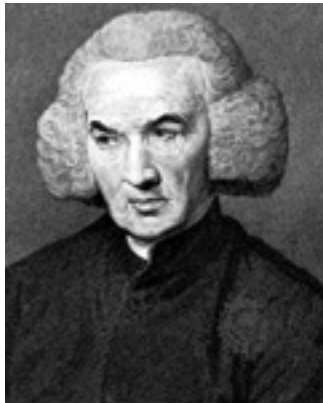


“How Do We Know What’s Right?” by Richard Price

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Richard Price. Engraving by T. Holloway after a painting by Benjamin West. (Wikipedia)

About the author . . .

Richard Price (1723—1791), born in Wales, served as a chaplain in several Unitarian congregations, including Newington Green. His writings are influential not only in philosophy but also in mathematics, religion, finance, and politics. Price’s political pamphlets offered such strong support for the American colonies that the Continental Congress invited his advice on state financing. He formed strong friendships with such diverse personalities as Mary Wollstonecraft, Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestly (discoverer of oxygen), Thomas Bayes (innovator in probability theory) and David Hume. Interestingly, many of these friendships were initiated and fueled by his constructive criticisms of their works.

About the work...

In his *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*,¹ Richard Price argues that moral principles, just like the principles of geometry, are universally, necessarily, and eternally true. He believes ideas of right and wrong originate in the understanding; indeed, Price anticipates not only Kant’s recognition of the origin of ideas of judgment and comparison—whereby reason discriminates among moral ideas, and reason alone is a sufficient basis for action, but also W. D. Ross’s deontological ethics or rational intuitionism—whereby morality is objective, and this objectivity is evaluative knowledge not empirically confirmable.

Price concludes ideas of right and wrong are simple ideas intuitively discriminated by the understanding since they cannot be defined more simply or even defined in different terms. For him, right and wrong are objective properties of actions, and as characteristics of actions, right and wrong are not subjectively dependent upon sensations arising from the nature of our minds. Just as rightness and wrongness are characteristics of behavior, so also mass and solidity are characteristics of natural objects. In both cases, these kinds of facts are not known through observation but rather by means of reason as one aspect of the faculty of the human understanding. Through introspection, Price concludes the source of the moral ideas of right and wrong is an intuition of the nature of things. In this manner, we can objectively perceive what is right and wrong in the world. Hence, Price rejects ethical naturalism, the view that ethical terms are ultimately definable in the empirical terms of the natural sciences. In this, he anticipates G. E. Moore’s discussion of the naturalistic fallacy in *Principia Ethica* that ethical concepts must be defined in terms of nonnatural properties.

Finally, Price opposes the divine command theory that actions are right only for the reason of God’s commanding them. Price argues if the divine command theory were true, then we would have to conclude there would be no reason for God to command what He does.

From the reading...

“What is the power within us that perceives the distinctions of *right* and *wrong*? My answer is: the UNDERSTANDING.”

1. Richard Price, *Review of the Principal Questions of Morals* 3rd. ed. (London: T. Cadell in the Strand, 1787), 8-79 passim.

Ideas of Interest from *Review of the Principal Questions of Morals*

1. Why doesn’t Price think that it is possible for a particular faculty of sense to examine, compare and evaluate sensations?
2. How does Price distinguish the faculty of sense from the faculty of understanding? Explain Price’s use of the terms “sense” and “understanding.”
3. On what basis does Price conclude that our ideas of right and wrong are simple ideas? What is the naturalistic fallacy? How does his argument avoid the naturalistic fallacy?
4. Explain and give an example of what Price means when he writes, “[T]he understanding is a power of immediate perception, which gives rise to new original ideas.” How does Price define intuition? Next, explain why Price believes some of our ideas do not originate entirely from the faculties of sense or understanding.
5. According to Price, what is the source of the mistake of concluding that our ideas of right and wrong are ideas of sense? Why is this mistake such a serious error? According to Price, what is the role of emotion in the making of ethical judgments?
6. Price points out sensations are distinct from their causes. In this regard, what is the analogy Price draws between the origin of our ethical ideas and the origin of the the secondary qualities of physical objects?
7. Explain what this conclusion drawn by Price means: “[N]othing is more common than for men to mistake their own sensations for the properties of the objects producing them, or to apply, to the object itself, what they find always accompanying it, whenever observed.” Explain the mistake in terms of the concepts of primary and secondary ideas.
8. What are Price’s three arguments against Hume’s claim that “[A]ll our ideas are either impressions or copies of impressions”: the first, a *reductio ad absurdum*, the second, a common sense inquiry into the kinds of impressions, and the third, right and wrong as the necessary nature of some actions.
9. According to Price, upon what basis can the principles of ethics be absolutely founded? What is his argument that the creation of law or the making of a promise is not an exception to the doctrine of ethical absolutism?
10. How does Price seek to prove that the source of ethical principles is not God, or even civil authority? According to Price, why can’t the will of

