

**THE APPEAL OF INTEGRATION:
THE INFLUENCE OF JOSEPH PRIESTLEY ON THE
DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISUAL ARTS AND FICTION IN THE
LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES.**

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PRIESTLEY AND UNITARIANISM

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) was a leading figure in the development of English Unitarianism. His unique blend of optimism, liberalism, commitment to intellectual freedom and inquiry, his wide-ranging intellectual interests alongside an unswerving religious conviction, ensured that he became the dominant voice in rational dissent in England in the eighteenth century. His position as a student and lecturer at Warrington Academy made the propagation of his views easier within dissenting communities throughout the country during that period.

Priestley was very influenced by David Hartley's 'Observations on Man', which he read as a student at Warrington Academy between 1752 and 1755. Priestley's integrated view of knowledge led to an easy acceptance and development of 'associationism', a theory which had scientific and theological application for him, as for many other eighteenth century scholars.¹ Derived from Locke and Newton, but most convincingly presented in Hartley, it was an attempt to explain the internal structure of matter and its forces, and sought to deal with the mind-body dualism of Descartes. It hypothesised, in theological terms that:

... God was the uncreated Being, existent from the beginning, and with Him, as necessary consequences of His existence, but not attributes of it, were space and time. By an act of Divine Will, matter had been created, homogeneous, particulate, and possessing position, extension, and movement. And the constant acting Will of the Immanent Creator was manifest in the forceful principles of interaction of those particles of matter, principles deterministically expressed in natural law, describable in mathematical terms, and confirmable by experiment. It was a mark of God's wisdom and contrivance that He should produce so great a variety of effects by so simple and easy a method.²

Priestley outlines his views on the problem of free will and necessitarianism (a form of determinism) in *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777). It has been pointed out that Priestley's views can be reduced to three propositions: that all actions have motives; that motives are causes; and that everything (including actions, events and the causes of

actions) has a cause.³ Priestley's views prompted a prolonged but amicable exchange of ideas with Richard Price, a theologian and philosopher for whom Priestley had a great respect (although Price did not agree with him on this issue). Their exchange of ideas was published in 1778 as *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley*.

Priestley applied this theory in his scientific experimentation. It also became the basis for his strong renunciation of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, because Priestley claimed that Thomas Reid's identification of inherent principles of the mind was unnecessary, as associationism offered a simpler, sounder explanation. Priestley claimed that Reid's 'vain multiplication of explanatory entities' contravened Newton's first Rule of Reasoning; that we are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are sufficient to explain their appearances. His views are outlined in 'An examination of Dr. Reid's inquiry into the human mind on the principles of common sense' (1774).⁴ While Scottish Common Sense Philosophy had an impact on the Harvard Unitarians, it was far less influential in English Unitarianism.

Priestley's central position in the development of Unitarian thought meant that his theological understandings stemming from associationism had a major impact on rational dissent. He believed that human behaviour, issuing always from predetermined motives, was perfectible, and could be brought into line with divine intent. This process of personal sanctification, if interrupted by moral abrogation, had to be taken up again after the inevitable consequences of personal failing were confronted. Priestley rejected any doctrine of substitutionary atonement, at one stage accepting Arian views, but later modifying them to a completely Socinian Christology. Priestley's indebtedness to Hartley's concept of associationism is discussed in Priestley's memoirs. While a lecturer at Warrington Academy (1761-1767) Priestley was an Arian. He became a Socinian when a minister at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds (1767-1773).

He became a confirmed materialist, rejecting the dualism of Descartes, allowing only for a final supernatural intervention in the last days, when deceased believers would be completely and miraculously reconstituted in order to spend eternity with God. He could not explain in scientific terms how this was possible. By stressing the indivisible nature of the material and the spiritual, associationism proposed a strong relationship between human behaviour and spiritual consequences, and between divine imperatives and personal outcomes. As a universalist, he believed that a benevolent God

would ensure the eternal security of all. An extract from Priestley's memoirs indicates the development of these combined viewpoints:

...I published the third and last part of my 'Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion'; and having in the preface attacked the principles of Dr. Reid, Dr. Beattie, and Dr. Oswald, with respect to their doctrine of "common sense", which they made to supersede all rational inquiry into the subject of religion, I was led to consider their system in a separate work, which though written in a manner that I do not entirely approve, has, I hope, upon the whole, been of service to the cause of free inquiry and truth.

In the preface I had expressed my belief of the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, but without any design to pursue *the subject*, and also my great admiration of Dr. Hartley's theory of the human mind, as indeed I had taken many opportunities of doing before. This led me to publish that part of his 'Observations of Man', which related to the doctrine of *association* of ideas, detached from the doctrine of vibrations, prefixing 'Three Dissertations', explanatory of his general system. In one of these I expressed some doubt of the immateriality of the sentient principle in man; and the outcry that was made on what I casually expressed on that subject can hardly be imagined. In all the newspapers, and most of the periodical publications, I was represented as an unbeliever in revelation, and no better than an Atheist.⁵

Priestley's contribution to the development of scientific thought, theological understanding, and liberal education⁶ should not be underestimated. His balanced and unsectarian integration of faith and knowledge often made him a provocative figure, acceptable to neither the religiously orthodox, nor those on the growth edge of humanist thinking. But his capacity to incorporate facets of these recent developments into his faith made him an appealing leader in the intellectually aware and liberal-minded Unitarian milieu to which he belonged.

Selected extracts from material written by English Unitarians in the first half of the nineteenth century indicate that Priestley's notion of determinism persisted for some time. Although the general acceptance of associationism and its derivative philosophical conclusions declined under the influence of Romanticism, there are some startling examples, within Unitarian circles, of the acceptance of the strong relationship between behaviour and consequences. W. R. Greg, a member of the Gaskell's Cross Street Chapel congregation and prominent social campaigner, wrote in 1851 that:

The doctrine of the eternity of future punishments, false as it must be in its ordinary signification, contains a glimpse of one of the most awful and indisputable truths ever presented to human understanding - viz., the eternal and ineffaceable consequences of our every action, the fact that every word and deed produces effects which must, by the very nature of things reverberate through all time, so that the whole futurity would be different had that word never been spoken, or that deed enacted.⁷

PRIESTLEY AND JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797) was a prominent painter who worked, as his name suggests, in and around the manufacturing town of Derby, where the atmosphere of industrial progress suited his vigorous spirit of amateur scientific inquiry. Many of his best known works are articulated by strong chiaroscuro, often from a single light source, and they frequently depict scientific experiments. He often watched experiments by lamplight at night in the homes of friends and colleagues and became fascinated by the play of light in such situations. He also painted lunar landscapes.

Joseph Priestley was one of a number of philosophers and scientists who formed the Lunar Society in Birmingham. A similar society was formed in Derby and such groups drew much of their support from prominent Unitarians such as Josiah Wedgwood. Joseph Wright of Derby was influenced in a general sense in the emphases and subject matter of his painting by the highly integrated view of philosophical, scientific and artistic inquiry that Priestley and others fostered in their intellectual pursuits.

One example will have to suffice. Joseph Priestley made use of an air pump in his scientific experiments, demonstrating, rather gruesomely, the effect of the absence of air on birds and small animals. This subject is strikingly captured in a painting by Joseph Wright of Derby entitled 'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump' (c.1767-8). The mixture of fascination with and fear of scientific discovery makes this an engaging work. The domestic nature of the scene (especially the presence of children) creates an interesting blend of emotion and intellectual detachment.

PRIESTLEY AND COLERIDGE

It is generally acknowledged that before 1801-2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge's philosophical views were dominated by his interest in philosophical materialism and religious Unitarianism.⁸ His admiration and respect for Hartley and Priestley is best reflected in 'Religious Musings', which he began in 1794. In this extended work, what he calls a 'desultory poem', Coleridge explores the theological implications of Hartley's and later Priestley's associationist theory. At one point he even makes direct reference to both men. First Hartley:

... and he of mortal kind
Wisest, he first who marked the ideal tribes
Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain. (lines 368-370)

And then Priestley:

Lo! Priestley there, patriot, and saint, and sage,
Him, full of years, from his loved native land
Statesmen blood-stained and priests idolatrous
By dark lies maddening the blind multitude
Drove with vain hate. Calm, pitying he retired,
And mused expectant on these promised years. (lines 371-376)

Priestley was sympathetic to the French Revolution, and Coleridge could not resist alluding to the fact that in 1791 his home was burned down by an angry mob and his scientific apparatus destroyed. In 1794 Priestley set sail for America.⁹

'Religious Musings' indicates that Coleridge accepted Priestley's development of Hartley's views. Priestley had reprinted sections of *Observations of Man* (1749), modifying some sections and adding some essays of his own.¹⁰ He went beyond Hartley in abolishing the distinction between matter and spirit,¹¹ and suggested that Hartley's notion of human perfectibility was not restricted to the development of individuals, but could be applied to the entire history of humankind.¹² This view is espoused in a work by Priestley entitled *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind on the principle of the Association of Ideas* (1775), and is dependent on the basic principles of associationist theory:

Hartley supposed that through the association of sense impressions in the mind, more 'complex ideas' (Locke's term) would be formed, which themselves would associate to give higher and higher perceptions. He thus described a hierarchy of knowledge, from ideas of sense (the raw material for the mind) to ideas of imagination, ambition, self-interest, sympathy, theophany (visible presence of God), and finally the moral sense.¹³

At various points 'Religious Musings' reflects this emphasis. One example will suffice:

From Hope and firmer Faith to perfect Love
Attracted and absorbed: and centered there
God only to behold, and know, and feel,
Till by exclusive consciousness of God
All self-annihilated it shall make
God its Identity: God all in all!
We and our Father one!

And blest are they,
Who in this fleshly World, the elect of Heaven,
Their strong eye darting through the deeds of men,
Adore with steadfast unpresuming gaze
Him Nature's essence, mind, and energy!

And gazing, trembling, patiently ascend
Treading beneath their feet all visible things
As steps, that upward to their Father's throne
Lead gradual - else nor glorified nor loved.' (lines 39-53)

The influence of Priestley's philosophical conclusions on the work of Coleridge was short-lived but significant.

PRIESTLEY AND ELIZABETH GASKELL

Joseph Priestley's influence on the work of the mid Victorian author, Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), was again indirect, but easily explained in terms of her lifelong association with English Unitarianism. Her family background was Unitarian, and when she married William Gaskell, a prominent Unitarian minister, she reinforced her connections with the largely intellectual, upper middle-class Unitarian milieu that was so well represented in cities such as Manchester during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Throughout the many years that William Gaskell was the minister at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, Elizabeth was constantly exposed to his sermons and to the teachings of other leading Unitarians of her day.

As explained earlier, Joseph Priestley was a key figure in the development of English Unitarianism and his influence continued well into the nineteenth century. It is obvious, especially in her earlier work, that Elizabeth Gaskell was influenced by his notion of associationism or necessarianism.

Central to any fictional engagement in her work, and especially in regard to the issue of individual moral responsibility and suffering, are certain theocratic assumptions. Her work, in the main, infers the notion of a benevolent God, whose dealings with his creatures are principally determined by their adherence to well-defined moral dictates. Moral transgression has consequences, and if it is not always valid to suggest that in her work suffering is directly inflicted by God, then it often arises as a result of the natural law of cause and effect.

In her work Elizabeth Gaskell ranges widely across the doctrinal emphases available in such assumptions. At times, particularly in her early work, she appears to accept a form of rigid determinism which overrides any notion of human responsibility or free-will. The human species simply becomes the victim of a relentless, mechanistic divine will. Usually, however, this view is considerably softened to an acceptance of human

suffering as the result of moral transgression. Occasionally this is taken further, to suggest the more comforting distinction between an immutable moral order and a benevolent divine being whose purpose is to use the resultant suffering as a means of spiritual reconciliation.

Elizabeth Gaskell's theodicy, as reflected in the corpus of her work, appears through her writing career to be steered away from the rigid notions of determinism with which she began to a more ambivalent and liberal position. This can be demonstrated in works such as 'My Diary' (1833-38), *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), and *Cousin Phillis* (1865). As the influence of Priestleyan notions of determinism waned, it was replaced in her work by a greater acceptance of the potential of free-will, an emphasis introduced into English Unitarianism by the less rationalistic, more liberal teachings of James Martineau, the leading figure in nineteenth century English Unitarianism.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF PRIESTLEY'S INFLUENCE

There are clear indications that other major literary and artistic figures in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England were influenced by Priestley. This came about, if not directly, then at very least through his strong espousal and popularisation of Hartley's philosophy.

Turner (1775-1851), the painter, appears to have derived ideas and images in 'Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus' from Priestley. John Gage has shown that the shining sea-creatures with stars on their brows depicted in this painting can be traced directly to Priestley's *History and Present State of Discoveries Relating to Vision, Light and Colour*.¹⁴

Wordsworth also appears to have been influenced by Hartley's associationist theory, probably through Coleridge. It is noticeable, however, in browsing through Wordsworthian criticism, that this is a contentious issue. Hartley's notion of 'theopathy', the 'sympathetic passive feeling excited by the contemplation of God', a result he suggested was brought about by a favourable series of sensations and associations, was an understanding that appealed to Wordsworth. This was especially relevant to the meaning Wordsworth found in his mature contemplation of youthful pleasures).¹⁵ It is evident in 'Tintern Abbey' and the well-known lines from 'Expostulation and Reply':

The eye - it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,

Against or with our will.
Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

There are other figures that could be mentioned as well. A serious reconsideration of the sustained and diverse nature of Joseph Priestley's influence would appear to be well overdue. Although much of his influence appears to have been indirect or as the result of his enthusiastic propagation of the views of others, such as Hartley, he was, nevertheless, a major figure. A significant number of leading literary and artistic figures appear to have derived varying degrees of theoretical impetus for their work from Joseph Priestley.

REFERENCES

- 1 Schofield, pp. 69-81.
- 2 Ibid, p. 72.
- 3 Thomas, p. 161.
- 4 Schofield, p. 75.
- 5 Ibid., 113.
- 6 Watts, pp. 83-100.
- 7 Wigmore-Beddoes, p.283.
- 8 Boulger, p.12
- 9 Willey, page 34.
- 10 Boulger, page 13.
- 11 Willey, page 35.
- 12 Wylie, page 76.
- 13 Wylie, pages 74-75.
- 14 Priestley's *Memoirs*, p. 45].
- 15 Groom, p. 29.