

# Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian

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## Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion

*James Dybikowski*

### INTRODUCTION

What ties Priestley's philosophical thought together and makes it distinctive is his sustained determination to repatriate for Christianity metaphysical and epistemological positions that other Christian thinkers rejected as dangerous and tantamount to infidelity and atheism. On the one hand, he saw that many contemporaries who engaged in natural investigation rejected the Christian revelation, the promise of a future life, and, indeed, God's existence.<sup>1</sup> On the other, he recognized that some articles of Christianity such as the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as commonly accepted metaphysical commitments such as the dualism of matter and spirit, encouraged the view that Christianity is not supportable by the same methods, principles of enquiry, or standards of evidence demanded of natural investigation, whether of physical or psychological phenomena. Priestley's solution was to strip Christianity of the features that made it unattractive to those committed to such investigation by showing them to be corruptions. A purified rational religion, he argues, is not only compatible with philosophy, but also provides resources to beat off sceptical doubt, whether about the external world, causality, morals,

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* (2nd edn., Birmingham, 1787), pp.[iii]–xi. This reference is to a dedication that appeared in the second edition. Other references are to this edition as the earliest edition available in ECCO.

or a future state of rewards and punishments. A related resource for coping with the sceptic, he identifies, is to lower expectations by displacing the demand for absolute certainty with the acceptance of probability, related because for Priestley rational religion, whether natural or revealed, rests for the most part not on demonstration, but on probability.<sup>2</sup>

The main metaphysical and epistemological ideas that characterize Priestley's mature philosophical thought are:

1. The association of ideas, which, he argues, explains all mental states, including reasoning and moral ideas.
2. The doctrine of necessity, which holds all human actions to be caused and, by virtue of that, necessitated, and which, far from constituting a threat to morality, helps us to better understand it.
3. Materialism.

For him, each of these doctrines is not only individually defensible, but also contributes to a coherent system fully consistent with natural investigation and its extension to human and animal minds. The significance of their individual defensibility is that while Priestley believes materialism and the association of ideas both entail the doctrine of necessity, that doctrine can be shown to be true even if they were to be rejected. A theme that runs through all these doctrines is the notion that an understanding of causes and effects is key to understanding the natural world, psychological phenomena included. It is at the foundation of the association of ideas, the doctrine of necessity, materialism, and, indeed, natural religion.

Priestley concedes that he adopted many of these positions from others: the association of ideas, for example, from David Hartley (1705–57), and the doctrine of necessity from Anthony Collins (1676–1729) and Hartley. His adoption of materialism traces back to ideas about unconventional ways of conceiving matter he encountered through Father Roger Joseph Boscovich (1711–87) and John Michell (1724–93). These ideas, he believed, overcame inveterate

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (2nd edn., Birmingham, 1782), II, pt. III, 147–50. References are to this edition as the earliest edition available online in ECCO.

prejudices about the nature of matter, although they needed a longer gestation period before he developed them into a full-blown monistic materialism. Boscovich, indeed, was offended by Priestley's praise since he had no wish to lend comfort to materialists.<sup>3</sup>

Priestley's originality turns less on the components of his system than on the system itself as combined with a primitive, rational Christianity that pre-dates its corruption by the 'Oriental' doctrine of a separate soul, which he views as the foundation of the beliefs of Christ's preexistence and deification. His attractiveness as a philosopher arises from his spirited and unflinching defence of these ideas against determined opposition. As he remarks about his commitment to the doctrine of philosophical necessity: 'We all see *some things* in so clear and strong a light, that, without having any high opinion of our own understandings, we think we may challenge all the world upon them.'<sup>4</sup> Challenge he certainly did. His skill as a controversialist ensured that the ideas he championed reached a far wider audience than they had when expressed by, say, a Hartley.

Given Priestley's project, it is not surprising that he should remark: 'Let us then study the *Scriptures, Ecclesiastical History, and the Theory of the Human Mind*, in conjunction; being satisfied, that from the nature of the things, they must, in time, throw a great and new light upon each other.'<sup>5</sup> Materialism, for example, offers a basis for viewing Christ as human rather than as a being that, in virtue of an immaterial soul, must have existed prior to his birth. It also provides a basis for Priestley's attempt to justify the doctrine of the resurrection promised by Christian revelation. Priestley's manner of mingling these and related enquiries is a feature of his writing that makes reading him difficult for the modern reader, who expects them to be more decisively demarcated. His methodology, however, is part and parcel of the project of tying philosophy and religion more closely together.

<sup>3</sup> *Scientific Autobiography*, Priestley to Boscovich, 19 Aug. 1778; Boscovich to Priestley, 17 Oct. 1778. For Boscovich and Michell and their influence on Priestley, see John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 109 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Priestley, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer, in Defense of the Illustrations of Philosophical Necessity* (Bath, 1779), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (London, 1777), p. xvi.

## THE GENESIS OF PRIESTLEY'S IDEAS

Priestley entered Daventry Academy at the age of 19, after a hiatus that followed his earlier schooling when he was left largely to his own devices. By his own account he had previously been educated 'in the very straitest principles of *reputed orthodoxy*'.<sup>6</sup> At Daventry he enjoyed his first sustained social experience of free enquiry. On key questions, his fellow students divided nearly equally as did his tutors: 'We were permitted to ask whatever questions, and to make whatever remarks we pleased; and we did it with the greatest, but without any offensive, freedom'. He later attempted to produce such an atmosphere as a teacher at Warrington Academy.<sup>7</sup> This experience was replicated once more, albeit all too unusually, in his great debate on liberty and materialism with his philosophical contemporary Richard Price, with whom he profoundly disagreed, but whom he held in the greatest respect. It stands out as a model of civility in debate.

At Daventry Priestley came to embrace, as he describes it, 'the heterodox side of almost every question'.<sup>8</sup> A reference in a lecture to David Hartley's *Observations on Man* led him to read the work.<sup>9</sup> Priestley was not only convinced by Hartley's account of the mind based solely on the association of ideas derived from sensory experience, but was also confirmed in his commitment to the doctrine of necessity.<sup>10</sup> Of this last, Priestley remarks: 'There is no truth of which I have less doubt, and of the ground of which I am more fully satisfied. Indeed, there is no absurdity more glaring to my understanding than the notion of Philosophical Liberty.'<sup>11</sup> For Priestley, philosophical liberty, or the power to initiate motion or to act in a certain way or otherwise while the circumstances are the same, is a philosophical fantasy that bears no real relation to what we ordinarily mean or should mean by 'liberty'.

The conception of philosophical liberty Priestley mocks is one he had earlier embraced. The first philosophical exchange he recalls

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* (London, 1777), p. v.

<sup>7</sup> Rutt, I i, 50–51, n\*.

<sup>8</sup> Rutt, I i, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Rutt, I i, 24.