God determine what is good or bad for human conduct?

The Reading Selection from *Review of the Principal Questions of Morals*

The Question Stated Concerning the Foundation of Morals

Some actions we all feel ourselves irresistibly determined to approve, and others to disapprove. Some actions we cannot but think *right*, and others *wrong*, and of all actions we are led to from some opinion, as either *fit* to be performed or *unfit*; or neither fit nor unfit to be performed; that is, *indifferent*. What the power within us is, which thus determines, is the question to be considered. . . .

The present enquiry therefore is; whether this be a true account of virtue or not; whether it *has* or has *not* a foundation in the *nature* of its object; whether *right* and *wrong* are real characters of *actions*, or only qualities of our *minds*; whether, in short, they denote what actions *are*, or only *sensations* derived from the particular frame and structure of our natures. . . .

From the reading. . .

“The power, I assert, that *understands*, or the faculty within us that discerns *truth*, and that compares all the objects of thought, and *judges* of them, is a spring of new ideas.”

Having premised these observations; the question now returns—What is the power within us that perceives the distinctions of *right* and *wrong*?

My answer is. The Understanding.

In order to prove this, it is necessary to enter into a particular enquiry into the origin of our ideas in general, and the distinct provinces of the *understanding* and of *sense*.

Of the Origin of Our Ideas in General

SENSATION and REFLECTION have been commonly reckoned the sources

of all our ideas: and Mr. *Locke* has taken no small pains to prove this. . . . It is hard to determine exactly what he meant by *sensation* and *reflection*. If by the former we understand, the effects arising from the impressions made on our minds by external objects; and by the latter, the notice the mind takes of its own operations; it will be impossible to derive some of the most important of our ideas from them. . . .

The power, I assert, that *understands*; or the faculty within us that discerns *truth* and that compares all the objects of thought, and judges of them, is a spring of new ideas.

If by the former we understand, the effects arising from the impressions made on our minds by external objects; and by the latter, the notice the mind takes of its own operations; it will be impossible to derive some of the most important of our ideas from them. . . .

As, perhaps, this has not been enough attended to, and as the question to be discussed, is; whether our *moral ideas* are derived from the *understanding* or from *sense*; it will be necessary to state distinctly the different natures and provinces of sense and reason.

To this purpose we may observe, first, that the power which judges of the perceptions of the senses, and contradicts their decisions; which discovers the nature of the sensible qualities of objects, enquires into their causes, and distinguishes between what is real and what is not real in them, must be a power within us which is superior to sense.

Again, it is plain that one sense cannot judge of the objects of another; the eye, for instance, of harmony, or the ear of colours. The faculty therefore which views and compares the objects of all the senses, cannot be sense. When, for instance, we consider sound and colour together, we observe in them *essence, number, identity, diversity, &c.* and determine their reality to consist, not in being properties of *external substances*, but in being modifications of our *souls*. The power which takes cognizance of all this, and gives rise to these notions, must be a power capable of subjecting all things alike to its inspection, and of acquainting itself with necessary truth and existence.

Sense consists in the obtruding of certain impressions upon us, independently of our wills; but it cannot perceive what they are, or whence they are derived. It lies prostrate under its object, and is only a capacity in the soul of having its own state altered by the influence of particular causes. It must therefore remain a stranger to the objects and causes affecting it. . . .

