

Priestley and Smith Against Slavery¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to consider Joseph Priestley's arguments against slavery in comparison with those of Adam Smith. Slavery was one of the most controversial issues in eighteenth-century England and was debated upon by a number of prominent thinkers. The problem was also discussed by Priestley and Smith who were regarded as representative thinkers in the century.

Priestley published a remarkable book arguing against slavery, entitled *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade*, in 1788. Despite the fact that this work provides detailed discussion and consideration of slavery, little attention has been paid to this great book. Similar arguments are also found in his *Lectures on History and General Policy*, also published in 1788 and encompassing the subjects of history, language and grammar, law, and politics on the basis of lectures given at Warrington Academy in Lancashire from 1761 through 1767. The *Lectures* briefly offer Priestley's views on slavery from humanitarian and economic perspectives.

Priestley was greatly influenced by Adam Smith, and learned a great many things from Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Priestley's economic arguments against slavery basically stem from Smith's views.

Keywords: Joseph Priestley, Adam Smith, Slavery, Slave trade

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1 Introduction

This paper aims to consider Joseph Priestley's arguments against slavery and the slave trade. Priestley, well known as the discoverer of oxygen, made great contributions to progress in natural science; his methods of conducting

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experimental science had great influence on subsequent scientists.² However, his achievements were not limited to the scientific world. He also wrote many essays and pamphlets regarding human society and inspired numerous subsequent thinkers.³

In the late eighteenth century, many writers, including Priestley, argued against slavery.⁴ However, Priestley's arguments against slavery have not been adequately examined;⁵ this may be because, as Leslie Stephen has noted, Priestley has been considered "a quick reflector of the current opinions of his time and class, and able to run up hasty theories of sufficient apparent stability to afford a temporary refuge amidst the storm of conflicting elements," and "[i]t would be vain ... to anticipate any great force or originality in Priestley's speculations." (Stephen 1876, 431) However, Priestley should not be regarded as a mere "reflector." He consistently argued against slavery.

Priestley's arguments against slavery have two perspectives: (1) a humanitarian perspective aligned with the contemporary mainstream; and (2) an economic perspective inspired by several of Smith's books, including *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, to which Priestley explicitly acknowledges his debt in his *Lectures on History and General Policy* (hereafter, *LH*). In the context of Smith's influence in late eighteenth-century England as well as that of the history of economic thought, the relationship between Priestley and Smith thus seems like an interesting subject.

Section 2 deals with the historical contexts of slavery from the late seventeenth through the nineteenth century, including the conditions of the slave trade and the numerous anti-slavery campaigns. Section 3 introduces and examines two perspectives from which arguments against slavery were made—the humanitarian and the economic—in *LH*. Sections 4 and in particular 5 scrutinize Priestley's argument against slavery and compare it to those of Smith.⁶ Section 6 presents the Conclusion.

²See Brock (2008) and Johnson (2009), which are useful as handbooks on Priestley's ideas on natural science.

³Particularly after he moved to America in 1791, Thomas Belsham (1750–1829), who was one of David Ricardo's teachers, was regarded in England as the most famous of Priestley's successors, according to Cremaschi (2004).

⁴In the same age, the French Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94) and the American Benjamin Rush (1745–1813) became known as opponents of slavery.

⁵Among previous studies on Priestley, there is no paper treating his anti-slavery argument. Neither Robbins (1959), Kramnick (1990), nor Schofield (1997, 2004) refer to it. Though Dick (2005) writes, from an historical perspective, on Priestley's philosophical arguments against British slavery, it seems Dick, concentrating on the contexts, does not dissect Priestley's texts.

⁶Matsumoto (2010) took Erasmus Darwin as an exponent of the former and noted similarities between Priestley and Darwin.

2 Historical contexts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade⁷

The British slave trade experienced sudden growth in the mid-eighteenth century. It is said that Britain was engaged in the slave trade more actively than any other European country. The Royal African Company, founded in 1672, had virtually monopolized the slave trade in West Africa and the West Indies. However, in 1698, the company liberalized the slave trade, permitting any English person to purchase slaves on the coast of Africa from Cap Blanc (between modern Mauritania and Western Sahara) through the Cape of Good Hope. This liberalization of the slave trade increased the number of exported and imported slaves; the number of slaves traded, which was 5,250 in the late seventeenth century, rose to some 25,000 in the 1740's, 36,000 in the 1760's and 47,000 in the 1770's, and amounted to some 45,000 in the 1790's. In 1767, British traders accounted for 54% of the world's slave exports.

The increase in the number of slaves exported was caused not only by the liberalization of the slave trade but also by the expansion of the commodity trade (particularly sugar, rum, and tobacco). Of all the commodities, sugar held the most important position. Its import to Britain increased 3.4 times between 1713 and 1775. The increased production was provided by the slaves in the colonies, such as the West Indies and North America. The sugar trade increased the colonists' purchasing power so that they could easily buy more slaves, and the increase in slave exports led to boosted export of manufactured products from Britain to Africa. In other words, the rise of sugar consumption in eighteenth-century Britain stimulated British industry via the slave trade in a triangular trans-Atlantic economy.

