metaphysician ·Hume·, if the thing was not unclean in itself you judged wrongly in esteeming it to be unclean; and what can be more absurd than that your esteeming a thing to be what it is not should make it be what you erroneously esteem it to be?

Let us try the edge of this on another example. Nothing is more evident than that *an action doesn't deserve to be called 'benevolent' unless it is motivated by a belief that it tends to promote the good of our neighbour*. But this is absurd, says the metaphysician. If it isn't benevolent in itself, your belief about its tendency can't change its nature. It's absurd ·to suggest· that your erroneous belief could make the action be what you believe it to be. Nothing is more evident than that *a man who tells the truth, believing it to be a lie, is guilty of falsehood*, but the metaphysician holds that this is absurd.

In short: if there's any strength in this argument ·of Hume's·, it follows that a man might be highly virtuous without having the least respect for virtue; very benevolent without ever intending to help anyone; very malicious without ever intending any hurt; very vengeful without ever intending to retaliate for an injury; very grateful without ever intending to return a benefit; and strictly truthful while intending to lie. So we could reject this reasoning, as inconsistent with self-evident truths, even if we couldn't

point out where it goes wrong—i.e. we could cut the knot if we couldn't untie it.

**(2)** But let us see whether we *can* discover the fallacy of this argument.

We ascribe moral goodness to actions considered abstractly, without any relation to the agent. We likewise ascribe moral goodness to an agent on account of an action he has done; we call it a good *action*, though in this case the goodness is really in the *man* and is ascribed to the action only in a figure of speech. Now, when we describe an action, considered abstractly, as morally 'good', and then describe the agent as morally 'good' because of that action, are we giving the word 'good' the same meaning both times? or do we unconsciously change its meaning depending on whether we are applying it to the action or to the man?

The action considered abstractly doesn't have understanding or will, isn't accountable, and can't be under any moral obligation. But all these things are essential to the moral goodness of a man—if a man didn't have understanding and will he couldn't have moral goodness. From this it strictly follows that the moral 'goodness' we ascribe to an action considered abstractly is *not* the same as the moral 'goodness' we ascribe to the person for performing that action. The meaning of 'good' is changed when it is applied to these different subjects.

This will be more evident when we consider what the two meanings are. A good action in a man [Reid ought to have said: 'An action in respect of which a man qualifies as good'] is one in which he applies his intellectual powers properly in order to judge what he ought to do, and acts according to his best judgment. This is all that can be required of a moral agent; it's what his moral goodness with respect to a good action consists in. But is this the goodness we ascribe to an action considered abstractly? Surely not! The action considered

abstractly doesn't have judgment or active power, so it can't have the goodness that we ascribe to the man because he performs it.

What do we mean by goodness in an action considered abstractly? It seems to me to consist in this and *only* in this:

It is an action of a kind that ought to be done by those who have the power and opportunity to do it, and are capable of seeing their obligation to do it.

(If you think that moral goodness in an action considered abstractly can be anything other than this, tell me about it!) And this goodness is inherent in the action's nature, and is inseparable from it. No opinion or judgment of an agent can alter it in the least.

Suppose the action to be that of rescuing an innocent person from great distress. This surely has all the moral goodness that an action considered abstractly can have. but obviously an agent in rescuing a person in distress may **(a)** have no moral quality, may **(b)** have great demerit, or may **(c)** have great merit.

**(a)** Suppose that mice rescue the distressed person by chewing through the cords that bound him. Is there moral goodness in this act of the mice?

**(b)** Or suppose that a man maliciously rescues the distressed person so as to plunge him into greater distress. There's surely no moral goodness in this action, but there is much malice and inhumanity.

**(c)** Suppose that a person, acting from real sympathy and humanity, rescues a distressed person at considerable expense or danger to himself: here is an action of real worth, which every heart approves and every tongue praises. But what are the features of it that give it that worth? They aren't features of the action considered by itself, because that was common to all the three—the mice, the sadist, and this benevolent hero. The worth lies in *the man* who on this

occasion acted as a good man should. He did what his heart approved, and therefore he is approved by God and man.

To summarize: if we distinguish •the goodness that can be ascribed to an action considered by itself from •the goodness that we ascribe to a man when he performs the action, we find a key to this metaphysical lock ·or, returning to the earlier metaphor, a way of untying this metaphysical knot·. We admit that the goodness of an action considered abstractly can't depend on the agent's belief-state, any more than the truth of a proposition can depend on our believing it to be true. But when a man exerts his active power well or badly, there is a moral goodness or baseness which we *figuratively* attribute to the action but which is truly and *literally* attributable only to the man; and this goodness or baseness depends very much on the man's intention and on what he believed about his action.

[Reid now has a paragraph saying that the distinction he is drawing has been understood 'in all ages by those who gave any attention to morals'. He gives Greek words for it, then Latin ones. Then:] In the scholastic ages an action good in itself was said to be *materially* good, and an action done with a right intention was called *formally* good. This last way of expressing the distinction is still familiar among theologians, but it seems that Hume •didn't attend to it or •thought it to be words without any meaning.

Hume tells us with great assurance: 'In short, it may be established as an undoubted maxim that no action can be virtuous or morally good unless there is in human nature some motive to produce it other than a sense of its morality' [again *Treatise* III.ii.1]. And this maxim is the basis for many of his reasonings on the subject of morals.

Does Hume's own system *require* that an action can't be produced merely from the sense of its morality, without any motive of agreeableness or usefulness? I shan't go into this

here. But if it does, and I think it's evident to every man of common understanding that

a judge or decision-maker acts most virtuously when his sentence is produced by no motive except a concern for justice and a good conscience, indeed when he has set aside all motives but this,

then Hume's 'undoubted maxim' must be false, and all the conclusions built on it must fall to the ground.

I think that two consequences for the theory of morals can be drawn from the principle I have tried to establish.

(1) If there is no virtue without the belief that what we do is right, it follows that a moral faculty—i.e. a power of detecting moral goodness and baseness in human conduct—is essential for any being to be capable of virtue or vice. A being who has no more conception of moral goodness and baseness, of right and wrong, than a blind man has of colours, can't have respect for it in his conduct and therefore can't be either virtuous or vicious.

He can have qualities that are agreeable or disagreeable, useful or harmful; so can a plant or a machine. And we sometimes use the word 'virtue' so broadly that it can signify any agreeable or useful quality, as when we speak of the 'virtues' of plants. But my present topic is *virtue* in the strict and literal sense of the word, in which it signifies the quality in a man that is the object of moral approval.

A man couldn't have this virtue unless he had a power of seeing right and wrong in human conduct and being influenced by what he sees. For he is virtuous only to the extent that he is guided in his conduct by that part of his constitution. Brutes [see Glossary] appear to have no such power, and therefore are not moral or accountable agents. They are capable of training and discipline, but not of virtuous or criminal conduct. Even human creatures in their early years are not moral agents, because their moral

faculty hasn't yet unfolded. These views are supported by the common sense of mankind, which has always held that neither brutes nor infants can be indicted for crimes.

It doesn't matter much *what* name we give to this moral power of the human mind; but it's such an important part of our constitution that it deserve to have some name of its own. The name *conscience* is the most common one, and it seems to me as proper as any other name that has been given to it. I have no objection to the name *moral sense*, though I think it has led to some mistakes about the nature of our moral power. Modern philosophers have thought of the external senses as having no role except giving us certain sensations or simple conceptions that we couldn't have without them; and this notion has been applied to the moral sense. But it seems to me to be a mistaken notion in both of those applications. By the sense of seeing I not only have the conception of the different colours but I see that one body has this colour and another has that. Similarly, by my moral sense I not only have the conceptions of right and wrong in conduct but I perceive that this conduct is right, that that conduct is wrong, and that this other is indifferent. All our senses are *judging* faculties, and so is conscience. And this power it not only a judge of our own actions and those of

others; it is also a principle [see Glossary] of action in all good men, and our conduct can be called 'virtuous' only to the extent that it is influenced by this principle.

(2) A second consequence of the principle laid down in this chapter is that the essential nature of the virtue that is the object of moral approval does not consist in

- a prudent pursuit of self-interest, or
- benevolent affections towards others, or
- qualities that are useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others, or
- sympathizing with the passions and affections of others, and getting our own conduct to harmonize with other men's passions.

Rather, it consists in living in all good conscience [Reid's phrase], i.e. •using the best means in our power to know our duty and •acting accordingly.

Prudence is a virtue, benevolence is a virtue, fortitude is a virtue; but the essential nature of virtue must lie in something that is common to all these and to every other virtue. And I don't think this can be anything but the rightness of such conduct and baseness of the contrary that a good man discerns. And he is virtuous just to the extent that he pursues what's right and avoids what's base.