<sup>10</sup> For Hartley, see Richard C. Allen, *David Hartley on Human Nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, p. xxii.

in his memoirs occurred between himself and the freethinker Peter Annet around 1749–51.<sup>12</sup> Priestley had learned Annet's system of shorthand and wrote to suggest improvements. Their correspondence broadened into a debate over philosophical liberty and necessity: Priestley defended philosophical liberty while Annet's efforts to dislodge him from that view failed. He was later pleased that he rejected Annet's offer to publish their correspondence because where Annet failed to convince him, the reading of Anthony Collins's *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty* soon thereafter did.<sup>13</sup> Of Collins's little book Priestley remarks: 'This treatise is concise and methodical, and is, in my opinion, sufficient to give intire satisfaction to every unprejudiced person'.<sup>14</sup> He later oversaw its republication in 1790, adding a critical preface.<sup>15</sup> His own debate on this and related issues with Richard Price mirrors Collins's debates with Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), England's great rationalist metaphysician, earlier in the century.<sup>16</sup>

If reading Collins first persuaded Priestley of the doctrine of philosophical necessity, his reading of Hartley confirmed him in that view. What impressed Priestley about Hartley's defence of the doctrine is that he too arrived at it contrary to his previous disposition and that he was a Christian, whereas Collins was reputedly an unbeliever and one of the most daunting challengers of the evidence for Christian revelation. For Priestley, unlike Hartley, however, the adoption of the doctrine of necessity preceded that of the association of ideas.

If Priestley was a convinced necessitarian in the 1750s, he did not commit himself to materialism until the 1770s. Once again he found

<sup>12</sup> Rutt, I i, 19. For Annet, see James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 125–44. For the timing of the exchange with Annet, see Schofield, I, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Rutt, I i, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, p. xxx.

<sup>15</sup> *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty*. By Anthony Collins, Esq. Republished with a Preface by Joseph Priestley (Birmingham, 1790). For Collins, see James O'Higgins, S.J., *Anthony Collins: The Man and his Works* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970) and, for a very different account, David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> For Richard Price, see D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); for Samuel Clarke, see J. P. Ferguson, *Dr Samuel Clarke: An Eighteenth Century Heretic* (Kineton: The Roundwood Press, 1976); and Samuel Clarke: Special Issue, *E&D* 16 (1997).

himself rejecting a conventional orthodoxy, the dualism of matter and spirit, he had previously accepted. He embraced materialism gingerly at first and then with full commitment in a string of publications that mostly appeared while he was in the employ of Lord Shelburne as his librarian. The high water mark of this commitment was the publication of *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), which with its annex, the *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, is his most significant philosophical work. He openly entertained materialism in the introductory essays to his edition of Hartley's *Theory of the Human Mind* (1775) and had broadly suggested it in his *Examination of Reid's Inquiry* (1774). Hartley was no materialist, but Priestley found materialism to be a natural development from his account of the human mind.<sup>17</sup> The strength of his commitment to materialism owed a great deal to the close attention he paid to the doctrine following the ferocious criticism to which he was subjected on simply entertaining it in print.<sup>18</sup> He was not a man to back down in the face of attack.

Equally notable about Priestley's conversion to materialism is that it followed an extended journey with Lord Shelburne to the continent, which included a stay in Paris. There he met materialists, but also at the same time 'unbelievers in Christianity, and even professed Atheists'.<sup>19</sup> These included the Baron d'Holbach (1723–89), whose house Priestley visited in Shelburne's company.<sup>20</sup> While Priestley was sympathetic to many of the philosophical opinions he encountered, he regarded the fashionable rejection of Christianity as arising from prejudice and a false view of the positions to which it was supposedly committed. As he remarks in the preface to his book on Reid's philosophy, 'the true interest of christianity is promoted no less by throwing down weak and rotten supports, than by supplying it with firm and good ones'.<sup>21</sup> Thoroughly pursued, philosophy supports natural and

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Priestley (ed.), *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas; with Essays relating to the Subject of it* (London, 1775), p. xix.

<sup>18</sup> Rutt, I i, 203. For an account of the criticism, see Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, 115–25.

<sup>19</sup> Rutt, I i, 199.

<sup>20</sup> See Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 105.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, Dr Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of*



revealed religion, while Christianity, rationally interpreted, is in keeping with the doctrines of philosophical necessity and materialism. Key to his advocacy of these last, however, is the removal of false views and ancient prejudices: the association with ancient fatalism and modern Calvinism in the case of the former, and the deeply held view that matter of its nature is passive, inert, and impenetrable in the case of the latter. Matter's supposed possession of these properties rendered it ineligible as a subject that could think or perceive.

Priestley's development of this system of ideas spans a relatively brief period from 1774 until about 1780. Some parts appeared in print beforehand, most notably in his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772–4), where he systematically sets out his approach to natural and revealed religion, but after 1780, this intensely creative philosophical period was largely over. With the exception of the association of ideas, he had had his say. Alas, the manuscript he was preparing to illustrate Hartley's doctrine was lost in the Birmingham riots in 1791.<sup>22</sup>

### SCOTTISH COMMON SENSE AND HARTLEY

One of the first philosophical works Priestley read as a young man was Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (first published 1690).<sup>23</sup> It repeatedly surfaces in his philosophical writings as a marker against which he defines his positions, favourably at times because its general approach to human knowledge provides 'the corner stone of all just and rational knowledge of ourselves', but critically at others because its views on the sources of knowledge, on liberty and on the possibility of thinking matter are either too unclear or too timid.<sup>24</sup>

When Priestley encountered the critique of Locke's empiricism made by Thomas Reid (1710–96) in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), he found Reid's 'notions of

*Truth, and Dr Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in behalf of Religion* (London, 1774), p. xxviii.

<sup>22</sup> Rutt, I ii, 6n\*.

<sup>23</sup> Rutt, I i, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, 5.

human nature [to be] the very reverse of those which I had learned from Mr. Locke and Dr Hartley (in which I thought I had sufficient reason to acquiesce).<sup>25</sup> When he later published his critical examination of Reid's common sense philosophy, he included attacks on other Scottish philosophers influenced by him, notably James Beattie (1735–1803) and his *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; in opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1770) as well as James Oswald (1715–69) and his *Appeal to Common Sense in behalf of Religion* (1766). They appealed to common sense to shore up the foundations of morality and religion, as Reid had for knowledge of the external world. For these philosophers, common sense is the view that there are certain beliefs, based neither on education nor on habit, that we cannot help having because of our common human nature. Beattie, for example, claimed that common sense rules out the doctrine of philosophical necessity as absurd. Part of Priestley's argument to disarm common sense philosophy is to show how easily it multiplies the phenomena it claims are only explainable by resorting to a variety of seemingly disconnected instinctive principles. It thereby abandons the simplicity he views as a hallmark of a correct metaphysical picture of the natural world and our place within it. In morality and religion especially, he argues that common sense threatens to displace the proper role of reason.

For Reid, common sense philosophy answers the scepticism of Hume and the idealism of Berkeley, but it identifies Locke as opening the door to both, whatever his intentions. For if ideas are not images of external objects and if we perceive ideas rather than external objects, ideas cannot be a source of knowledge about the external world and are compatible with its nonexistence.<sup>26</sup> Reid accepts this sceptical argument, but rejects the theory of ideas that generates it. His response is that there are first principles forming part of our natural constitution that make belief in an external world instinctive and its denial absurd.

<sup>25</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, p. vii. Two useful collections of articles on various aspects of Reid's philosophy are: Melvin Dalgarno and Eric Matthews (eds), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) and Terence Cuneo and René Van Woudenberg (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004). The former collection in particular deals with his relation with Priestley.

<sup>26</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, 28–36.

Typically Priestley's critique of Reid is read now to see how well he grasps Reid's philosophical intentions and how effectively his critique answers him. The general verdict is that he has mixed success at best.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, when Reid published his later and philosophically most significant works, Priestley paid no heed. For our purposes, it is more illuminating to consider how Priestley's critique, right or wrong, contributes to the development of his philosophical outlook.

Unlike Reid, Priestley displays a robust immunity to the problem of scepticism. He rejects Reid's solution to scepticism about an external world as motivated by a false problem. For him, it is unreasonable to expect to silence all doubt of its existence as absurd. Such doubt ought to be acknowledged as possible, but scepticism is not its inevitable consequence. 'It is quite sufficient', he argues,

if the supposition [of an external world] be the easiest hypothesis for explaining the origin of our ideas. The evidence of it is such that we allow it to be barely possible to doubt of it; but that it is as certain as that two and two make four, we do not pretend.<sup>28</sup>

Its existence is the most *probable* explanation of experience because 'it exhibits *particular appearances*, as arising from *general laws*, which is agreeable to the analogy of every thing else that we observe'.<sup>29</sup> Berkeley's idealism offers an alternative explanation, holding God to be the direct cause of ideas in our minds, but it is far less probable because it fails to give a good explanation for the existence of general laws. While ideas are the immediate objects of thought, we properly infer and reason about external objects to which these ideas relate as representational signs, although not as images.<sup>30</sup> If philosophers in the ideas tradition sometimes talk about them that way, it is a mistake to construe their talk as anything but figurative.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Alan P. F. Sell, 'Priestley's Polemic against Reid', *P-PN*, 3 (1979), 41–52.

<sup>28</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, 58. Locke also addresses and dismisses sceptical doubt about the external world. See John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, IV, 2, §14, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, based on Locke's 4th edn., 1700), 536–8.

<sup>29</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, p. lix.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 57. For Berkeley, see David Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, 30.

For Priestley, the attraction of the way of ideas is that it opens the way to natural enquiry into the mind as illustrated in the work of Hartley. Priestley's basic objection to Reid is that his appeal to common sense effectively 'checks all farther inquiry, and is therefore of great disservice in philosophy'.<sup>32</sup> In the hands of Beattie and Oswald, it becomes 'exceedingly dangerous and alarming; setting aside all reasoning about the fundamental principles of religion, and making way for all the extravagancies of credulity, enthusiasm, and mysticism'.<sup>33</sup> Nor are its damaging effects limited to religion because they can just as easily be used to support conservatism in politics as well.<sup>34</sup> For Priestley, common sense's appeal to nature is too facile. It attributes to nature phenomena such as the dread of fire, which, for him, are clearly learned by associating ideas.<sup>35</sup> It also attributes to custom what results from reason, such as the belief that the future will be like the past. For Priestley, we know that the future will be like the past because it always has been.

On the distinctively physiological approach Priestley adopts from Hartley, sensations, caused by external objects, are conveyed through the nerves to the brain. He admits that we are presently ignorant of what sensations and the ideas they generate in the mind are, but for him this is not a reason to reject Hartley's causal approach, his theory of vibrations in particular striking Priestley as the most plausible available account of how sensations are transmitted to the brain. Given that vibrations can differ from each other in degree, kind, place, and so on, corresponding to the variety of sensations and ideas as well as their associations, the theory offers a rich and more compelling model than the classical picture of the mind as a tablet on which sensations are impressed and registered.

Priestley confronts what he takes as Reid's central objection to this kind of theory, that even if ideas are conveyed to the mind, it, as an unextended and indivisible substance, could not be affected by them, since they would share no common property. Priestley's moral is that: 'If then we wish to preserve this external world, which is very convenient for many purposes, we must take care to entertain

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 22.                   <sup>33</sup> Ibid. 160–1.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Paul B. Wood, 'Thomas Reid's Critique of Joseph Priestley: Context and Chronology', *Man and Nature*, 4 (1985), 29–45.

<sup>35</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, 90.

notions of mind and ideas more compatible with it.<sup>36</sup> Priestley pursues this hint in his essays on Hartley. Given how much Hartley's theory explains by reference to matter and material properties right up to perception itself, would it not make sense to explain perception likewise?<sup>37</sup> He suggests: 'I rather think that the whole man is of some *uniform composition*, and that the property of *perception*, as well as the other powers that are termed *mental*, is the result (whether necessary or not) of such an organical structure as that of the brain.'<sup>38</sup> The suggestion occasioned a storm of controversy, but Priestley, far from backing down, fully embraced it and in embracing it, he concluded that perception must indeed be a necessary result of that structure.

For Priestley, Hartley's improvement on Locke is that his theory accounts for *all* thought by the association of ideas, not just some, including reasoning, the passions, volitions and moral ideas. This last is a point that others believed had to be explained by reference to something like a moral sense or innate ideas.<sup>39</sup> When Priestley comments on Hartley's account, he focuses, as Hartley had, on the development of moral ideas from early childhood and on that development in the context of acquiring skills in action.<sup>40</sup> A child stretches its hand and grasps without any particular intention in response to some stimulus. Its muscles contract involuntarily. When a toy, for example, is placed in its hand later, the child learns to grasp it and reach out even when the toy is at a distance. Thus an original involuntary automatic action by means of association becomes a voluntary action, still performed mechanically, although Priestley would later caution that one should not be misled by the negative associations of such language into supposing that he was reducing human action to the movements of 'a common clock, or a fulling-mill'.<sup>41</sup> For Priestley, this analysis is even more compelling when one considers how the action comes to be performed habitually without reflection in a 'secondarily automatic' manner. For if the initial and

<sup>36</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry*, 59–60.

<sup>37</sup> Priestley, *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind*, pp. xix–xxi.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. xx.      <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. xxiii.      <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* pp. xxvii ff.

<sup>41</sup> Priestley, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer*, 83.

end stages are mechanical, so likewise should be the middle.<sup>42</sup> The moral is that 'voluntary' contrasts not with 'necessitated', but with 'involuntary'.

Similarly, ideas of moral right and wrong are acquired as a child has the experience of being checked by a greater power. Initially the child yields to that greater power. As its understanding develops, it distinguishes between parents and its relation to them and the way its peer group relates to parents. The commands of parents as not to be resisted or disputed transform into ones that *ought* not to be resisted, and transferred from that context to other authorities, external and internal. The basis of the transformation from 'must' to 'ought' is the discovery that there are reasons for some actions and against others.<sup>43</sup> What these reasons are and the basis for paying them heed Priestley develops in his writings on natural and revealed religion. He is prepared to continue using the language of 'moral sense', but it is to be understood as shorthand for this process learned by association.<sup>44</sup> Earlier philosophers who use the phrase, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, intend to signify that our ability to distinguish right and wrong, virtue and vice, has a natural basis in our constitution as well as our natural affections and dispositions.<sup>45</sup>

## PHILOSOPHICAL NECESSITY

For Priestley, both materialism and the association of ideas entail mechanism and hence the doctrine of necessity.<sup>46</sup> That said, Priestley originally adopted the doctrine from reading Anthony Collins, who relies on neither materialism nor the association of ideas, as well as Hartley, who rejects materialism. Collins insists that the necessity

<sup>42</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 42–3.

<sup>43</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, 77.

<sup>44</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 225.

<sup>45</sup> See Rivers, II, index references to 'sense, moral'.

<sup>46</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, pp. xix–xx; 36; *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr Price and Dr Priestley* (London, 1778), 241.

he defends is moral necessity, not ‘absolute, physical, or mechanical necessity... as is in clocks, watches’ and the like.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless an agent’s actions are determined by *causes* such as willings, volitions, and choices.<sup>48</sup>

Collins’s use of the expression ‘moral necessity’ struck dualists like Samuel Clarke as brazen. When Clarke used it, he did so in an inverted commas sense. Clarke agrees that stones, clocks, and watches *move* by physical necessity, but reasons and motives only incline; they do not necessitate. Even if it is certain that a strongly motivated action will be performed, that is a far cry from saying that the motive causes or determines the agent to act.<sup>49</sup> For Clarke, the agent with reasons has the power or liberty to act otherwise, but chooses not to do so. Certainty is one thing; necessity, quite another. Necessity applies to physical objects that are passive and moved, not to beings that act. Like Collins, Priestley accepts that ‘moral’ differs from ‘physical necessity’ only in its sphere of application. Both necessities are equally real. As he had for Collins, the figure of Samuel Clarke looms behind Priestley’s account as the defender of philosophical liberty he seeks to disarm. Most objections he encountered, whether from Richard Price or others, were variants of arguments advanced by Clarke.

For Priestley, philosophical necessity is a modern doctrine, which, he claims, Hobbes, whom he admires, was the first to formulate.<sup>50</sup> It should not be confused with the ancient doctrine of fate or the doctrine of predestination. While fate claims the inevitability of outcomes such as Oedipus’ killing of his father and sleeping with his mother, it has no view of how these outcomes will be produced and in particular how the motives of human agents, whether or not they are aware of them, determine choices through a chain of causes and effects ultimately tracing back to God.<sup>51</sup> So likewise for Calvinism where, as Priestley puts it, ‘the work of conversion [is] wholly of

<sup>47</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty* (London, 1717), p. iii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 48–50.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Clarke, *Remarks upon a Book, entitled, A Philosophical Enquiry concerning Human Liberty* (London, 1717), 15–18.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (London, 1651), pt. II, 21, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), esp. 261–3.

<sup>51</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, p. xxv.

God's free and sovereign grace, independent of every thing in the person thus regenerated or renovated, and to which he cannot in the least contribute'.<sup>52</sup> For Priestley, many objections to philosophical necessity, such as that it renders human activity irrelevant or insignificant, apply only to these other doctrines from which he distinguishes philosophical necessity.

One factor inhibiting the acceptance of philosophical necessity for Priestley is the common misconception that liberty and necessity are incompatible. This the Hobbist tradition denies, provided that liberty is defined as simply a power of doing whatever one wills or pleases, without being prevented by an alien cause.<sup>53</sup> If only this is required, actions can be free because unimpeded by anything external to the agent while still determined by the agent's antecedent motivations and desires. According to Priestley, this is all that most intend by 'liberty' when they are uninfluenced by larger philosophical and religious agendas. Part of Priestley's purpose in defending the doctrine of necessity, accordingly, is to show how well it matches up with commonly held pre-philosophical notions. When the implications of this conception of liberty are spelled out, however, people are 'alarmed and staggered' and, as a result, disown their pre-philosophical view, supposing their experiences must really be different from what they had supposed.<sup>54</sup> For Priestley, the obstacles that prevent acceptance of the doctrine of necessity have less to do with philosophical argument than with the unpalatable consequences that are thought to follow from it, whether they touch on morality or God. His aim, accordingly, is to defuse these reactions. As he remarks in his editor's preface to his edition of Collins's *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty*: 'If persons have strength of mind not to be frightened by names, and be capable of attending to things only, the strongest objections to the doctrine of necessity will not affect them.'<sup>55</sup>

For Priestley, philosophical necessity is supported by an absolutely general and compelling argument from the nature of cause and effect. As such, it relies on the truth neither of the association of ideas nor of materialism. Whether one considers inanimate bodies, such as a

<sup>52</sup> Priestley, *Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer*, 71.

<sup>53</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, pp. xxvii–xxix.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

<sup>55</sup> Collins, *Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Priestley, p. vii.



balance, or mental phenomena, the same circumstances—states of mind and views of things—invariably result in the same effect. Given the invariability of the effect, the only reasonable conclusion is ‘that there must be a sufficient reason in the nature of the things, why it should be produced in these circumstances.’<sup>56</sup> For Priestley, this is to say that human actions, as much as the movements of bodies, are governed by laws of nature ordained by God.

The claim that we often cannot predict what an agent will do in certain circumstances is a product of ignorance rather than an objection to the argument. Were it possible for there to be opposed outcomes in indistinguishable circumstances, there would be effects without causes, a consequence Priestley says that even defenders of philosophical liberty would find unacceptable. Indeed, if there could be effects without causes, the most compelling argument for God’s existence, at least in Priestley’s view, would be undermined. For it would be possible for the material universe to come into existence without a being distinct from it as its cause. But since defenders of philosophical liberty concede that the motives of agents align with their actions, they grant, according to Priestley, the premise of his argument, even though they reject its conclusion.

Priestley is well aware of the counter that while it may be *certain* how agents will act in view of their motives, those motives do not necessitate actions as physical causes do. Motives only incline and provide reasons or ends of action, but their role is not causal or, if causal, then only in the sense of final causes, not necessitating ones. Priestley’s reply is that the best evidence we possess for physical causes is allowed by the objection in the moral case, the certainty of the effect. ‘If my mind be as *constantly* determined by the influence of motives, as a stone is determined to fall to the ground by the influence of gravity, I am constrained to conclude, that the *cause* in one case acts as necessarily as that in the other.’<sup>57</sup> True, Priestley allows, the expression ‘moral certainty’ is sometimes used to imply nothing more than a high degree of probability. Such a use of the notion can be traced

<sup>56</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 10. See James A. Harris, ‘Joseph Priestley and “the Proper Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity”’, *E&D*, 20 (2001), 23–44, and *Of Liberty and Necessity: The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 167–78.

<sup>57</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 18.

back at least to Descartes where it means nothing stronger than a certainty sufficient for the conduct of life.<sup>58</sup> That, however, is not the issue here.<sup>59</sup> Nor would there be any reason to treat wrongdoers differently, he maintains, even if it were possible to distinguish what was certain from what was necessary.<sup>60</sup> The attempt to distinguish physical from moral necessity by anything other than subject matter fails. Each is as law-governed and necessary as the other.

Neither does he accept the argument that human action is caused, but only by a mind itself in abstraction, independently of motives and not itself determined.<sup>61</sup> For exclusive of motives, the mind has no reason to choose one course of action over another and thus lacks the capacity to serve as the cause of its own determinations. The proposal is one Priestley regards as 'chimerical': 'the will cannot properly determine *itself*, but is always determined by *motives*.'<sup>62</sup>

Many proponents of liberty, however, were not satisfied. For those like Samuel Clarke and Richard Price, an action necessitated by the agent's reasons or motives would not only not be free, but not be an action at all, since the person's movements would be merely passive as effects of causes. While it may be morally certain that an agent who has particular reasons and motives will act on them, certainty of outcome does not establish necessity, a point strongly reinforced by the consciousness agents possess of their own freedom. Unless it were possible for a person to act otherwise even though the person chooses not to do so, moreover, the person's actions would fall outside the scope of virtue and morality. For if they were necessitated by a causal chain that leads back to God, those actions would be neither praiseworthy as virtuous nor blameworthy as vicious any more than they would be if the agent had been compelled to act by force. Their necessary occurrence due to a causal chain that agents are not at liberty to break or interrupt at the time of choice removes them from the scope of morality, which requires a robust philosophical liberty, not the anaemic liberty of spontaneity Priestley offers instead. The objection, in sum, is that Priestley has no sufficiently robust account

<sup>58</sup> I owe this point to an unpublished paper by Charles Wolfe.

<sup>59</sup> Priestley, *Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer*, 26–7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 27–30.

<sup>61</sup> Price and Priestley, *Free Discussion*, 291–6.

<sup>62</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 72.

of human agency to support virtue and morality. On his view, the real causes of actions become agents' motives rather than agents in their own right, but motives of themselves cannot cause anything.<sup>63</sup>

Priestley rejects this account of agency. As for the consciousness we are said to have of our liberty, the characterization of the experience is ambiguous, for it depends on just what that liberty is that we are said to have a consciousness of. He argues that all we really can claim to be conscious of is the absence of any impediment to choosing whatever seems preferable on balance or not making a choice, if indeed that should appear preferable.<sup>64</sup> That the deliberating agent may make rapid changes of preference in no way undermines the position. Were it possible to act altogether independently of motive, he sees neither anything praiseworthy about it nor reason to attribute it to the agent, since it would be mysterious how the action would have been produced.<sup>65</sup> For Priestley, to act from a motive is for the *person* to act from a cause within, rather than because of some foreign cause. If this still falls short of the supposed requirements for action, so be it, but these are not requirements either of agency or of moral judgement.

For Priestley, the argument that morality and virtue require philosophical liberty fails. On the contrary, 'Whatever it is *within a man* that leads him to virtue, and that will certainly and necessarily incline him to act right . . . they deem to be a *virtuous principle*, to be the *foundation of merit*, and to *intitle to reward*.'<sup>66</sup> That the person possesses such a disposition as a result of early parental training or natural temper does not diminish that claim: 'Men are charmed with a virtuous conduct, with the principle that was the cause of it, with the principle that was the cause of that principle, and so on, as far as you please to go.'<sup>67</sup> The stronger the disposition—and for Priestley virtue turns on habituation and disposition—the more automatic, easy, and mechanical the person's actions. This in no way diminishes the person's accountability or the propriety of praise or blame for the actions that flow from that state of mind, provided these notions are properly understood. On the contrary, praise and reward for virtue function

<sup>63</sup> Price and Priestley, *Free Discussion*, 136–40.

<sup>64</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 47–8.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 72.      <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 67.      <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 67–8.

to reinforce the disposition while blame and punishment for wrongdoing serve as correctives through the application of causal force on the agent and others. If praise and blame, reward and punishment were inefficacious, they would not be rationally defensible. Contrary to the objection, the doctrine of necessity provides a foundation for accountability because it ensures that rewards and punishment have their 'fullest effect' whereas the doctrine of philosophical liberty, he claims, does not.

For the purposes of philosophy, however, Priestley is prepared to discard the language of 'responsibility', 'merit' and 'demerit', 'praise' and 'blame'. 'Every thing that really corresponds to them', he says, 'may be clearly expressed in different language.'<sup>68</sup> All too commonly these expressions are defined in a way that assumes the truth of the doctrine of philosophical liberty. For him, the crucial issue is whether a moral governor concerned with the good of his subjects would treat them as his theory maintains. In his view, the answer is plainly 'yes'. A causal influence on future action would be effective for voluntary actions. To refute his theory, Priestley argues, the objector needs to show not the incompatibility of his language with contrived concepts of responsibility and the rest, but with what a concerned moral governor would do.

As Priestley acknowledges, the potential impact of his view for many common attitudes would be significant. Attitudes of self-congratulation and self-reproach, shame, guilt, remorse, and pardon would have no place for a fully convinced believer in the doctrine of necessity. He is particularly attentive to the example of remorse. He grants that this attitude implies the belief that one could have acted otherwise in the circumstances of action. For Priestley, however, this belief is false. The reality is that one would act no differently if one were faced with the same circumstances, but when one learns from one's mistakes, one approaches the circumstances of action with an altered disposition. Change in conduct does not need to be motivated by remorse, accordingly, and hence the capacity for it is not required for morality to function.

<sup>68</sup> Price and Priestley, *Free Discussion*, 149; Priestley, *Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer*, 79–81.

It is clear from the references to moral government that Priestley ties his approach towards necessity to theology and religion, in which he closely follows his mentor Hartley.<sup>69</sup> For on his view, to succeed in fully adopting the doctrine of necessity and living one's life as far as is deliberately possible in accordance with it depends on our success in cultivating a philosophical state in which we see ourselves as God's instruments and God as the true author of our actions. Such a perspective is transformational even if it may not be sustainable for lengthy periods. Our ordinary attitudes are displaced by humility, the love of God, and the view of other human beings as part of one family.<sup>70</sup> This gives Priestley all the more reason to question Hume's rejection of humility as a 'monkish' virtue that is a product of superstition and false religion rather than the natural judgement of unprejudiced reason.<sup>71</sup>

We realize that in view of God's goodness, there can be no absolute evil. For what evil there is must only exist to promote the overall sum of good and, as a result, to be '*annihilated*'. This consoling view serves as '*the only sure anchor of the soul in a time of adversity and distress*'.<sup>72</sup> While we are in awe of God, we cannot and should not attempt to imitate him. In particular, human beings are not sanctioned to do evil so that good can come of it. Their path, lacking God's knowledge, must be that of a virtue that is *rule governed*, even if acting differently were to contribute to the overall good. What is significant for our view of the world in such a state is that we stand in communion with God's will, not that we should imitate what God alone can do. Patently the effects of the doctrine of necessity would look rather different if this theology were to be rejected.

However, if all human actions are ultimately ascribable to God, whose instruments we are, God must be the sole ultimate cause of evil, whether moral or natural. Priestley does not shy away from this conclusion, but argues that while God may be the cause of evil, it does not follow that God is evil. For that conclusion to follow,

<sup>69</sup> See Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 161–4.

<sup>70</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 108–9.

<sup>71</sup> See David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (London, 1751), sect. ix; ed. with an introduction by J. B. Schneewind (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 73–4.

<sup>72</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 110.

the production of sin and evil must have been God's intention or purpose, which it is not. Since God's overriding aim and achievement is the happiness of his creatures, God is virtuous because his actions arise from a calculation of and a motivation to produce 'general utility'.<sup>73</sup> Evil is not part of God's design except as it promotes the general good. It follows that the means chosen by God must be necessary to achieve this end.

Here Priestley once again sharply disagrees with Hume.<sup>74</sup> For Hume, if God is good, human actions arising from God's causality cannot be evil. For if they were, so likewise must God be. One cannot have it both ways. Priestley disagrees. The evil done by God and the evil done by humans is very different. God may have created humans with evil dispositions, making them vicious and subject to reproach and punishment, but God's object was the general good. Indeed, according to Priestley, 'if [God] prefers that scheme in which there is the greatest prevalence of virtue and happiness, we have all the evidence that can be given of his being infinitely holy and benevolent, notwithstanding the mixture of vice and misery there may be in it.'<sup>75</sup>

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume challenges the claim that we are in a position to draw this inference from experience.<sup>76</sup> For how do we know that God could not have done better unless we are independently convinced of God's infinite benevolence? But the only evidence we have for this proposition is the world we know from experience. For all we know on this basis, the being that produced such a world may have been a bumbling, apprentice designer, however good its intentions. Priestley's contrast between the basis for judging God and for judging men, however, depends on the perfection of the former as against the imperfection of the latter.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>74</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*; originally published as *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1748), sect. viii, pt. ii; ed. Charles Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1955), 108–11.

<sup>75</sup> Priestley, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 124.

<sup>76</sup> For responses to Hume's philosophy of religion, see James Fieser (ed.), *Early Responses to Hume's Writings on Religion* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001). These constitute vols. V and VI of *Early Responses to Hume*.

## MATERIALISM

There are two keys to Priestley's materialism. The first is a pair of methodological principles he adapts from Newton of not multiplying causes to explain appearances beyond necessity as well as assigning similar causes to similar effects.<sup>77</sup> As he sees it, the consistent application of these principles places the dualism of matter and spirit on the defensive. For him, dualism is a philosophical invention burdened with the insuperable difficulty of explaining the relation between matter and spirit. Everything dualism purports to explain, he argues, can be better explained by monism, the monism of matter in particular. For Priestley, what really counts is monism, not whether one characterizes it as materialism. For him, the desired result is a single subject capable of possessing both material and mental attributes, whatever the real nature of these proves to be. About this last Priestley does not pretend to know.

The second point is that from Priestley's perspective modern philosophers, notably those influenced by Descartes and the Cartesian tradition, have adopted dualism because they mistakenly attribute to matter solidity or impenetrability as well as passivity. For many dualists matter and spirit share no common property, although Clarke and Price are exceptions because they believe spirit to be extended. For the dualist of either stripe, however, perception and thought are not attributable to a material being. But once properties like impenetrability and passivity are no longer seen to be essential to matter, according to Priestley, the case for materialism can be viewed in a new light with the principal objections to it falling away.<sup>78</sup> Far from being impenetrable or inert, matter of its nature is anything but solid and consists of physical points that possess powers of attraction and repulsion that are exercised within spheres of influence. According to Priestley, the effect of these powers had been confused with impenetrability in the philosophical tradition. If some do not recognize what they take to be matter in this description, so be it. The consequence is that nothing stands in the way any longer of

<sup>77</sup> See Harris, 'Joseph Priestley and "the Proper Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity"', 32–4, who notes that Priestley's formulation of the first of Newton's principles departs from Newton's script.

<sup>78</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 81.

attributing perception and thought to matter so conceived and, more particularly, to material systems.<sup>79</sup>

Priestley also attempts to deflect other lines of philosophical objection that turn on the difference between thought or perception and other known properties of matter. He argues that they neither support immaterialism nor rule out materialism, but reflect ignorance: 'we have no more conception of how the powers of sensation and thought can inhere in an *immaterial*, than in a *material* substance'.<sup>80</sup>

One objection on which Priestley lavishes special attention turns on the unity of consciousness, which requires the power of thought to be simple and indivisible, where matter, by contrast, is divisible. In that case the argument is that consciousness would necessarily be a property of the parts, and rather than a single consciousness there would be indefinitely many. But if consciousness does not belong to the particles of, say, the brain, neither can it belong to the brain as a whole.<sup>81</sup> Samuel Clarke developed this objection in his celebrated controversy with Anthony Collins on the natural immortality of the soul.<sup>82</sup> Priestley's response is the same as Collins's: consciousness is a property of systems of matter and need not be a property of that system's parts any more than the parts of a sphere need themselves be circles. Priestley and Collins, accordingly, defend the possibility of emergent properties that belong to systems although not to their divisible parts, where Clarke and others reject it.

For Priestley, perception and thought are properties that necessarily arise from material or corporeal organization in living beings, even though in the current state of knowledge we may not be able to explain their real nature.<sup>83</sup> To begin with, human perception and thought are never found in experience apart from, and are plainly dependent on, organized systems of matter.<sup>84</sup> That this should be our invariable experience warrants concluding that there is a necessary

<sup>79</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 82. <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 86–90.

<sup>82</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A Defense of an Argument made use of in a Letter to Mr Dodwel, to Prove the Immateriality and Natural Immortality of the Soul* (London, 1707), 8–15. The whole controversy is conveniently collected in *The Works of Samuel Clarke*, 4 vols (London, 1738; rpt. New York: Garland Press, 1978), III, 721–913.

<sup>83</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 28.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 28.



connection between the two. Priestley parts company with Locke who, while he sees nothing incompatible with the hypothesis that thinking could be superadded as a property of matter by the power of God, nevertheless maintains it to be more likely that the soul is immaterial. According to Priestley, Locke should have concluded that there is no reason to attribute thought to anything but matter.<sup>85</sup> For Priestley, the foundation for an immaterial soul is the belief that only such an entity can survive death and possess the power of perception and thought in such a state.<sup>86</sup> For from the soul's immateriality and its claimed indivisibility, the natural immortality of the soul was inferred, as it had been since Plato.

In the ancient world and with the Epicureans in particular, materialism was associated with the view that death puts an end to our existence and that even if the same atoms that constitute our bodies were reassembled, the reassembled being would not be identical with the being that died.<sup>87</sup> The dispersal of the atoms constitutes an irreparable break in identity. For Priestley, a major challenge is to reconcile materialism, as he understands it, with the possibility of a future life rendered certain by the evidence of revelation, with rewards and punishments distributed for the way we live our lives. In the ancient world this possibility was associated with the survival of an immaterial soul with powers of thought serving as the bearer of personal identity. But classically, on such a view, the immaterial soul at death is finally freed from the impediment of the body, which, for Priestley, does not combine well with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. For those like Price who agree with Priestley about the shortcomings of the classical doctrine for Christianity, the immaterial soul survives separation from the body in an inactive state until the resurrection. Unless an immaterial soul does so, there could be no resurrection because whatever might be brought together at such a time would have no claim on our interest as being us, even if it claimed to have the same memories and states of consciousness we once had while living.<sup>88</sup> At best, it would only be like us and

<sup>85</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 73. See Locke, *Essay*, IV, 3, §6.

<sup>86</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of the Universe)*, bk. III.

<sup>88</sup> Price and Priestley, *Free Discussion*, 107–8.

hence not a proper subject to experience the rewards and punishments merited as a result of the conduct of our lives. If so, the motive for virtue provided by the doctrine of resurrection would disappear.

In order to defend the doctrine of the resurrection, Priestley distinguishes the identity of the man from the identity of the person.<sup>89</sup> The difficulty is that following death the parts of the human body are dispersed and may become parts of other bodies. But, Priestley argues, this happens even during life when the material parts that constitute us—the identity of the man—change over time, while the person remains the same, irrespective of the pace of change. Projecting these changes into the future, we feel concern for our future selves, since what matters for personal identity is ‘the *sameness and continuity of consciousness*’.<sup>90</sup> In its absence, the propriety of rational reward and punishment disappears. If, however, we can project and imagine ourselves knowing each other and conversing again in a resurrected state, the requirement for personal identity would be satisfied. While there is no need on Priestley’s view to preserve bodily identity or continuity, he believes that the body will in fact be reconstituted at the resurrection, not the whole of it, but the particles constituting ‘the *germ of the organical body*’.<sup>91</sup> So while the man’s capacity for consciousness and thought ceases, those particles can be reconstituted by the power of God and revived.

Price challenged Priestley’s claims. Among other things, he argues that Priestley needs the resurrection of the same body with the same material parts to defend his claims. If thinking arises simply from the arrangement of parts of matter that disperse at death and if the same arrangement were subsequently produced with different matter, that would constitute another person. Otherwise, Price, Priestley, and whomever else one might care to consider could be one and the same if they happened to possess the same arrangement and, by virtue of that, the same consciousness. Priestley’s answer is that while their minds would be ‘*exactly similar*’, they would be ‘*numerically different*’.<sup>92</sup> Death does not entail the loss of existence of the man, but the

<sup>89</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 155–65; Price and Priestley, *Free Discussion*, 75.

<sup>90</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 159.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 161.

<sup>92</sup> Price and Priestley, *Free Discussion*, 76–8.

loss of that man's powers to think and perceive. If so, Price counters, the restoration of personal identity at the resurrection depends on the reconstitution of the matter that constituted the man. But if death does not entail loss of existence of the man following the dissolution of the body, the man must also have existed prior to birth because the matter that constitutes the man existed then as well. For Priestley, however, the times before birth and after death are asymmetrical. Only the matter that would constitute Christ existed before his birth and not Christ himself.

Priestley, however, devotes the lion's share of attention to countering the objections to materialism that purport to make it incompatible with God's being and nature and with Christianity in particular. Traditionally God had been represented as immaterial and, indeed, Priestley himself before his adoption of materialism had had no qualms in doing so.<sup>93</sup> Yet if materialism were true, critics argued, God too might be material.<sup>94</sup> Priestley answers that we know so little of God's essence that we have no proper idea of it in view of the evident differences between God's powers and ours. Hence there is no inference from human materiality to divine materiality. That said, he has no special difficulty with the representation of God as immaterial so long as 'immaterial' is not taken to mean having no common attributes with matter.<sup>95</sup> For a God who shares no common attribute with matter would not be able to act on the creation. Such a God would be as remote from the universe as the Epicurean gods who, while material, could neither affect nor be affected by anything else. But while Priestley would prefer to be noncommittal about God's nature, the sting is removed from representing God as material once matter's nature is properly understood.<sup>96</sup> He notes that the arguments founded in natural religion for God's being as an intelligent first cause distinct from its creation and its attributes—its wisdom, power, and goodness—are unaffected, if the creation be held to be material. The charge that materialism is tantamount to atheism, accordingly, is without foundation.

<sup>93</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, 37.

<sup>94</sup> Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 103–13.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 108.      <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 108–9.

## NATURAL AND REVEALED RELIGION AND MORALITY

In his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772–4) Priestley systematically sets out the basic principles of natural and revealed religion for the benefit of young members of Christian congregations.<sup>97</sup> His later *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1780), by contrast, while incorporating his earlier argument, is written more informally as a series of letters that focus on the challenge to Christianity of unbelievers like David Hume (1711–76) and the Baron d'Holbach, whose anonymously published *Système de la nature* (1770) articulates an aggressive atheism.<sup>98</sup>

Like many Christian apologists, Priestley maintains that while natural religion turns on what can be justified by natural reason, its principles would not have been discovered without the benefit of revelation.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, natural religion leaves so much undecided that he gives greater weight to revelation, notwithstanding his conviction that God's being, benevolence, and providence can all be satisfactorily established by reason. In view of his empiricist outlook, it is not surprising that he rejects the methods by which rationalists, like Samuel Clarke, tried to establish these propositions. Where Clarke argues that God's existence as a self-existent being can be demonstrated *a priori* because rejecting it entails a contradiction, Priestley starts from the existing universe as we know it from experience and argues from it that there must be a self-existent being as its ultimate cause.<sup>100</sup> That said, some of his arguments, such as his defence of a single God because it would be contradictory to suppose there were two or more infinite beings of the same kind, owe a debt to Clarke and the rationalist tradition.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, [p. i].

<sup>98</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 160–74. For the Baron d'Holbach's view, see Alan Charles Kors, 'The Atheism of d'Holbach and Naigeon' in Michael Hunter and David Wotton (eds), *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 273–300.

<sup>99</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, 3; Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, pp. xvii–xviii.

<sup>100</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 182–95. Clarke's argument is to be found in *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (London, 1705). See Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*, ed. Ezio Lailati (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), Introduction.

<sup>101</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 65–6.

For Priestley, there must be a self-existing first cause, since otherwise it would be impossible to account for appearances. What are commonly designated causes are not really such, since they do not fully explain their own or any other being's existence. If they did, there would be no need to refer to a prior or superior cause.<sup>102</sup> In *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, he additionally claims that the idea of a cause 'implies not only something prior to itself or at least cotemporary with itself, but something capable at least of comprehending what it produces.'<sup>103</sup> He recognized from the first that Hume's scepticism about causality constituted a challenge to this argument. He finally turned to disarm it in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*.<sup>104</sup>

For God's intelligence, power, benevolence, and moral governance, Priestley relies on the argument from design. He argues that as it is evident from experience that a chair, say, is initially produced by a designer distinct from itself and capable of comprehending its nature and uses, so wherever there is a fitness or correspondence of one thing to another, there must be a cause capable of grasping and designing that fitness. Human beings make tables, but there must be a superior cause, God, who designed and produced human beings.<sup>105</sup>

The attributes to which Priestley devotes the lion's share of attention are God's goodness and benevolence. For him, benevolence is inferred from God's evident intention to promote the happiness of his creatures, an objective which, he claims, can be seen to be achieved from an examination of God's creatures and reflection on the progressive improvement of the state of the world over time, most evidently over the previous century. Even war, he observes, is 'unspeakably less dreadful than formerly'—a consideration that has not worn well.<sup>106</sup>

For Priestley, if there is a difficulty, it lies with the inference to the infinity of God's benevolence. Given that infinite happiness is

<sup>102</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, 5–7.

<sup>103</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 41.

<sup>104</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. II, 208; Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 196–201. Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, sects. iv–v.

<sup>105</sup> See Robert H. Hurlbutt, *Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument*, revised edn. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

<sup>106</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, 82.

impossible for finite beings, God appears to have done the best that could be done for his creation, notwithstanding the existence of pain, disease, and death. For even these evils contribute to God's purpose, whether that be the welfare of individuals or the overall sum of happiness through the course of time, since, he claims, a succession of creatures enhances the overall sum of happiness more than the continuance of the same creatures. He acknowledges that if God is infinitely benevolent, resourceful, and powerful, it is arguable that human nature might have been constructed without mixing good and evil. His answer is that since everything appears for the best for us, so too it is reasonable to suppose this is so for the whole, some appearances notwithstanding.

In his arguments Priestley opposes Hume, whose *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* systematically seeks to dismantle such reasoning. Priestley, who had never been impressed by Hume's philosophical ability, clearly sees this to be his real intention when he notes that while Philo, the sceptic, awards the palm of victory to Cleanthes, the champion of the argument from design, Hume gives Philo the best of the argument.<sup>107</sup> Priestley dismisses Hume's arguments out of hand, although most readers judge them to be far more powerful than he credits.

Priestley was not content to leave his dismissal of Hume at that. He also engaged with other aspects of his philosophy as well as with inferences Christians characteristically drew from it. One discussion of special interest is of Hume's account of causation based on the observation of constant conjunction.<sup>108</sup> Hume's analysis poses two central difficulties for Priestley. The first is that Hume claims that anything may produce anything. If so, it would be entirely possible for the universe to come into existence or to have existed from eternity without a cause. One Christian response was to reject the principle that apparently leads to this conclusion by looking for a source of the idea of causation outside sensory experience. This is not a lead Priestley, given his empiricist commitments, can follow. His reply is simply that on the basis of experience 'it is indelibly impressed upon the minds of all men, that all events whatever, and all productions

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 127.

<sup>108</sup> Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sect. vii.

whatever, must have a necessary and adequate cause; so that “nothing can come to be without a cause foreign to itself”.<sup>109</sup> Hume denies that experience can show this to be true of the universe.

Unlike Hume, Priestley views causation as a highly complex abstract idea based on a very large number of different sensory impressions and the association of ideas. True, when we see the behaviour of iron near a magnet, we cannot give a satisfactory explanation *why* this should be. Yet invariable experience and knowledge of the circumstances warrants concluding that magnets necessarily have such an effect. There is in short ‘*some* real and sufficient cause in all such conjunctions.’<sup>110</sup> Priestley notes in his *Examination of Reid* that when

the same events never fail to take place in the same circumstances, the *expectation* of the same consequences from the same previous circumstances is necessarily generated in our minds, and we can have no more suspicion of a different event, than we can separate the idea of *whiteness* from that of the other properties of *milk*.<sup>111</sup>

This is a point about the mind and does not itself justify the view that there is a real necessitating cause present when there are such conjunctions. For Priestley, however, there is more to it than that. For it is not just any constant conjunction that justifies the supposition that necessity is in play, but ones that explain *how* the cause comes to have such an effect. One of Priestley’s examples is how it is that the sounding of one string on a musical instrument causes a second string in unison with the first to vibrate. That explanation arises from coming to know that sound is a vibratory motion of the air that produces the vibration of the second string. Thus to say causes necessitate effects is to say that their relation is governed by a law of nature, and there could not be a cause without an effect unless this law were violated. But violated he believes it can be by miracles. Putting this last to the side, Priestley’s reply is still problematic because Hume denies there is a secure empirical foundation that the

<sup>109</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I*, 199.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 199. See Richard Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego, CA: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 213–26.

<sup>111</sup> Priestley, *Examination of Dr Reid’s Inquiry*, pp. xl–xli.

future will be like the past. James Harris has recently suggested the most plausible explanation why Priestley does not appear bothered by Hume's argument is that he regards the laws of nature as expressions 'of the unchanging will of God'.<sup>112</sup> But if that is the explanation, it must be based, as Harris observes, on something other than experimental reasoning.

According to Priestley, one can derive all God's other moral perfections including justice, mercy, and truth from his benevolence.<sup>113</sup> God's benevolence is expressed as an impartial regard for the general happiness of the totality of his creatures and mankind in particular. This impartial regard, he argues, is consistent with the unequal distribution of happiness so long as inequality promotes a greater degree and sum of happiness.<sup>114</sup> This standard is the basis for the 'rule' of right and wrong.<sup>115</sup> In general, for Priestley, human virtue turns on observing rules. God is not so bound in showing mercy, for example, because he knows 'the secrets of [our] hearts'.<sup>116</sup> It is only exceptionally that departures from rules designed to promote virtue can be justified because such deviations are liable to produce more harm than good.

The highest order rules for right and wrong, however, are not intended as direct guides to human conduct. The first is regard for the happiness of others, which Priestley takes as equivalent to obedience to God's will; the second, regard for our own *real* happiness, so long as it does not come at the expense of others.<sup>117</sup> The difficulty in applying the first rule is that very little good would result if one did.<sup>118</sup> Unlike God, human benevolence is limited and not subject to strict impartiality, for the greatest good to others is promoted if humans prefer those closest to them, not only marriage partners and children, but also their country.<sup>119</sup> Self-interest, moreover, is best promoted when it is not our direct aim. There may be prudence, but not virtue unless other motives are also at play. Real self-interest entails that we heed God and do good to others as well as heeding conscience, which

<sup>112</sup> Harris, 'Joseph Priestley and "The Proper Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity"', 41–4.

<sup>113</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, 52–5.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 43.      <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* 61.      <sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 61–3.      <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* 93.      <sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* 114–17.



Priestley analyses as the psychological internalization of these rules, which allows us to act when there is no time for deliberation.<sup>120</sup> Self-interest is promoted through regard for the good of others, within the constraints Priestley identifies. Whatever failure there is in rewarding virtue in this life will be rectified in the after life. That this is so cannot be established with certainty by natural religion, although he maintains there is some evidence from the analogy of nature, including the improving state of things in the world.

Like Locke in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), however, Priestley claims it is necessary to look to revelation for a complete, perspicuous, and fully authoritative system of ethics as well as for stronger assurance of the motives for virtue.<sup>121</sup> Natural religion, by itself, is too abstract and general. He reviews the ethical systems of those who preceded Christianity, who generally did not connect religion and morality, as well as deists who reject revelation and atheists.<sup>122</sup> The contrast, he argues, can be seen in the difference between Christians and non-Christians on a host of issues, including the propriety of suicide and the status of chastity and humility as virtues and of fornication and sodomy as vices. Where Priestley in so many domains is anything but a conventional thinker, when it comes to the content of morals, he comes across as quite conservative. For him, it is possible in some restricted sense to be a virtuous atheist, but the knowledge of morality's full scope and the strongest motives for acting morally depend on God.<sup>123</sup> The way that life is viewed and its significance are entirely different, Priestley argues, as between a believer and an atheist. In one of his late American works, *Socrates and Jesus Compared*, Priestley, who takes Socrates as embodying the best the non-Christian world has to offer, compares him adversely to Christ and attributes the unfavourable comparison to the inferiority of Socrates' knowledge 'concerning God, providence and a future state'.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. I, 63, 124.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. II, 173–4. For Locke's view, see the particularly useful edition of John C. Higgins Biddle, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), ch. 14.

<sup>122</sup> Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, I, pt. II, 196–7.

<sup>123</sup> Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I*, p. vi.

<sup>124</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (Philadelphia, 1803), 40.

## CONCLUSION

Priestley's chief importance as a philosophical theorist lies in keeping alive, clarifying, and deepening lines of thought under threat of being marginalized as the exclusive preserve of unbelievers. His forthright and lucid championing of the cause of necessity, most notably, made it easier to entertain such a view impartially and more difficult to dismiss it out of hand. His spirited defence of the doctrines of necessity and materialism has been singled out for praise by the likes of the Victorian scientist T. H. Huxley, who found his 'among the most powerful, clear, and unflinching expositions of materialism and necessarianism which exist in the English language'.<sup>125</sup> That praise is now dated, but it is clear that he exercised a strong influence for some time to come for just these reasons. As James Harris observes, Priestley's formulation of the doctrine of necessity became the point of departure for defenders of necessity for the next 40 years in Britain, particularly among dissenters, as Thomas Reid's libertarianism did on the other side of the debate.<sup>126</sup> He did not enjoy such an influence in the formulation of materialism. As John Yolton has observed, most failed to take on board what was distinctive and original in his version of the doctrine.<sup>127</sup> As for his third major philosophical interest, the association of ideas, he served as a champion of Hartley through his edition, but the loss of his manuscript during the Birmingham riots meant that this potential legacy was left unrealized.

Priestley has not enjoyed the same attention from contemporary philosophers as many whom he opposed, such as Reid, Clarke, or Price, or, for that matter, many who influenced him, such as Hartley, Collins, or Locke. His account of religion, natural and revealed, is the exception.<sup>128</sup> Unlike any of these other thinkers, there is no contemporary book dedicated to his philosophical thought generally, as there should be. He appears more prominently in histories of the development of ideas in the eighteenth century, notably of materialism,

<sup>125</sup> T. H. Huxley, *Science and Education: Essays* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899), 22.

<sup>126</sup> Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 17. <sup>127</sup> Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, 200.

<sup>128</sup> For Priestley on natural religion, see Schofield, I, ch. 7, and Schofield, II, ch. 2.

necessitarianism, and notions of personal identity.<sup>129</sup> Valuable as they are, such accounts ignore the systematic quality of Priestley's philosophical thought to which he attaches so much weight.

<sup>129</sup> His contribution to eighteenth-century materialism is canvassed by Yolton, *Thinking Matter*; to necessitarianism by Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity*; and to personal identity by Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).