Sense presents *particular* forms to the mind; but cannot rise to any *general ideas*. It is the faculty of intellect that examines and compares the presented forms, that rises above individuals to universal and abstract ideas; and thus looks downward upon objects, takes in at one view an infinity of particulars, and is capable of discovering general truths.—Sense sees only the *outside* of things, reason acquaints itself with their *natures*.—Sensation is only a

mode of feeling in the mind; but knowledge implies an active and vital energy of the mind. Feeling pain, for example, is the effect of sense; but the understanding is employed when pain itself is made an object of the mind’s reflexion, or held up before it, in order to discover its nature and causes. Mere sense can perceive nothing in the most exquisite work of art; suppose a plant, or the body of an animal; but what is painted in the eye, or what might be described on paper. It is the intellect that must perceive in it order and proportion; variety and regularity; design, connection, art, and power; aptitudes, dependencies, correspondences, and adjustment of parts so as to subserve an end, and compose one perfect whole; things which can never be represented on a sensible organ, and the ideas of which cannot be passively communicated, or stamped on the mind by the operation of external objects.—Sense cannot perceive any of the modes of thinking beings; these can be discovered only by the mind’s survey of itself.

In a word, it appears that *sense* and *understanding* are faculties of the soul totally different: The one being conversant only about *particulars*; the other about *universals*: The one not *discerning*; but *suffering*; the other not *suffering*, but *discerning*; and signifying the soul’s *Power* of surveying and examining all things, in order to judge of them . . .

From the reading . . .

“[T]he understanding is a power of immediate perception, which gives rise to new original ideas . . .”

[T]hose . . . who will allow no other source of our knowledge of matter and motion, than *experience*; or the information conveyed to the mind through the senses, would do well to consider, whether the three axioms (or laws of motion) on which Sir *Isaac Newton* founds his philosophy, are not entirely without evidence and meaning.—What is it acquaints us, that every body will for ever continue in the state of rest or motion it is in, unless something produces an alteration of that state; that every alteration of its motion must be proportional to the force impressed, and in the same line of direction, and that its action upon another body, and the action of that other upon it, are always equal and contrary? In other words; what furnishes us with our ideas of resistance and inactivity?—Not *experience*: for never did any man yet see any portion of matter that was void of *gravity*, and many other active powers; or that would not immediately quit its state of rest, and begin to move; and also *lose* or *acquire* motion after the impressing of new force upon it, without any *visible* or *discoverable* cause. Ideas so contradictory to sense cannot be derived from it. They must therefore be ascribed to a higher origin.

But though we would suppose them the objects of constant *experience*, as

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well as the perceptions of *reason*, yet, as discovered by the former, they must be very different from what they are, as apprehended by the latter. Though, for instance, *experience* and observation taught us always, that the alteration of motion in a body is proportional to the impressed force, and made in the line of direction in which this force acts; yet they can teach us this but very imperfectly: they cannot inform us of it with precision and exactness. They can only shew us, that it is so *nearly*; which, strictly speaking, is the same with not being so at all. The eye of sense is blunt. The conceptions of the imagination are rude and gross, falling infinitely short of that certainty, accuracy, universality, and clearness, which belong to intellectual discernment.

...



Richard Price’s Unitarian Chapel, Newington Green. Members of his congregation included Mary Wollstonecraft and John Adams. (Fin Fahey, Wikipedia)

First ... [e]very perception being the perception of something, implies some kind of *reality* distinct from and independent of itself; nothing being more grossly absurd, than to suppose the perception, or apprehension of a thing, to be the same with the thing itself. It would be as good sense to suppose examination, the same with the subject examined; the eye, the same with visible objects; memory, the same with the fact remembered; or desire, the same with the object desired. And yet this absurdity seems to be *foundation* of a system of scepticism which has been lately taught the world.

Of the Origin of Our Ideas of Moral Right and Wrong

LET us now return to our first enquiry, and apply the foregoing observations to our ideas of *right* and *wrong* in particular.

’Tis a very necessary previous observation, that our ideas of *right* and *wrong* are simple ideas, and must therefore be ascribed to some power of *immediate* perception in the human mind. He that doubts this, need only try to give definitions of them, which shall amount to more than synonymous expressions. Most of the confusion in which the question concerning the foundation of morals has been involved has proceeded from inattention to this remark. There are, undoubtedly, some actions that are *ultimately* approved, and for justifying which no reason can be assigned; as there are some ends, which are *ultimately* defined, and for choosing which no reason can be given. Were not this true; there would be an infinite progression of reasons and ends, and therefore nothing could be at all approved or desired.