However, over the course of the eighteenth century, the humanitarian movement against slavery grew, particularly in the 1780s. The three most prominent leaders of the movement were Granville Sharp (1735–1813), Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) and William Wilberforce (1759–1833).⁸ In 1787, the Society for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in London, with Clarkson playing the most important role. The Society did not pursue the radical idea of immediately abolishing slavery, instead opting for a realistic gradualism, first abolishing the trade in slaves and then focusing on eliminating slavery completely. They were mainly engaged in two activities: a grassroots movement outside Parliament and the push for an anti-slavery law inside Parliament. Not only the Society but also other private citizens were engaged in

⁷For the information given in this section, particularly Williams (1944), Ryden (2009).

⁸Priestley was acquainted with their activities through the letter from John Barton (1754–1789). The unpublished letter can be found on a web site (<http://bartonhistory.wikispaces.com/%2aJohn+Barton+the+Elder+Correspondence#John%20Barton%20to%20Dr.%20Joseph%20Priestley%2c%20June%201787>, accessed; Jul. 16. 2012). This information was given by Dr. David Barton. I am appreciative of the helpful information from him.

the anti-slave movement. Prior to 1788, when a committee of the Privy Council was established to investigate the slavery problem, more than 100 petitions were submitted to Parliament. However, the investigation made little progress because Members of Parliament in favor of slavery protested it. Although the first motion to abolish slavery was tabled in April 1791, it was defeated.

The abolition of slavery was finally achieved in the nineteenth century. The “Act of Parliament to Abolish the British Slave Trade” was approved in 1807, and the legal status of slave was abolished in 1834.

3 Priestley’s argument in *Lectures on History and General Policy*

Priestley lectured in history at Warrington Academy from 1761 through 1767, publishing *Lectures on History and General Policy* in 1788 on the basis of his lecture notes. In the book, he clearly declares against slavery and the slave trade.

First of all, Priestley treats the origin of slavery. According to him, human beings “naturally” (Priestley 1803, 308) tend to avoid working, and most of the products in ancient Greece and Rome were produced by slaves. In modern times, he said slaves were purchased in Africa in order to secure labor forces in colonies, particularly in America, thereby resulting in the establishment of a slave trade.

Priestley condemns this slavery as “injustice and ill-policy” (308). According to him, “[s]ervitude is the most wretched condition of human nature” because it is impossible for slaves to enjoy liberty or self-command. Humans are “more miserable in a state of servitude than other animals” (308). Therefore, Priestley believes that slavery should be abolished and that the “human nature” of those who are forced into servitude should instead be cultivated (308).

Priestley also indicates that “no methods can make slaves work with the same spirit and effect as freemen” (309) and goes on to quote Smith from *The Wealth of Nations*: “[F]rom the experience of all ages and nations, I believe, that the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves. It is found to do so even at Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, where the wages of common labour are so very high” (Smith 1776, 99). Priestley demands that slave-mongers give up the slave trade. Even if they temporarily lose profit, they should employ slaves as freemen “in another way as soon as possible (309).” He believes that it is necessary to turn slaves into laborers whose physical and mental liberty is guaranteed.

According to Priestley, the abolition of the slave trade will lead to peace in the world. He regards sound and just commerce as a vital requirement for world peace. If a state purchases slaves, it will more easily enter into war to increase its stock of slave-soldiers. Thus, if slavery and the slave trade are abolished, war will not break out as easily. This would also mean an increase in the number of free workers and in production. This might temporarily lower wages, but production would be boosted by the division and specialization of labor, raising standards

of living in the long term. In short, Priestley—somewhat optimistically—believes that the abolition of slavery will lead to an increase in wealth.⁹

Priestley brings up the American colonies where liberty is ensured as his ideal model and praises the stance of American Quakers against slavery (309).¹⁰ Thus, the essence of Priestley’s argument is that liberty is the highest value.¹¹ He argues in *LH* against slavery from both humanitarian and economic perspectives, but his argument remains broad, with insufficient detail. It is in *SST*¹² that Priestley discusses the subject in more depth.

4 Priestley’s humanitarian perspective in *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade*

Priestley preached a sermon against slavery at Birmingham and published it as *SST*, in 1788. In it, he divides his arguments against slavery into the humanitarian and the economic, as in *LH*.

Slavery, Priestley says, is “the greatest, and most crying evil under the sun” (1788, 381). If a person has human feeling, she or he must object to slavery. This is a universal revulsion that has nothing to do with race, nationality, or religion. “You will consider all mankind as brethren, and neighbours. ... As men, and as Christians ... we should interest ourselves not only in our relations, and particular friends; not only for our countryman; not only for Europeans, but for the distressed inhabitants of Asia, Africa, or America; and not only for Christians, but for Jews, Mahometans, and Infidels. And as we ought to feel for our fellow-men, we ought, to the utmost extent of our influence, to exert ourselves to relieve their distresses” (368).

Priestley wishes to impeach the cruelty of slavery and the slave trade. For example, he says,

“I have been informed by a person who resided in Jamaica, that it is usual for the slaves, after they are purchased, to shudder at the sight of a fire, or kitchen utensils, imagining that they are to be killed and eaten, till older slaves convince them that nothing of that kind is intended. What the poor creatures must suffer with this idea on their minds all the voyage, and the terror it must impress on the country in general, in which thousands who are never taken know they are liable

⁹ Priestley followed Smith’s debates in this aspect. However, J.S. Mill directly criticizes Smith on this point, arguing that slavery is not necessarily expensive in a fertile place. See Mill (1848, 238–241).

¹⁰ See Sugiyama (1984).

¹¹ In *First Principles of Government*, Priestley writes, “It is an universal maxim, that the more liberty is given to every thing which is in a state of growth, the more perfect it will become” (Priestley 1768, 123).

¹² Priestley refers to the published sermon as a “discourse” (363).

to it, is not to be estimated, and for which no good treatment of slaves can compensate.” (368)

Priestley cites the death of slaves in transport and in the colonies as an example of the cruelties they suffer. He particularly condemns the process of “seasoning,” which extracts strong slaves on board. This example is very effective in conveying the cruelty of slavery to his audience.

[I]n order to raise our sugar, and other West- India commodities, perhaps half a million of persons are annually destroyed, and in manner peculiarly shocking to humanity. To die by an earthquake, by pestilence, or even by famine, would be merciful, compared with the manner in which many of these poor wretches often perish. All the European plantations taken together are said to require an annual supply of sixty thousand fresh slaves; but these are those that remain after so many have died in what is called the seasoning, before they can be brought to bear the labour to which they made to submit; and after so many more have been lost during the voyage, owing to the mode of their confinement and ill usage on board, that it is said not less than a hundred thousand are annually exported from Africa. And, some say, that before this, ten are destroyed for one that is secured, and safely lodged on board the ship. (370)

Rightly, Priestley cannot consider the condition of slaves to be happy. If slaves arrive at a colony alive, they are forced to obey “the caprice of” their masters (367). A person free from a master’s will enjoys the happiest condition; Priestley demands that the government establish a law to alleviate the wretched condition of the slaves and weaken the arbitrariness of the master’s will.

However, in this approach, slaves would still remain slaves; thus, abolition also needs to be discussed. “Under humane masters, slaves may, no doubt, enjoy a certain degree of happiness; but still they are slaves, subject to the wills, and, consequently, the caprices of others; and there is no proper security from the greatest outrages, but in the protection of law” (367). Priestley criticizes slave-masters for abusing their power. If slaves revolted against a master, he says, they would be suppressed by every conceivable means and their lives would be endangered. Their lives are hellish: “In general, it is said, that in our plantations slaves are employed so many hours every day, excepting Sundays, in the service of their masters, that they have only one for themselves, and but little for sleep. For remissness in labour they are severely beaten, and for rebellion, (as any attempt to recover their liberty is called), they are generally gibbeted alive” (371).

According to Priestley, cruelty and abuse of power on the part of masters were very severe in the English colonies. His views concerning the management of French slaves are very similar to those of Smith: “no Europeans whatever use their slaves with so much cruelty as the English. The Spaniards have made excellent regulations in their favour, in consequence of which the slaves can

work out their own freedom; and the French Government has also interposed by a code of laws enacted for this very purpose. But the slaves belonging to the English are almost wholly left to the mercy of their masters; and the annual consumption of them is itself a proof of the most cruel usage” (372).

Priestley also condemns the enslavement of women from the perspective of the woman’s role in the family.¹³ Since women are particularly inhumanely treated when in slavery, he says, they are corrupted morally, and the family is destroyed. It should be difficult for decent people to accept such a system: “The shocking indecencies to which the females are subjected during the voyage, and afterwards, and the cruel separation of the nearest relations and friends, husbands and wives, parents and children, both when they are put on board the ships, and at the place of sale, would be heard with horror by all but those who are habituated to this traffic” (371–372).

Abuse of power on the part of the master also results in the master’s moral corruption, which is pernicious to society as well as to the master himself. “Such a power as that which a master exercises over a slave, necessarily tends to make him haughty, cruel, and capricious, unfit for the society of his equals, which is the happiest state of man” (380). Although Priestley uses the word “equals,” he does not mean material equality. He insists that every person has equal rights, and that “man has the power of reflection in an eminent degree” (379). This “reflection” makes people “miserable in a state of servitude” (379). