Happiness and Religion: Joseph Priestley's "Theological Utilitarianism"*

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was one of the most prominent English thinkers in the late eighteenth century. The main purposes of the present paper are to show his idea of utilitarianism (theological utilitarianism), which differs from that of Jeremy Bentham (secular utilitarianism), and to incorporate Priestley into a theological utilitarian. The difference between Priestley and Bentham stems from the disparity in their understanding of "happiness." Priestley's concept of "happiness" implies that human beings can keep endeavoring to attain "higher happiness" in the future, guided by divine providence. In short, to Priestley, "happiness" means the "perfection" of human nature, or the ability by which the greatest good is accomplished. It is thus possible to say that Priestley developed theological utilitarianism, which is based on his Christian belief in God. This paper also attempts to clarify that Priestley's utilitarianism follows and subscribes to the ideas of Francis Hutcheson and David Hartley.

Keywords: Joseph Priestley, Jeremy Bentham, theological utilitarianism, happiness
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1 Introduction

The paper mainly aims to elucidate Joseph Priestley's utilitarianism as theological utilitarianism, which differs from Jeremy Bentham's secular utilitarianism. According to Crimmins (1983, 522–524), theological utilitarianism, coined by Lecky (1869) and later used by Earnest Albee (1901), means that "the religious aspect is clearly the trait that dominates utilitarian ethics in England before Bentham." Scarre (1969) connects Utilitarianism with Enlightenment and

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refers to Priestley and Bentham. Scarre regards Priestley and Paley as theological utilitarianism's "most important defenders in the later eighteenth century (60)," and Bentham as a "practical," not metaphysical, thinker. Though Crimmins does not refer to Priestley, I will demonstrate that Priestley can also be included in the field of theological utilitarianism.

To prove this point, I will discuss the subject broadly under four sections: (1) Priestley's two features in his social philosophy, (2) Benthamite secular utilitarianism, (3) Priestley's theological utilitarianism, and (4) conclusion.

2 The two aspects of Priestley's social philosophy

Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) is known as the first to discover the nature of oxygen and a number of other core gases, identify carbon dioxide and invent soda water and carbonated drinks, and demonstrate some of the basic processes of photosynthesis. Therefore, because he had revolutionized experimental chemistry, he is primarily regarded as a scientist today. In truth, he was multifaceted: he was a theologian, philosopher, educationalist, historian, and productive writer, having published many works on grammar, rhetoric, history, and political and economic theory. When he passed away in 1804, he had published more than 200 books, pamphlets, sermons, and essays.[1] In this paper, I will concentrate on the theological and philosophical aspects of his massive body of work.

Priestley is identified as a Lockean Radical, together with Richard Price (1723–1791). Lockean Radicals are generally construed as those who acquired many ideas from John Locke (1632–1704) and applied them to their own societies. According to Dickinson (1977), in the eighteenth century, "radicals absorbed the political theories of John Locke, Algernon Sidney, James Tyrrell, and other Whig propagandists of the late seventeenth century, but interpreted them in a straightforward, literal fashion." Locke's political and social thought are based on the theory of natural right, advocating that a government be constructed by a contract among people and that people's property be guaranteed as a reward for their labor (Dickinson 1977, 198–199). In *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1768), Priestley declares he will follow in and develop Locke's political and social thought: "I had placed the foundation of those most valuable interests of mankind on a broader and firmer basis, in consequence of my availing myself of a more accurate and extensive system of morals and policy, than was adopted by Mr. Locke, and others who formerly wrote upon this subject" (Priestley 1768, 3).

On the other hand, Priestley is also known as a utilitarian, from whom Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) adopted the phrase "the greatest happiness of the

[1] For more full studies about Priestley's career, see Rivers and Wykes (eds.) (2008).

greatest number" and its philosophy. Bentham said, "By an early pamphlet of Priestley's, the date of which has fled from me recollection, light was added to the warmth. In the phrase, 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number,' I then saw delineated, for the first time, a plain as well as a true standard for whatever is right or wrong, useful, useless, or mischievous in human conduct, whether in the field of morals or of politics"[2] (Bentham 1843, 79). However, Bentham later realizes that, in fact, the phrase that caught his attention had been originally used by either Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) or Cesane Bonesana Beccaria (1738–1794). Ignoring Bentham's "error," some scholars insist that Priestley and William Paley (1743–1850) were the predecessors of Bentham's utilitarianism. For example, Joseph A. Schumpeter (1883–1950) states: "The essential of the utilitarian system had … been presented before in the *Principles of Morals and Political Philosophy* (1785) by William Paley, and some of them in the *Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1768) by Joseph Priestley" (Schumpeter 1954, 131).[3]

Priestley's political and social thought has two features: Locke's political and social thought (in particular, the natural right theory[4]) and utilitarianism. Chuhei Sugiyama (1974, 70) criticizes Priestley in that the theory of natural law or natural right coexists with utilitarianism, pursuing social utility without providing valid and convincing explanations. Also, Isaac Kramnick (1990, 96–97) says, "Priestley's liberalism … had two dimensions. … He was committed to a natural rights liberalism on the one hand and to utilitarian liberalism on the other. Priestley was a bridge between two variants of liberalism." In earlier studies, including those of Schumpeter, however, the difference between Bentham and Priestley is not made clear.

Below, I will show that Priestley's utilitarianism differs from that of Bentham. It is extremely important to recognize that Bentham rejects the theological ethics that Priestley adheres to. Utilitarianism is divided into two types, theological and secular, depending on whether or not there are religious elements. Priestley's utilitarianism is referred to as theological utilitarianism and Bentham's, as secular utilitarianism. Crimmins (1983, 524) notes that "there was a distinctive thread of utilitarian ethics which is religious in character and can be set apart from the more diffuse development of the secular version of the doctrine."

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[2] Later, Bentham added, "Priestley was the First (unless it was Beccaria) who taught my lips to pronounce this search truth:—That the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation" (142).

[3] According to Nagai (2001), both Karl Gunnar Myrdal (1898–1987) and Schumpeter "fully recognize Bentham severely criticizes the thought of natural law, but they believe utilitarianism evolves from the thought of natural law" (52–53).

[4] Tapper (1996), however, says, "Priestley was not a natural-rights theorist, at least not a defender of natural rights" (272). I take a contrary position on Tapper's proposal, as I will later discuss.

3 Bentham's secular utilitarianism

As I mentioned above, Bentham mistakenly assumes that the phrase "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" was written by Priestley in his *Essays*. In fact, Priestley uses a similar expression: "[T]he good and happiness of members, that is the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined" (Priestley 1768, 14).

However, Bentham's concept of happiness greatly differs from that of Priestley. We have to pay careful attention to the difference because the concept of happiness is important in the history of utilitarianism. Mulgan notes that "perhaps the most important question dividing utilitarians is the definition of happiness or 'well-being'" or 'utility' or 'whatever makes life worth living'" (Mulgan 2007, 3).

Bentham published *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* in 1789, wherein his view of happiness is well expressed. He regards happiness as "benefit, advantage, pleasure, good" and unhappiness as "the happening of mischief, pain, evil." Bentham goes on to say that "if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual." However, "The interest of the community" is "the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it (community)" because "[t]he community is a fictitious *body*" (Bentham 1789, ch. 1 §2–3). He therefore thinks that happiness is achieved by each individual.

Bentham, as is well known, also defines happiness as the maximum of pleasures or the minimum of pains: a "thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains" (Bentham 1789, ch. 1 §5). According to him, happiness is measured by comparing pleasures with pains.

However, if people leave "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" to individual and selfish conduct, happiness will happen only by chance. Thus, to Bentham, the role of a legislator is extremely important since "the happiness of the individuals, of whom a community is composed, that is their pleasures and their security, is the end and the sole end which the legislator ought to have in view" (Bentham 1789, ch. 3 §1). He also believes that "the object of" the principle of utility or the theory of greatest happiness "is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law" (Bentham 1789, ch. 1 §1). People can accomplish "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" by making artificial laws (especially penal laws), thus creating a harmonious society.

For Bentham, an atheist, utilitarianism has no place for religious elements. Legislators must not be dependent on religion or religious principles. Bentham scathingly blames the Established Church's being connected with the state for the resulting ethical corruption and decadence, and obstruction to progress and

reform. Also, he would not defend natural religion, which presupposes the existence of God.

Bentham regards happiness as secular and replaces religious principles with secular ones. The purpose of his utilitarianism is to calculate pleasures and pains and work out moral order in this world.[5]

4 Priestley's theological utilitarianism

What is theological utilitarianism? The idea of theological utilitarianism ultimately pursues "perfection," that is, to approximate the position of God. Theological utilitarianism is based on the idea that happiness can be achieved by following natural law and the command of God, and it postulates that human beings are one of the creatures created by God. However, human beings cannot exist independently, separated from society. Accordingly, human beings are regarded as the existence designed by God and led by the light of nature in order to achieve "perfection" in society. Natural law is looked upon as a necessary canon for maintaining social order. In other words, when human beings follow natural law and are led by God, they can obtain happiness in this world.

The underlying concepts of theological utilitarianism held by the eighteenth century thinkers are that human conduct to promote happiness is good, while the opposite conduct is evil; and that happiness-promoting conduct per se is following the providence and will of God. Theological utilitarianism stems from the concept that happiness is closely connected with religious belief. One of the key issues in theological utilitarianism is how to achieve "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." Most importantly, happiness should be viewed not only from the standpoint of this world, but also from the standpoint of the next world.

Priestley defines social principles as "a disposition to love, and to do kind offices to our fellow-creatures" (Priestley 1772–1774, 43). Social principles lead people to two principles of conduct, "one of which is obedience to the will of God, and the other a regard to own real happiness" (*Ibid.*, 25). However, people must not pursue happiness selfishly and ignore the happiness of others because the purpose of God in creating humans is to make them happy. God "must, consequently, prefer the happiness of the whole to that of any individuals, it cannot be his pleasure, that we should consult our own interest, at the expense of that of others. Considering ourselves, therefore, not as separate individuals,

[5] See also Crimmins (1990). We need to pay attention to many commentators who refer to Bentham's religious views. For example, Stephen (1950) stresses that Bentham gave up religious elements and regarded the next world as a fancy. Otonashi (1994) also maintained Bentham was a complete empiricist because he believed that the ideas of God and the future world were demonstrated by experience.

but as members of society" (*Ibid.*, 26–27). Priestley thinks that the two principles of conduct cannot clash and can achieve social happiness because they are created by God.

Priestley views the universe as a harmonious structure managed by the benevolent providence of God. The structure has moral order created by God. According to him, therefore, this world is ruled by natural and mechanical moral laws created by a benevolent God to promote the happiness of all creatures. People have to employ reason to recognize the laws, whereby they can get close to the state of happiness. Priestley asserts that "a greater happiness can exist in a greater number, than in a smaller" (*Ibid.*, 18). Thus, his concept of happiness itself rests on religious elements, which Bentham does not consider.

Priestley clearly distinguishes happiness in this world from happiness in the future. According to him, the greatest happiness in this world is to pursue charity and the love of God—the supreme practice of benevolence. To him, it is "the most solid and lasting happiness" (Priestley 1787, 121) or "a state of the most complete happiness" (*Ibid.*, 134–135). "This doctrine abounds with the noblest practical uses, and points out directly the great rule of life and source of happiness" (*Ibid.*, 140).

To Priestley's mind, the happiness that people can obtain in the future is 1) the condition of rest released from hardship, 2) the unlimited and absolute happiness without hunger and thirst, and 3) the condition of glory celebrated by God. His understanding of happiness comes from the Bible. Only the person who obtains the rewards for virtue through right conduct can go to Heaven and enjoy happiness in the future. On the other hand, a person who has done foul deeds is punished and sent to Hell and is therefore not entitled to enjoy happiness. Priestley also understands that virtue arising from right conduct not only leads to happiness in this world but also carries over in the future. Happiness in this world can be seen by reason and observation, whereas happiness in the future can be recognized from the Bible. That is, people can recognize and strive for happiness by exercising the reason God has given them and understanding natural law. By differentiating happiness in this world from happiness in the future, Priestley is able to observe how people enjoy happiness in this world while aiming for happiness in the future.

Priestley does not touch on the problem of inequality caused by people's liberal conduct. He, in fact, admits the system of rank (e.g., Priestley 1772–1774, 18). Associating happiness in this world with inequalities, his idea gradually inclines towards the theory that justifies the enjoyment of wealth accumulated by manufactures.

The difference between Priestley's and Bentham's utilitarian systems is similar to the difference between Hutcheson's and Bentham's utilitarianism. I would like to examine Hutcheson's idea of natural feeling led by divine providence. Hutcheson bases his thought on utilitarian principles. To him, the pursuit of happiness is not just a right, but a duty as well, whereby a person can be blessed by God and be able to promote the common good. The characteristics of virtue,

that is, the benevolent feeling, in Hutcheson's thought, is approved by God. In *System of Moral Philosophy*, Hutcheson declares, "In other animal-kinds each one has instincts toward its proper action, and has the highest enjoyment in following them, even with toil and some pain. Can we suppose mankind void of such principles?" (Hutcheson 1755, 58).

Hutcheson's answer, of course, is that such principles apply to human beings. Human beings have "a natural and immediate determination to approve certain affections, and actions consequent upon them; or a natural sense of immediate excellence in them" (*Ibid.*). The "natural sense" promotes social goods and approves beneficial behavior for society. According to Hutcheson, natural law is identified through such behaviors. "Precepts of the law of nature … are deemed immutable and eternal, because some rules, or rather the dispositions which give origin to them, and in which they are founded, must always tend to the general good, and the contrary to the general detriment, in such a system of creatures as we are" (*Ibid.*, 273).

Thus, Hutcheson's moral system is quite similar to that of Priestley. Their utilitarianism (unlike Bentham's) presupposes the existence of a moral order provided by God. In other words, they construct social order while keeping religious elements.

Such theological ideas of Priestley are also based on the associationism of David Hartley (1705–1757) in *Observations on Man*. According to Hartley, ideas and attitudes are formed in the human mind through association. We tend to know more complicated ideas and feelings in our own life by combining senses. Through the progress of human nature, "we move by a natural progress via imagination, ambition, and self-interest up to the supreme pleasures of sympathy, "theopathy' (the love of God), and the moral sense." (Allen 1999, 8. Also see chs. 8 and 9, and Canovan, 441) Hartley says "some degree of spirituality is the necessary consequence of passing through life" (Hartley, 82), which implies that "our ultimate happiness appears to be of a spiritual not corporeal nature" (*Ibid.*, 84). Hartley insists that happiness is achieved by spiritual pleasure.

Priestley learns from Hartley that "each individual human being finds his greatest happiness in a condition of moral and intellectual health that is prescribed by nature and God" (Canovan 1984, 443). Priestley emphasizes the importance of subjective and autonomic conduct by adding the belief that human beings as a whole are advancing towards a happier and perfect condition (e.g., Priestley 1791, 466). Modifying Hartley's ideas, Priestley completes his utilitarianism. Priestley considers knowledge a motor that propels people towards a happier and perfect condition. Regarding knowledge and education, Priestley declares that "a man … who has been tolerably well educated, in an improved Christian country, is a being possessed of much greater power, to be, and to make happy, than a person of the same age, in the same, or any other country, some centuries ago." He goes on to say that "knowledge, as Lord Bacon observes, being power, the human powers will, in fact, be increased." Thus, human beings can dominate "nature, including both its materials, and its

laws," and "men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable." As a result, according to Priestley, "whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal, beyond what our imaginations can now conceive" (Priestley 1768, 8–9). To sum up, in Priestley's thought, the ultimate happiness is "perfection." Each human being exercises the ability given to him or her by God, through which he or she can attain the condition of "perfection."

5 The ends of Government

How does Priestley use his theological utilitarianism in his politics? According to Canovan, Priestley, in his *Essay on the First Principles of Government,* employs his utilitarian criteria at "three different levels," that is, "the ends of government," "efficiency and liberty," and "expediency."[6] The following passages from the essay are usually quoted as a summary of Priestley's thought:

> It must necessarily be understood … whether it be expressed or not, that all people live in society for their mutual advantage; so that the good and happiness of the member, that is the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined …
>
> This own it is rather matter of surprise to me, that this great object of all government should have been so little insisted on by our great writers who have treated of this subject, and that more use hath not been made of it. In treating of particular regulations in states, this principle necessarily obtruded itself; all arguments in favour of any law being always drawn from a consideration of its tendency to promote the public good; and yet it has often escaped the notice of writers in discoursing on the first principles of society, and the subject of civil and religious liberty.
>
> This one general idea, properly pursued, throws the greatest light upon the whole system of policy, morals, and, I may add, theology too. To a mind not warped by theological and metaphysical subtitles, the Divine Being appears to be actuated by no other views than the noblest we can conceive, the happiness of his creatures (Priestley 1768, 14).

Of the three levels Canovan refers to, I would like to concentrate on "the ends of government" underlying all of Priestley's politics.

According to Priestley, the government is a means to achieve the perfection of an individual, "[t]he great instrument in the hand of divine providence, of this progress of the species toward perfection, is society, and consequently government" (*Ibid*., 8) and its purpose is to promote the "good and happiness" of

[6] Hole (1989, 71–72) also supports Canovan's interpretation.

the members of the community. The "good and happiness" is provided by God and is gained by confidence in harmonious natural order. "[T]he greatest good of the members of a community" means the greatest good of each member of the community; thus the individual's perfection is the highest happiness.

Priestley considers perfection the highest happiness to be led by natural law and protected by natural right. Natural right is a necessary right to achieve individual happiness, and is a nonaggressive right that rational people forming society never abandoned when they established a government by social contract. When Priestley misunderstands that Edmund Burke (1729/30–1797) denies the social contract theory while presupposing convention as a condition to establish government, Priestley writes:

> But what does this convention respect, beside the secure enjoyment of such advantages, or rights, as have been usually termed natural, as life, liberty, and property, which men had from nature, without societies, or artificial combinations of men? Men cannot, surely, be said to give up their natural rights by entering into a compact for the better securing of them. And if they make a wise compact, they will never wholly exclude themselves from all share in the administration of their government, or some control over it. For without this their stipulated rights would be very insecure. (*Ibid*., 167)

Priestley's theological utilitarianism has a framework of natural law, and the greatest happiness means the perfection of each individual who forms a society. The requirement for guaranteeing perfection is natural right at the time of entering into the social contract. Government, therefore, is responsible for the highest happiness—perfection—and its legitimacy is based on whether or not each individual can achieve perfection.

A typical example of the way in which his utilitarianism and contract theory are connected is found in the discussion on the right of resistance. According to Priestley, it is almost equal to the condition of political slavery that voting rights are not given to people and only a small number of people are in authority. A condition such as this causes a fatal effect because it is contrary to conduct principles. This is clarified by the following statement: "Virtue and right conduct consist in those affections and actions which terminate in the public good; justice and veracity, for instance, having nothing intrinsically excellent in them, separate from their relation to the happiness of mankind; and the whole system of right to power, property, and everything else in society, must be regulated by the same consideration: the decisive question, when any of these subjects are examined, being, what is it that the good of the community requires?" (*Ibid*., 12).

Who judges "what is it that the good of the community requires"? It is judged by the "public servants" who are elected by people. If they occupy high positions or are "called kings, senators, or nobles" enjoying "privileges or prerogative," they are ultimately "public servants." These classes have no power to

promote their own benefits at the sacrifice of people. Thus, if "public servants" abuse their power against the people's will, people can exercise the right of resistance. Priestley declares:

> [I]f the abuses of government should, at any time be great and manifest; if the servants of the people, forgetting their masters, and their master's interest, should pursue a separate one of their own; if, instead of considering that they are made for the people, they should consider the people as made for them; if the oppressions and violations of rights should be great, flagrant, and universally resented; if the tyrannical governors should have no friends but a few sycophants, who had long preyed upon the vitals of their follow citizens, and who might be expected to desert a government, whenever their interests should be detached from it: if, in consequence of these circumstances, it should become manifest, that the risqué, which would be run in attempting a revolution would be trifling, and the evils which might be apprehended from it, were far less than these which were actually suffered, and which were daily increasing; in the name of God, I ask, what principles are those, which ought to restrain an injured and insulted people from asserting their natural rights, and from changing, or even punishing their governors, that is their servants, who had abused their trust; or from altering the whole form of their government, if it appeared to be of a structure so liable to abuse? (*Ibid*., 18–19).

In Priestley's political and social thought, to promote people's happiness is the primary issue; to erect a legal government is merely secondary. Priestley also writes, "To whomsoever the society delegates its power, it is delegated to them for the more easy management of public affairs, and in order to make the more effectual provision for the happiness of the whole. Whoever enjoys property, or riches in the state, enjoys them for the good state, as well as for himself; and whenever those powers, riches, or rights of any kind, are abused, to the injury of the whole, that awful and ultimate tribunal, in which every citizen hath an equal voice, may demand the resignation of them ..." (*Ibid*., 26).

Thus, Priestley regards the government as a means to attain each individual's perfection, "[g]overnment being the great instrument of this progress of the human species towards this glorious state ... ." If the government cannot make its purpose come true, people can overthrow it, and they have the right to establish such a government as can attain each individual's happiness.

6 Conclusion

The conclusions of this paper are: (1) Priestley's "theological utilitarianism" should be clearly distinguished from Bentham's secular utilitarianism because Priestley incorporates notions of natural laws, natural rights, and a social contract with theological viewpoints which Bentham never bothers to adopt.

(2) Priestley thinks "the greatest happiness" can be achieved by following the harmonious natural order, whereas Bentham thinks it can be measured by maximizing pleasures and minimizing pains. Ultimately, Priestley's moral order is created by God's good will while Bentham's is nothing but a product of human contingent behaviors.

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