From the reading...

“ All sensations, as such, are modes of consciousness, or feelings of a sentient being, which must be of a nature totally different from the particular causes which produce them. A *coloured body*, if we speak accurately, is the same absurdity with a *square sound*. ”

Supposing then, that we have a power *immediately* perceiving right and wrong: the point I am now to endeavour to prove, is, that this power is the *Understanding*, agreeably to the assertion at the end of the *first* section. I cannot but flatter myself, that the main obstacle to the acknowledgment of this, has been already removed, by the observations made in the preceding section, to shew that the understanding is a power of immediate perception, which gives rise to new original ideas; nor do I think it possible that there should have been many disputes on this subject had this been properly considered. . . .

As there are some propositions, which, when attended to, necessarily determine all minds to *believe* them: And as (which will be shewn hereafter) there are some ends, whose natures are such, that, when perceived, all beings immediately and necessarily *desire* them: So is it very credible, that, in like manner, there are some actions whose natures are such, that, when observed, all rational beings immediately and necessarily *approve* them. . . .

I do not at all care what follows from Mr. *Hume*’s assertion, that all our ideas are either *impressions*, or *copies of impressions* or from Mr. *Locke*’s assertion that they are all *deducible from SENSATION and REFLECTION*. The first

of these assertions is, I think, destitute of all proof; it supposes when applied in this as well as many other cases, the point in question; and, when pursued to its consequences, ends in the destruction of all truth and the subversion of our intellectual faculties. The other wants much explication to render it consistent with any tolerable account of the original or our moral ideas . . .

Were the question, what that perception is, which we have of number, diversity, causation or proportion; and whether our ideas of them signify truth and reality perceived by the understanding, or impression made by the objects to which we ascribe them, on our minds; were, I say, this the question, would it not be sufficient to appeal to every man’s consciousness? These perceptions seem to me to have no greater pretence to be denominated perceptions of the understanding, than *right* and *wrong*.

It is true, some impression of pleasure or pain, satisfaction or disgust, generally attend our perceptions of virtue and vice. But these are merely their effects and concomitants, and not the perceptions themselves, which ought no more to be confounded with them than a particular truth . . . ought to be confounded with the pleasure that may attend the discovery of it. Some emotion or other accompanies, perhaps all our perceptions; but more remarkably our perceptions of right and wrong. And this is what has led to the mistake of making them to signify nothing but impressions, which error some have extended to all objects of knowledge; and thus have been led into an extravagant and monstrous scepticism.

[L]et any one compare the ideas arising from our *powers of sensation*, with those arising from our *intuition* of the natures of things, and enquire which of them his ideas of right and wrong most resemble. On the issue of such a comparison may we safely rest this question. It is scarcely conceivable that any one can impartially attend to the nature of his own perceptions, and determine that, when he thinks gratitude or beneficence to be *right*, he perceives nothing *true* of them, and *understands* nothing, but only receives an impression from a *sense*. Was it possible for a person to question, whether his idea of *equality* was gained from sense or intelligence; he might soon be convinced, by considering, whether he is not sure, that certain lines or figures are *really* equal, and that their equality must be perceived by all minds, as soon as the objects themselves are perceived.—In the same manner may we satisfy ourselves concerning the origin of the idea of *right*: For have we not a like consciousness, that we discern the one, as well as the other, *in* certain objects? Upon what possible grounds can we pronounce the one to be *sense*, and the other *reason*? Would not a Being purely intelligent, having happiness within his reach, *approve* of securing it for himself? . . .

It would, I doubt, be to little purpose to plead further here, the natural and universal apprehensions of mankind, that our ideas of right and wrong belong to the understanding, and denote real characters of actions; because it will be easy to reply, that they have a like opinion of *sensible* qualities of

bodies; and that nothing is more common than for men to mistake their own sensations for the properties of the objects producing them, or to apply to the object itself, what they find always accompanying it, whenever observed. Let it therefore be observed . . . [t]hat if right and wrong denote effects of sensation, it must imply the greatest absurdity to suppose them applicable to actions: That is; the ideas of *right* and *wrong* and of *action*, must in this case be incompatible; as much so, as the idea of pleasure and a regular form, or of pain and the collisions of bodies.—All sensations, as such, are modes of consciousness, or feelings of a sentient being, which must be of a nature totally different from the particular causes which produce them. A *coloured body*, if we speak accurately, is the same absurdity with a *square sound*. We need no experiments to prove that heat, cold, colours, tastes, &c. are not real qualities of bodies; because the ideas of matter and of therefore qualities, are incompatible.—But is there indeed any such incompatibility between *actions* and *right*? Or any such absurdity in affirming the one of the other?—Are the ideas of them as different as the idea of a sensation, and its cause ?

On the contrary; the more we enquire, the more indisputable, I imagine, it will appear to us, that we express necessary truth, when we say of some actions, they are right; and of others, they are wrong. Some of the most careful enquirers think thus, and find it out of their power not to be persuaded that these are real distinctions belonging to the natures of actions. Can it be so difficult, to distinguish between the ideas of sensibility and reason; between the *intuitions of truth* and the *passions of the mind*? Is that a scheme of morals we can be very fond of, which makes our perceptions of moral good and evil in actions and manners, to be all vision and fancy? Who can help seeing, that right and wrong are as absolutely unintelligible, and void of sense and meaning, when supposed to signify nothing true of actions, no essential, inherent difference between them; as the perceptions of the external and internal senses are, when thought to be properties of the objects that produce them?

How strange would it be to maintain, that there is no possibility of *mistaking* with respect to right and wrong; that the apprehensions of all beings, on this subject, are alike just, since all sensation must be alike *true* sensation?—Is there a greater absurdity, than to suppose, that the *moral rectitude* of an action is nothing absolute and unvarying; but capable, like all the modifications of pleasure and pain, of being intended and remitted, of increasing and lessening, of rising and sinking with the force and liveliness of our feelings? Would it be less ridiculous to suppose this of the relations between given quantities, of the equality of numbers, or the figure of bodies?

From the reading...

“ [I]f no actions are, *in themselves* either right or wrong, or any thing of a moral and obligatory nature, which can be an object to the understanding; it follow that, in themselves, they are all indifferent. ”

In the last place; let it be considered, that all actions, undoubtedly, have a *nature*. That is, *some character* certainly belongs to them, and somewhat there is to be *truly* affirmed of them. This may be, that some of them are right, others wrong. But if this is not allowed; if no actions are, *in themselves*, either right or wrong, or any thing of a moral and obligatory nature, which can be an object to the understanding; it follows, that, in themselves, they *are* all indifferent. This is what is essentially true of them, and this is what all understandings, that perceive right, must perceive them to be. But are we not conscious, that we perceive the contrary? And have we not as much reason to believe the contrary, as to believe or truth at all our own discernment? . . .

In other words; every thing having a *nature* or *essence*, from whence such and such truths concerning it necessarily result, and which it is the proper province of the understanding to perceive; it follows, that nothing whatever can be exempted from its inspection and sentence, and that of every thought, sentiment, and subject, it is the natural and ultimate judge. *Actions*, therefore, *ends* and *events* are within its province. Of these, as well as all other objects, it belongs to it to judge.—What is this judgment?—One would think it impossible for any person, without some hesitation and reluctance, to reply; that the judgment he forms of them is this; that they are all essentially *indifferent*, and that there is no one thing fitter to be done than another. If this judging truly; how obvious is it to infer, that it signifies not what we do; and that the determination to think otherwise, is an imposition upon rational creatures. Why then should they not labour to suppress in themselves this determination, and to extirpate from their natures all the delusive ideas of morality, worth, and virtue? What though the ruin of the world should follow?—There would be nothing *really* wrong in this.

A rational agent void of all moral judgment, incapable of perceiving a difference, in respect of fitness and unfitness to be performed, between actions, and acting from blind propensions without any sentiments concerning what he does, is not possible to be imagined. And, do what we will, we shall find it out of our power, in earnest to persuade ourselves, that reason can have no concern in judging of and directing our conduct; or to exclude from our minds all notions of right and wrong in actions.

In short; it seems sufficient to overthrow any scheme, that such consequences, as the following, should arise from it:—That no one being can judge one end to be better than another, or believe a real moral difference between actions;

without giving his assent to an impossibility; without mistaking the *affections* of his own mind for *truth* and *sensation* for *knowledge*.—That there being nothing intrinsically proper or improper, just or unjust; there is nothing *obligatory*; but all beings enjoy, from the reasons of things and the nature of actions, liberty to act as they will.

The following important corollary arises from these arguments:

That morality is *eternal and immutable*.

From the reading...

“ No will, therefore can render *any thing* good and obligatory, which was not so antecedently, and from eternity ... ”

Right and wrong, it appears, denote what actions *are*. Now whatever any thing is, that it is, not by will, or decree, or power, but by *nature and necessity*. Whatever a triangle or circle is, that it is unchangeably and eternally. It depends upon no will or power, whether the three angles of a triangle and two right ones shall be *equal*; whether the periphery of a circle and its diameter shall be *incommensurable*; or whether matter shall be *divisible, moveable, passive, and inert*. Every object of the understanding has an indivisible and invariable essence; from whence arise its properties, and numberless truths concerning it. Omnipotence does not consist in a power to alter the nature of things, and to destroy necessary truth (for this is contradictory, and would infer the destruction of all wisdom, and knowledge) but in an absolute command over all *particular, external* existences, to create or destroy them, or produce any possible changes among them.—The natures of things then being immutable; whatever we suppose the natures of actions to be, they must be immutably. If they are indifferent, this indifference is itself immutable, and there neither is nor can be any one thing that, *in reality*, we *ought* to do rather than another. The same is to be said of right and wrong, of moral good and evil, as far as they express real *characters* of actions. They, must immutably and necessarily belong to those actions of which they are *truly* affirmed.

[Is Morality Based on God’s Will?]

No will, therefore, can render *any thing* good and obligatory, which was not so antecedently, and from eternity; or any action right, that is not so in itself; meaning by *action*, not the bare external effect produced, but the ultimate principle of conduct, or the determination of a reasonable being, considered as arising from the perception of some motives and reasons and intended for

some end. According to this sense of the word *action*, whenever the principle from which we act is different, the action is different, though the external effects produced, may be the same. If we attend to this, the meaning and truth of what I have just observed, will be easily seen.—Put the case of any action, the performance of which is *indifferent*, or attended with no circumstances of the agent that render it better or fitter to be done than omitted. Is it not plain that, *while all things continue the same*, it is as impossible for any will or power to make acting obligatory here, as it is for them to make two equal things unequal without producing any change in either? It is true, the doing of any indifferent thing may become obligatory, in consequence of a command from a being possessed of rightful authority over us: But it is obvious, that in this case, the command produces a change in the circumstances of the agent, and that what, in consequence of it, becomes obligatory, is not the same with what *before* was indifferent. The external effect, that is, the *matter of the action* is indeed the same; but nothing is plainer, than that actions in this sense the same, may in a moral view be totally different according, to the ends aimed at by them, and the principles of morality under which they fall.

When an action, otherwise indifferent, becomes obligatory, by being made the subject of a promise; we are not to imagine, that our own will or breath alters the nature of things by making what is indifferent not so. But what was indifferent *before* the promise is still so; and it cannot be supposed, that, *after* the promise, it becomes obligatory, without a contradiction. All that the promise does, is, to alter the connexion of a particular effect; or to cause that to be an *instance* of right conduct which was not so before. There are no effects producible by us, which may not, in this manner, fall under different principles of morality; acquire connexions sometimes with happiness, and sometimes with misery; and thus stand in different relations to the eternal rules of duty.

The objection, therefore, to what is here asserted, taken from the effects of positive laws and promises, has no weight: It appears, that when an obligation to particular indifferent actions arises from the command of the Deity, or positive laws; it is by no means to be inferred from hence, that obligation is the creature of will, or that the nature of what is indifferent is changed; nothing then becoming obligatory, which was not so from eternity; that is, *obeying the divine will, and just authority*. And had there been nothing right in this, had there been no reason from the natures of things for obeying God’s will; it is certain, it could have induced no obligation, nor at all influenced an intellectual nature as such.—Will and laws signify nothing, abstracted from something previous to them, in the character of the law-giver and the relations of beings to one another, to give them force and render disobedience a crime. If mere will ever obliged, what reason can be given, why the will of one being should oblige, and of another not; why it should not oblige alike to every thing it requires; and why there should be any difference between *power* and *authority*. It is truth and reason, then, that, in all cases, oblige, and not

mere will. So far, we see, is it from being possible, that any will or laws should *create* right; that they can have no effect, but in virtue of natural and antecedent right.

Thus, then, is morality fixed on an immoveable *basis*, and appears not to be, in any sense, *factitious*; or the *arbitrary production* of any power human or divine; but *equally everlasting* and necessary with all *truth* and *reason*. And this we find to be as evident, as that right and wrong signify a *reality* in what is so denominated.

Related Ideas

1. “The Moral Philosophy of Richard Price and Its Influence” (<http://www.archive.org/details/moralphilosophyo00laverich>).

Access to E. C. Lavers dissertation subtitled *A study in ethics both critical and appreciative of his chief work* on the *Internet Archive, American Libraries* site. Lavers explains Price’s the rational origin of moral ideas in Price’s ethics as an immediate intuition of the understanding. Intuitionism implies necessary truth in ethics.

2. “Richard Price” (http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_price.html).

Jonathan Bennett presents the complete text of Price’s *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* in simplified and contemporary prose while still accurately retaining the content and style. Price’s text is part of *Some Texts from Early Modern Philosophy*, a collection of edited and readable writings , all by Bennett.

3. “Richard Price” [A Biography] (<http://www-groups.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Biographies/Price.html>).

J. J. O’Connor and E. F. Robertson outline a biography of Richard Price emphasizing his contributions to mathematics, science, and politics. This page is part of *The MacTutor History of Mathematics Archive*, sponsored by the School of Mathematics and Statistics, University of St Andrews, Scotland.

4. “Richard Price” (http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Richard_Price).

This article entry from the classic eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* includes a short summary of *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* along with the main biographical facts of Price’s life. This Web page is part of the *Love to Know, Classic Encyclopedia* site.

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5. “Richard Price and Joseph Priestley”[Biographical Summaries] (<http://bartleby.com/220/1419.html>).

This biographical summary drawn from *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* compares the lives of Price and Priestley and is presented on the *Bartleby Great Books Online* site.

From the reading...

“The following important corollary arises from these arguments: That morality is *eternal and immutable*.”



Smelling out a Rat. Price, as a revolutionist is disturbed by the specter of Edmund Burke holding a crown and a cross, with an open copy of Price’s revolutionary writing on his head. (*Library of Congress*)

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Explain in some detail what Price means when he indicates that right and wrong are in the objects themselves, and it is necessarily true that actions have moral value.

Evaluate carefully Price’s assumption that all actions have a nature. This assumption is the basis for his concluding right and wrong are not subjectively dependent upon the nature of mind. Since Price’s main assertion that morality is absolute (*i.e.*, “is eternal and immutable”) follows the truth of this assumption, how can this claim be justified?

2. Explain what Price means when he explains that the ideas of right and wrong arise from the power of immediate perception of the understanding. How does his account of moral ideas arising from intuition differ from what have been described by other moralists as either moral ideas arising from sensation or moral ideas arising as the innate ideas of conscience?
3. Adam Smith argues that the distinction between right and wrong is not due to reason but is instead based on immediate sense and feeling:

[R]eason cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake. Reason may shew that this object is the means of obtaining some other which is naturally either pleasing or displeasing, and in this manner may be render it either agreeable or disagreeable, for the sake of something else. But nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling. If virtue, therefore in every particular instance, necessarily pleases for its own sake, and if vice as certainly displeases the mind, it cannot be reason, but immediate sense and feeling ,which in this manner reconciles us to the one and alienates us from the other.²

How do you think Richard Price would answer Adam Smith’s argument?

4. How does Price’s argument in this reading refute Francis Hutcheson’s claim that right and wrong are known by the immediate perception of an “implanted sense” from God. Explain the differences between Price’s account of the intuition of moral ideas by the faculty of the understanding and Hutcheson’s account of the perception of moral ideas felt through the faculty of the moral sense. Hutcheson argues just as we perceive sensible qualities such as color, sound, and odor by external sense so also we perceive moral qualities as feelings of pleasure by the internal sense of the understanding. He writes, “The pleasure in our sensible percep-

2. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 470-1.

tions of any kind, gives us our first idea of natural good,”³ whereas the pleasure from human action from gives us the first idea of moral good⁴ How do both of these accounts differ from the theory that the notions of right and wrong are innate?

5. Discuss carefully how Price might respond to John Balguy’s claim that “The dictates and directions of right reason are the very rule which the Deity Himself inviolably observes, and which therefore must needs affect all intelligent creatures.”⁵

Explain whether or not Price’s objection to the divine command theory applies to (1) the formulation whereby moral good is coincident with what God commands (thus what is good and what God commands happens to coincide), (2) the formulation whereby moral good is identical with what God commands, and finally (3) the formulation whereby moral good means what God commands.

6. How do you think Price could respond to the following argument by Martin Luther supporting theological voluntarism by an infinite regress argument:

He is God, and for his will there is no cause of reason than can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God. For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens [or is commanded] must be right. Cause and reason can be assigned for a creature’s will, but not for the will of the Creator, unless you set up over him another creator.⁶

Discuss whether or not Luther’s argument is a *petitio principii*.

7. In Price’s argument concluding all actions have a nature and rightness or wrongness is “essentially true of them”, evaluate the evidence for this premise:

[I]f no actions are, *in themselves* either right or wrong, or any thing of a moral and obligatory nature, which can be an object to the understanding; it follows that, in themselves, they are all indifferent.

3. Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, (Adamat Media, 2001), 113.

4. Ibid, 117.

5. John Balguy, *Foundation of Moral Goodness* selection in L.A. Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists, Being Selections from Writers Principally of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), II, 188.

6. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 236-7.

Does Price assume in his argument all actions having a nature the essence of all actions is based on the essential properties of the polar concepts of right and wrong?⁷ Consequently, in any description of the essence of human action, no distinctions can be drawn among morally indifferent actions? Or is he assuming no distinctions can be drawn among actions upon which moral categories do not apply? Does he equivocate in his use of the word, “indifferent”?

8. Price purports to establish that ethical principles are necessarily true, and right and wrong denote the nature or essence of actions. How, then, can Price account for the ethical disagreement among people?
9. At the beginning of his argument against the existence of a moral sense being the origin of our ideas of right and wrong, Price argues, “Again, it is plain that one sense cannot judge of the objects of another; the eye, for instance, of harmony, or the ear of colours. The faculty therefore which views and compares the objects of all the senses, cannot be sense.” Do you think the phenomenon of synesthesia raises a substantial objection to the conclusion that different kinds of sense impressions cannot be discriminated by one specific sensory process. Research psychologists have studied visual, tactile, taste, and auditory synesthesias where the stimulation of one sense is involuntarily linked to a different sense. The phenomenon is not unusual, and according to researchers V. S. Ramachandran and E. M. Hubbard, synesthesia is seven times more common in creative people than in the general population:⁸

Synesthesia . . . is a condition in which otherwise normal people experience the blending of two or more senses. . . . As scientists explore the mechanisms involved in synesthesia, they are also learning about how the brain in general processes sensory information and uses it to make abstract connection between seemingly unrelated inputs.⁹

Given the presence of some form of synesthesia in one out of twenty persons, would it be fair to conclude we cannot rule out the possibility of the existence of a moral faculty of sense which evaluates the content of sense impressions?

10. Evaluate whether or not Price’s argument for ethical absolutism is a *petitio principii*. He claims since, necessarily, no one can judge the moral differences of actions unless actions intrinsically are right or wrong, ethical absolutism is proved:

7. Polar concepts are expressed by terms which only have meaning by being contrasted with one another. *Eds.*

8. V. S. Ramachandran and E. M. Hubbard, “Hearing Colors, Tasting Shapes,” in *Scientific American*, 292 no. 4 (May 2003): 57.

9. *Ibid.*, 53.

“How Do We Know What’s Right?” by Richard Price

In short, it seems sufficient to overthrow any scheme, that such consequences, as the following, should arise from it: That no one begin can judge . . . a real moral difference between actions, with giving his assent to to an impossibility; without mistaking . . . *sensation* for *knowledge*. . .

The following important corollary arises from these arguments:

That morality is *eternal* and *immutable*.

That is, does the argument in this excerpt supporting ethical absolutism assume the very conclusion it attempts to prove?

*

Revision History

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