Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume

[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.—-The 'volume' referred to at the outset contained the present work, the *Dissertation on the Passions* and the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which were all published together.]

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Section 8: Liberty and necessity

It might reasonably be expected, in questions that have been eagerly discussed and disputed since science and philosophy first began, that the disputants would at least have agreed on the meanings of all the terms, so that in the course of two thousand years we could get away from verbal disputes and come to the true and real subject of the controversy. Isn't it easy enough to give exact definitions of the terms used in reasoning, and then focus our attention on these definitions rather than on the mere sound of the words? But if we look more closely we'll be inclined to think that that's not what happens. From the mere fact that a controversy has kept going for a long time and is still undecided, we may presume that there is some ambiguity in how the disputants express themselves, and that they assign different ideas to the words used in the controversy. ·Here is the basis for this presumption·. The intellects of human beings are supposed to be naturally alike (and if they weren't, there would be no point in reasoning or disputing together); so if men attached the same ideas to the words they use, they couldn't go on for so long forming different opinions of the same subject—especially when they communicate their views to one another, and cast about in every direction for arguments that may give them the victory over their opponents. Admittedly, if men try to discuss questions that lie right outside the reach of human capacity, such as those concerning the origin of worlds, or the workings of the domain of spirits, they may for a long time beat the air in their fruitless contests, and never arrive at any definite conclusion. But when the question concerns any subject of common life and experience, the only thing that could keep the dispute alive for a long time is (one would think) some ambiguous expressions that keep the antagonists at a distance and prevent them from coming to grips with each other.

That's what has been happening in the long dispute about liberty and necessity. I think we shall find that all people—both learned and ignorant—have always have had the same view about liberty and necessity ·although they have differed in how they expressed it, and have thus seemed to be in disagreement·. I think that a few intelligible definitions would have immediately put an end to the whole controversy. This dispute has been so vigorous and widespread, and has led philosophers into such a labyrinth of obscure sophistry, that it would be understandable if a reader had the good sense to save himself trouble by refusing to listen to any side in a debate that he can't expect to find instructive or interesting. But perhaps he will return to it, given my account of how the debate stands: my account has more novelty ·than its predecessors·, promises at least some resolution of the controversy, and won't put him to much trouble by any intricate or obscure reasoning.

There is my project, then: to show that all men have always agreed about both *necessity* and *liberty*, when those terms are taken in any reasonable sense, and that the whole controversy until now has turned merely on words. I shall begin by examining the doctrine of necessity.

Everyone agrees that matter in all its operations is driven by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so exactly settled by the energy of its cause that in those particular circumstances no other effect could possibly have resulted from that cause. The laws of nature prescribe the speed and direction of every motion so exactly that the

collision of two bodies *has to* produce motion with precisely the speed and direction that it does in fact produce; it could no more have resulted in any other motion than it could have resulted in the formation of a living creature. So if we want to get a correct and precise idea of necessity, we must consider where that idea comes from when we apply it to the operation of bodies.

It seems obvious that if

> all the scenes of nature were continually changed in such a way that no two events bore any resemblance to each other, but every event was entirely new, without any likeness to whatever had been seen before,

we would never have acquired the slightest idea of necessity, or of a connection among these objects. We might then say that one object or event has *followed* another, but not that one was *produced by* the other. The relation of cause and effect would have to be utterly unknown to mankind. Inference and reasoning about the operations of nature would come to a halt; and memory and the senses would remain the only channels through which knowledge of any real existence could possibly have access to the mind. This shows that our idea of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity we observe in the operations of nature, where •similar items are constantly conjoined, and •the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. The necessity that we ascribe to matter consists only in those two—•the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and •the consequent *inference* from one to the other. Apart from these we have no notion of necessity or connection.

If it turns out that all mankind have always held, without any doubt or hesitation, that these two factors are present in the voluntary actions of men and in the operations of minds—·i.e. that like is followed by like, and that we are disposed to make inferences on that basis·—it follows that all mankind have always agreed in the doctrine of necessity, and have been disputing simply because they didn't understand each other.

Here are some points that may satisfy you concerning the constant and regular conjunction of similar events. Everyone acknowledges that there is much uniformity among the actions of men in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains the same in its forces and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions; the same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit—these passions, mixed in various proportions and distributed throughout society, are now (and from the beginning of the world always have been) the source of all the actions and projects that have ever been observed among mankind. Do you want to know the feelings, inclinations, and course of life of •the Greeks and Romans? Then study well the character and actions of •the French and English: you can't go far wrong in transferring to •the former most of your observations regarding •the latter. Mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange on this topic. The chief use of history is only to reveal the constant and universal principles of human nature by showing men in all kinds of circumstances and situations, and providing us with materials from which we can form our observations and become acquainted with the usual sources of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many sets of data that the political theorist or moral philosopher uses to fix the principles of his science; just as the natural scientist learns the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects by the tests he puts them through. •The earth, water, and other elements examined by Aristotle and Hippocrates don't

resemble those we find now any more closely than •the men described by Polybius and Tacitus resemble those who now govern the world.

If a traveller, returning from a distant country, were to bring us an account of men wholly different from any we have ever encountered—men with no trace of greed, ambition or vengefulness, knowing no pleasure except friendship, generosity, and public spirit—we would immediately spot the falsehood of his account, and would judge him to be a liar just as confidently as if he had filled his report with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies. And when we want to expose an historical document as a forgery, we can't make use of a more convincing argument than to show that the actions ascribed to some person in the document are directly contrary to the course of nature, and that no *human* motives in such circumstances could ever lead him to behave in that way. The veracity of Quintus Curtius is as suspect when he describes •the supernatural courage by which Alexander was hurried on to attack multitudes single-handed as it is when he describes •the supernatural force and activity by which Alexander was able to resist the multitudes. So readily and universally do we acknowledge a uniformity in human motives and actions, as well as in the operations of material things.

If we have a long life and a variety of business and social contacts with other people, that experience is beneficial in teaching us the ·general· principles of human nature, and guiding us in our future conduct as well as in our theory-building. Guided by this experience we infer *upwards* from men's actions, expressions, and even gestures to their inclinations and motives; and in the *downward* direction we interpret ·and predict· their actions on the basis of our knowledge of their motives and inclinations. The general observations that we store up through a lifetime's experience give us the clue to human nature and teach us to disentangle all its intricacies. Pretences and mere show no longer deceive us. Public declarations pass for the specious colouring of a cause [=, roughly, 'We take public declarations of politicians to be the work of spin-doctors']. And though we allow virtue and honour their due weight and authority, the *perfect unselfishness* that people so often lay claim to is something we never expect in multitudes and parties, seldom in their leaders, and not much even in individuals at any level in society. But if there were no uniformity in human actions, and if the outcomes of all the tests of these matters that we conducted were irregular and didn't fit any general patterns, we couldn't possibly assemble any general observations concerning mankind, and no experience, however thoughtfully pondered, would ever serve any purpose. ·To revert for a moment to the general point about the need for uniformities if there is to be understanding·: Why is the old farmer more skillful in his calling than the young beginner if not because there is a certain uniformity in how the operation of the sun, rain, and earth affects the production of plants, and experience teaches the old practitioner the rules by which this operation is governed and directed?

But we mustn't expect this uniformity of human actions to be so complete that all men in the same circumstances will always act in precisely the same way, for that wouldn't be allow for differences among characters, prejudices, and opinions. Such complete uniformity is never found in nature. On the contrary, from observing the variety of conduct in different men we are enabled to form a greater variety of generalizations, which still presuppose a degree of uniformity and regularity ·underlying the variety·.

•Does the behaviour of men differ in different ages and countries? That teaches us the power of custom and education, which mould the human mind from its infancy

and form it into a fixed and established character. •Is the conduct of the one sex very unlike that of the other? From that we learn the different characters that nature has given to the sexes and preserved in them with constancy and regularity. •Are the actions of one person very different in the different periods of his life from infancy to old age? This invites many general observations about the gradual change of our feelings and inclinations, and the different patterns that human creatures conform to at different ages. Even the characteristics that are special to each individual have a uniformity in their influence; otherwise our acquaintance with the individuals and our observation of their conduct could never teach us what their dispositions are or serve to direct our behaviour towards them.

I admit that we may encounter some actions that seem to have no regular connection with any known motives, and that are exceptions to all the patterns of conduct that have ever been established as governing human conduct. But if we want to know what to think about such irregular and extraordinary actions, we might consider the view that is commonly taken of irregular events that appear in the course of nature and in the operations of external objects. All causes are not conjoined to their usual effects with the same uniformity. A workman who handles only dead matter may be thwarted in what he is trying to do ·by something unexpected in the dead material he is working with·, just as a politician directing the conduct of thinking and feeling agents can be thwarted ·by something unexpected in the people he wants to control·.

Common people, who judge things by their first appearance, explain these unexpected outcomes in terms of an intrinsic uncertainty in the causes, a weakness that makes them often fail to have their usual effects even though there are no obstacles to their operation. But scientists, observing that in almost every part of nature there are vastly many different triggers and causes that are too small or too distant for us to find them, judge that it's *at least possible* that the contrariety of events comes not from any contingency in the cause—·i.e. the cause's being inherently liable to fail to produce the usual effect·—but from the secret operation of contrary causes. This *possibility* is converted into *certainty* when by further careful observation they discover that a contrariety of effects always reveals that there *was* indeed a contrariety of causes, and comes from their mutual opposition. A peasant can give no better reason for a clock's stopping than to say that it often does not go right; but a clock-maker easily sees that the same force in the spring or pendulum has always the same influence on the wheels, but ·in this one case· fails of its usual effect because a grain of dust (perhaps) has put a stop to the whole movement. From observing a number of parallel instances, scientists arrive at the maxim that the connection between all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances comes from the secret opposition of contrary causes.

In the human body, for instance, when the usual symptoms of health or sickness are not as we expect, when medicines don't operate with their usual effect, when some cause leads irregularly to different effects—the scientist and the physician aren't surprised by this, and are never tempted to deny the necessity and uniformity of the forces that govern the animal system. They know that a human body is a mighty complicated machine, that many secret powers lurk in it that we have no hope of understanding, that to us it must often appear very uncertain in its operations, and that therefore the irregular events that outwardly appear are not evidence that the laws of nature aren't observed with the greatest regularity in its internal operations and control

systems.

The scientist, if he is consistent, must apply the same reasoning to the actions and decisions of thinking agents. The most irregular and unexpected decisions of men may often be explained by those who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation. A normally obliging person gives an irritable answer; but he has toothache, or hasn't dined ·and is hungry·. A sluggish fellow reveals an unusual briskness in his step; but he has met with a sudden piece of good fortune. Sometimes a person acts in a way that neither he nor anyone else can explain; but we know in a general way that the characters of men are somewhat inconstant and irregular. This ·inconstancy· is, in a way, the constant character of human nature, though there is more of it in some persons who have no fixed rule for their conduct and frequently act in a capricious and inconstant manner. ·Even in these people· the internal forces and motives may operate in a uniform manner, despite these seeming irregularities; just as the winds, rain, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by unchanging forces, though our skill and hard work can't easily tell us what they are.

Thus it appears not only that •the relation of motives to voluntary actions is as regular and uniform as that of cause to effect in any part of nature, but also that •this regular relation has been universally acknowledged among mankind, and has never been the subject of dispute in science or in common life. Now, it is from past experience that we draw all our conclusions about the future, and ·in these inferences· we conclude that objects that we find to have always been conjoined will always be conjoined in the future; so it may seem superfluous to argue that the experienced uniformity of human actions is a source from which we infer conclusions concerning them. But I shall do so, though briefly, so as to show my over-all position from a different angle.

In all societies people depend so much on one another that hardly any human action is entirely complete in itself, or is performed without some reference to the actions of others that are needed if the action is to produce what the agent intends. The poorest workman, who labours alone, still expects at least the protection of the law to guarantee him the enjoyment of the fruits of his labour. He also expects that when he takes his goods to market, and offers them at a reasonable price, he will find buyers, and will be able through the money he earns to get others to supply him with what he needs for his subsistence. In proportion as a man's dealings with others are wide-ranging and complicated, to that extent his way of life involves a variety of voluntary actions ·by other people·—things people do from their own motives, but which he expects to co-operate with his motives. In arriving at these expectations he goes by past experience, in the same manner as in his reasonings about external objects; and he firmly believes that men, as well as all the kinds of stuff, will continue to behave in the ways that he has found them to do. A manufacturer relies on the labour of his employees for getting a job done, as much as he relies on the tools that he uses, and he would be equally surprised if either the men or the tools disappointed his expectations. In short, this empirical inference and reasoning about the actions of others enters so much into human life that every man is engaged in it at every waking moment. Isn't this a reason to affirm that all mankind have always agreed in the doctrine of necessity, according to my account of it?

Nor have philosophers ·or scientists· ever thought differently about this. Almost every *action* of their life presupposes the common people's opinion, which is also essential to most branches of *learning*. What would become of history if we didn't, on the basis of the experience we have had of

mankind, depend on the truthfulness of the historian? How could politics be a science if laws and forms of government didn't have a uniform influence on society? Where would the foundation of morals be if people's characters had no certain or determinate power to produce sentiments [here = 'feelings and opinions'], or if these sentiments had no constant effect on actions? And what could entitle us to pass critical judgment on any dramatic poet or author if we couldn't say whether the conduct and sentiments of his actors were natural for such characters in such circumstances? It seems almost impossible, therefore, to engage either in learning or in action of any kind without acknowledging •the doctrine of necessity, and •this *inference* from motives to voluntary actions, from characters to conduct.

And indeed, when we consider how aptly we can form a single chain of argument involving both •human nature and •other parts of the natural world, we shan't hesitate to agree that these are of the same nature and are derived from the same sources. A prisoner who has neither money nor influence can't escape, and he learns the impossibility of this as well when he considers •the obstinacy of the gaoler as when he considers •the walls and bars with which he is surrounded; and in trying to escape he chooses to work on •the stone and iron of the latter rather than on •the inflexible nature of the former. The same prisoner, when led to the scaffold, foresees his death as certainly from the constancy and fidelity of his guards as from the operation of the axe. His mind runs along a certain train of ideas:

> the refusal of the soldiers to consent to his escape;
> the action of the executioner;
> the separation of the head from the body;
> bleeding, convulsive motions, and death.

Here is a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions; but our mind feels no difference between them when it passes from one link to the next. And we are just as certain of the future event as we would be if we inferred it, from objects present to the memory or senses, through a sequence of causes linked by so-called *physical* necessity. The same experienced union has the same effect on the mind, whether the united objects are •motives, volitions, and actions or rather •shapes and movements. We may change the names of things, but their nature and how they operate on the understanding never change.

If an intimate friend of mine, whom I know to be honest and wealthy, comes into my house where I am surrounded by my servants, I rest assured that he isn't going to stab me before he leaves, in order to rob me of my silver ink-well; and I no more suspect such behaviour from him than I expect the collapse of the house itself which is new, solidly built, and well founded. ·You may object·: 'But he may have been seized with a sudden and unknown frenzy, ·in which case he *may* attack and rob you·.' I reply: A sudden earthquake *may* start up, and shake and tumble my house about my ears; ·so that the two possibilities are still on a par, though admittedly they are not examples of absolute certainty·. Very well, I shall change the examples. I shall say that I know with certainty that •my friend will not put his hand into the fire and hold it there until it is consumed; and I can foretell this with the same confidence as I can that •if my friend throws himself out of the window and meets with no obstruction he won't remain for a moment suspended in the air. No suspicion of an unknown frenzy can give the least possibility to the former event, which is so contrary to all the known principles of human nature. ·Here is another example, equally certain·. A man who at noon leaves his purse full of gold on the pavement of a busy street may as well expect that it will fly away like a feather as that he will find it still there an hour later! More

than half of human reasonings contain inferences like this, accompanied by varying degrees of certainty proportioned to our experience of the usual conduct of mankind in situations of the kind in question.

I have often wondered what could possibly be the reason why all mankind, though they have always unhesitatingly acknowledged in all their behaviour and reasoning that human conduct is governed by necessity, have nevertheless shown so much reluctance to acknowledge it in words, and have rather tended, all through the centuries, to proclaim the contrary opinion. Here is what I think may be the explanation. If we examine the operations of ·inanimate· bodies and the production ·in them· of effects from their causes, we shall find that our faculties can never give us more knowledge of this ·cause-effect· relation than merely to observe that particular objects are *constantly conjoined* together and that the mind is carried by a *customary transition* from the appearance of one to the expectation of the other. This conclusion concerning a limit on human knowledge is the result of the strictest scrutiny of this subject, ·which I have conducted·, and yet men are still very inclined to think that they penetrate further into the powers of nature and perceive something like a *necessary connection* between the cause and the effect. When they turn their reflections back towards the operations of their own minds, and *feel* no such connection between the motive and the action, they are inclined to infer that the effects arising from thought and intelligence are unlike those resulting from material force. But once •we are convinced that all we know of causation of *any* kind is merely the constant conjunction of objects and the consequent inference of the mind from one to the other, and •have grasped that these two circumstances—·the constant conjunction and the consequent inference·—are agreed by everyone to occur in voluntary actions, we may be more easily led to admit that the same necessity is common to all causes. And though this reasoning may contradict the systems of many philosophers by ascribing necessity to the decisions of the will, we shall find when we think about it that they disagree with it only in words and not in their real beliefs. Necessity, in the sense I have been giving the word, has never yet been rejected, and I don't think it ever could be rejected by any philosopher. Someone wanting to reject it would have to claim that the mind can perceive in the operations of matter some further *connection* between cause and effect, and that no such connection occurs in the voluntary actions of thinking beings. Now whether this is right or not can only appear on examination ·of the empirical facts·, and the onus is on these philosophers to justify their assertion by defining or describing that *connection* and pointing it out to us in the operations of material causes.

It would seem, indeed, that men begin at the wrong end of this question about liberty and necessity when they start in on it by examining the faculties of the mind, the influence of the understanding, and the operations of the will. They should at first investigate a simpler topic, namely the operations of body and of brute unthinking matter, and see whether they can *there* form any idea of causation and necessity except that of a constant conjunction of objects and a subsequent inference of the mind from one to the other. If these items—·the conjunction and the inference·—are really all there is to the necessity that we conceive in matter, and if they are also universally agreed to occur in the operations of the mind, the dispute is at an end; or if it continues, it should be admitted to be merely verbal. But as long as we rashly suppose that we have some further idea of necessity and causation in the operations of external objects, while finding nothing further in the voluntary actions of the mind, we can't possibly resolve the issue when we start

from such an erroneous supposition. The only way out of this error is to examine the narrow extent of our knowledge relating to material causes, and to convince ourselves that all we know of such causes is the constant conjunction and inference above-mentioned. It may be hard for us to accept that human understanding has such narrow limits; but we shall afterwards have no difficulty in applying this doctrine to the actions of the will. For as it is evident that these actions have a regular conjunction with motives and circumstances and characters, and as we always draw inferences from latter to the former, we ought to acknowledge *in words* the necessity that we have already avowed in every deliberation of our lives and in every step of our conduct and behaviour.

·START OF A BIG FOOTNOTE·

Another cause for the prevalence of the doctrine of liberty may be a false sensation or seeming experience that we have, or may have, of liberty or indifference in many of our actions. The *necessity* of any physical or mental action is not, strictly speaking, a quality in the agent; rather, it resides in the thinking or intelligent onlooker, and consists chiefly in the determination of the onlooker"s thoughts to infer the occurrence of that action from some preceding events; and liberty, when opposed to necessity, is nothing but the absence of that determination ·in the onlooker's thought· and a certain looseness or indifference which the onlooker feels in passing or not passing from the idea of one event to the idea of a following event. When we reflect on human actions ·as onlookers·, we seldom feel such a looseness or indifference, and can commonly infer with considerable certainty how people will act from their motives and dispositions; but it often happens that in performing the actions ourselves we are aware of something like it [= like that looseness and indifference]. And as we are prone to think, when one thing resembles another, that it *is* the other, this ·fact about experiencing something like the looseness and indifference mentioned above· has been treated as a perfect proof of human liberty. We feel that our actions are subject to our will on most occasions; and we *imagine* we feel that the will itself is not subject to anything. Here is why: When for purposes of argument we try it out, we feel that the will moves easily in every direction, and produces an image ·or likeness· of itself even on that side that it didn't decide in favour of. ·For example, I play with the question of whether to raise my right hand or my left, and raise my left, but I have the feeling that in doing this I performed a kind of image or shadow of a decision to raise my right·. We persuade ourselves that this image or faint motion could at that time have been completed into the thing itself—·for instance, into my raising my right hand·—because if anyone denied this ·and we wanted to challenge the denial· we would find upon a second trial that now it can ·lead to my raising my right hand·. We overlook the fact that in this case the motive for our actions is the fantastical desire to show that we are free. It seems certain that, even when we imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves, an onlooker can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he can't, he concludes in general that he could do so if he knew every circumstance of our situation and mood, and the most secret springs of our character and disposition. And *this* is the very essence of necessity, according to my doctrine.

·END OF THE BIG FOOTNOTE·

But to continue in this reconciling project regarding the question of liberty and necessity (which is the most contentious question in metaphysics), I shan't need many words to prove that •all mankind have always agreed about liberty as well as about necessity, and that •the whole dispute about liberty has been merely verbal. For what is meant by

'liberty' when the term is applied to voluntary actions? Surely we can't mean that actions have so little connection with motives, inclinations, and circumstances that the former don't follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the latter, and that motives etc. support no inference by which we can infer actions. For these—·the uniformity and the inference·—are plain and acknowledged matters of fact. By 'liberty', then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will; i.e. if we choose to stay still we may do so, and if we choose to move we may do that. This hypothetical liberty—·'hypothetical' because it concerns what we may do *if* we so choose·—is universally agreed to belong to everyone who isn't a prisoner and in chains. There's nothing to disagree about here.

Whatever definition we may give of 'liberty', we should be careful to ensure *first* that it is consistent with plain matter of fact, and *secondly* that it is consistent with itself. If we observe these two constraints, and make our definition intelligible, I am sure that all mankind will be found to have the same opinion about it.

Everyone agrees that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that 'chance' is a mere negative word that doesn't stand for any real power existing anywhere in nature. But it is claimed that some causes are necessary while others are not. Here then is the advantage of definitions. Let anyone define a 'cause' in such a way that 'a necessary connection with its effect' isn't included in the definition, and let him show clearly the origin of the idea expressed by his definition; and I shall readily give up the whole controversy! But if my account of causation is right, there's absolutely no chance of making and defending such a definition. If objects didn't have a regular conjunction with each other, we would never have had any notion of cause and effect; and this regular conjunction produces the inference of the understanding that is the only 'connection' we can understand. Whoever attempts a definition of 'cause' in terms of something other than regular conjunction and subsequent inference will be obliged to employ either unintelligible terms or ones that are synonymous with the term he is trying to define.[8]

And if the above-mentioned definition is accepted, a definition according to which liberty is contrasted not with *constraint* (·as in my definition·) but with *necessity*, liberty becomes equivalent to *chance*; and everyone agrees that there is no such thing as chance.

Part 2

There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than to try to refute a philosophical hypothesis by claiming that its consequences are dangerous to religion and morality. When an opinion leads to •absurdities, it's certainly false; but it isn't certain that an opinion is false because its consequences are •dangerous. That line of argument ought therefore to be avoided, because it doesn't contribute to the discovery of truth but merely makes one's antagonist personally odious. I offer this as a general observation, without claiming to draw any advantage from it. I frankly submit ·my views· to the dangerousness test, and shall venture to affirm that the doctrines of necessity and of liberty that I have presented are not only consistent with

[8] Thus, if a 'cause' is defined as 'that which produces anything', it is easy to see that producing is synonymous to causing. Similarly, if a 'cause' is defined as 'that *by* which a thing exists', this is open to the same objection. For what does the phrase '*by* which' mean? Had it been said that a cause is that *after* which anything constantly exists, we would have understood the terms. For this is indeed all we know of the matter. And this constancy forms the very essence of necessity, of which we have no other idea but that.

morality but are absolutely essential to its support.

Necessity can be defined in either of two ways, corresponding to the two definitions of *cause*, of which necessity is an essential part. Necessity consists either in •the constant conjunction of similar objects, or in •the inference of the understanding from one object to another. Now, it has silently been agreed—in the universities, in the pulpit, and in common life—that the will of man is subject to necessity in each of these senses (which in fact are basically the same). Nobody has ever claimed to deny that •we can draw inferences concerning human actions, or that those inferences are founded on •the experienced union of similar actions with similar motives, inclinations, and circumstances. There are only two ways in which someone might disagree about this. **(1)** He might refuse to give the name 'necessity' to this property of human actions; but as long as the meaning is understood, I hope the word can do no harm. **(2)** Or he might maintain that we could discover in the operations of matter something further ·than the constant conjunction and the inference that I have said constitute the idea of necessity·. But it must be admitted that such a discovery—·because it concerns only the material world·—cannot imply anything for morality or religion, whatever it may mean for natural science or metaphysics. I may have been mistaken in asserting that there is no idea of any other necessity or connection in the actions of *body* ·apart from constant conjunction and inference·—but what I have ascribed to the actions of the mind is surely only what everyone does and must readily agree to. My views about *material* objects and causes do conflict somewhat with what is generally believed, but my views about *the will* do not. So my doctrine can at least claim to be utterly innocent.

All laws are founded on rewards and punishments, which are based on assuming as a fundamental principle that rewards and punishments have a regular and uniform influence on the mind, producing good actions and preventing evil ones. We may call this influence anything we like; but as it is usually conjoined with the action it must be regarded as a *cause*, and as being an instance of the kind of necessity that I have been presenting.

The only proper object of hatred or vengeance is a person or creature that thinks and is conscious; and when any criminal or injurious *actions* arouse that passion, it is only by their connection to the *person* whose actions they are. Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and when they don't come from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither bring him credit (if they are good) or discredit (if they are bad). Even if •the actions themselves are blameable—even if they are contrary to all the rules of morality and religion—•the person isn't responsible for them, and can't possibly become, on account of them, the object of punishment or vengeance, because they didn't come from anything in him that is durable and constant ·as his *character* is·, and they leave nothing durable and constant behind them ·in him·. So according to the principle that denies necessity, and consequently denies causes ·in human behaviour·, a man who has committed the most dreadful crime is as pure and untainted as a newborn baby. His character is in no way involved in his actions, since they aren't caused by it; and the wickedness of the actions never be used as a proof of the depravity of the character.

•Men are *not blamed* for actions that they perform ignorantly and casually, whatever their consequences are. Why is this, if not because the principle of such an action is only momentary, ending when the action ends? •Men are *less blamed* for actions that they perform hastily and without premeditation than they are for ones that come

from deliberation. Why is this, if not because a rash or hasty cast of mind, even if it is a constant cause or force in the mind, operates only at intervals and doesn't infect the whole character? •Repentance wipes off every crime if it is accompanied by a reform of life and manners. What can account for this, if not the thesis that actions make a person criminal only insofar as they show that he has criminal drives in the mind; and when these drives change ·through his repentance·, his actions no longer show what they used to show, and so they cease to be criminal? But it's only upon the doctrine of ·the· necessity ·of human actions· that they ever did show anything about his mind; so without that doctrine they show nothing, and consequently never were criminal.

It is equally easy to prove by the same arguments that liberty—understood according to my definition, in which all men agree—is also essential to morality, and that no human actions in the absence of such liberty are capable of having any moral qualities, or can be the objects either of approval or disapproval. For actions are objects of our moral sentiment [= 'feeling' or 'opinion'] only insofar as they indicate the internal character, passions, and affections; so they can't possibly attract either praise or blame when they come not from those sources but only from external force.

I don't claim to have met or removed all objections to my theory about necessity and liberty. I can foresee other objections, derived from lines of thought that I haven't here discussed. For instance, this may be said:

> If voluntary actions fall under the same laws of necessity as the operations of matter, there is a continuous chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from •the original cause of everything through to •every single volition of every human creature. No contingency anywhere in the universe, no indifference [= no cases where either P or not-P could come true], no liberty. When we *act* we at the same time *are acted on*. The ultimate author of all our volitions is God, who first set this immense machine in motion and placed everything in it in a particular position, so that every subsequent event had to occur as it did, through an inevitable necessity. Human actions, therefore, cannot be morally wicked when they come ·inevitably· from so good a cause; or if there is anything wrong in them, God must share the guilt because he is the ultimate cause and author of our actions. A man who sets off an explosion is responsible for all the explosion's consequences, whether the fuse he employs is long or short; and in the same way when a continuous chain of necessary causes is fixed, whoever produces the first item in the chain is equally the author of all the rest, and must both bear the blame and win the praise that belong to them; and this holds whether the being in question is finite or (like God) infinite. Our clear and unalterable ideas of morality give us unquestionable reasons for applying this rule when considering the consequences of any human action; and these reasons must be even stronger when applied to the volitions and intentions of an infinitely wise and powerful being ·such as God·. When it concerns such a limited a creature as man, we may plead ignorance or impotence ·in his defence·, but God doesn't have those imperfections. He foresaw, he ordained, he intended all those actions of men that we so rashly judge to be criminal. So we have to conclude either •that those actions are not criminal, or •that God and not man is accountable for them. But each of these positions is absurd and impious; so it follows that the doctrine from which they are deduced

> can't possibly be true, because it is open to all the same objections. If a doctrine necessarily implies something that is absurd, the doctrine itself is absurd; in the same way that an action that necessarily and inevitably leads to a criminal action is itself criminal.

This objection consists of two parts, which I shall examine separately. **(1)** If human actions can be traced up by a necessary chain to God, they can never be criminal; on account of the infinite perfection of the being from whom they are derived, and who can intend only what is altogether good and praiseworthy. **(2)** If they are criminal, we must conclude that God isn't perfect after all, and must accept that he is the ultimate author of guilt and moral wickedness in all his creatures.

(1) The answer to the first objection seems obvious and convincing. There are many philosophers who, after carefully surveying all the phenomena of nature, conclude that the whole universe, considered as one system, is at every moment ordered with perfect benevolence; and that the greatest possible happiness will in the end come to all created beings, not tainted by any positive or absolute ill and misery. ·Here is how they reconcile this with the existence of physical ills, such as earthquakes, plagues, and so on·. Every physical ill, they say, is an essential part of this benevolent system, and could not possibly be removed—even by God himself, considered as a wise agent—without letting in some greater ill or excluding some greater good that will result from the removed ill. From this theory some philosophers (including the ancient Stoics) derived a theme of *comfort under all afflictions*, teaching their pupils that the •ills under which they laboured were really •goods to the universe; and that if we could grasp the system of nature as a whole we would find that every event was an object of joy and exultation. But though this theme is high-minded and superficially attractive, it was soon found in practice to be weak and ineffectual. You would surely irritate rather than comfort a man racked by the pains of gout by preaching to him the rightness of the general laws that produced the poisoned fluids in his body and led them through the proper canals to the sinews and nerves, where they now arouse such acute torments! These 'grasping-the-whole' views of nature may *briefly* please the imagination of a theorizing man who is secure and at ease; but they can't stay *for long* in his mind, even when he isn't disturbed by the emotions of pain or passion; still less can they maintain their ground when attacked by such powerful antagonists ·as pain and passion·. Our feelings ·aren't affected by surveys of the entire universe; they· take a narrower and more natural view of things, and—in a manner more suitable for the infirmity of human minds—take account only of nearby beings around us and respond to events according as they appear good or ill *to us*.

The case is the same with •moral as with •physical ills. It can't reasonably be supposed that those remote considerations that are found to have so little effect with regard to •the latter will have a more powerful influence with regard to •the former. The mind of man is so formed by nature that when it encounters certain characters, dispositions, and actions it immediately feels the sentiment of approval or blame. (No emotions are more essential to the human constitution than those two.) The characters that arouse our approval are chiefly those that contribute to the peace and security of human society; and the characters that arouse blame are chiefly those that tend to public detriment and disturbance. This makes it reasonable to suppose that the moral sentiments arise, either immediately or through an intermediary, from a reflection on these opposite interests—·namely, public welfare and public harm·. Philosophical meditations may lead to a different opinion or conjecture, namely:

> everything is right with regard to the whole system, and the qualities that disturb society are in the main as beneficial and as suitable to the primary intention of nature as are those that more directly promote society's happiness and welfare;

but what of it? Are such remote and uncertain speculations able to counterbalance the sentiments arising from the natural and immediate view of the objects ·on which judgment is passed·? When a man is robbed of a considerable sum of money, will his *vexation over his loss* be lessened in the slightest by these lofty reflections ·about the good of the whole·? ·Clearly not!· Why then should his moral *resentment against the crime* be supposed to be incompatible with those reflections? Indeed, why shouldn't the acknowledgment of a real distinction between •vice and •virtue be consistent with all philosophical systems, as is the acknowledgment of a real distinction between •personal beauty and •ugliness? Both these distinctions are grounded in the natural sentiments of the human mind; and these sentiments can't be controlled or altered by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever.

(2) The second objection can't be answered so easily or satisfactorily: it isn't possible to explain clearly how God can be the ultimate cause of all the actions of men without being the author of sin and moral wickedness. These are mysteries which mere natural reason—not assisted by divine revelation—is unfit to handle; and whatever system reason embraces, it must find itself involved in inextricable difficulties and even contradictions at every step it takes with regard to such subjects. It has so far been found to be beyond the powers of philosophy to reconcile •the indifference and contingency of human actions (·so that men could have acted differently from how they did act·) with •God's foreknowledge of them, or to defend God's absolute decrees and yet clear him of the accusation that he is the author of sin. It will be a good thing if these difficulties make philosophy aware of her rashness in prying into these sublime mysteries, and get her to leave this scene which is so full of obscurities and perplexities, and return with suitable modesty to her true and proper province, which is the examination of common life. She will find there difficulties enough to keep her busy, without launching into such a boundless ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction!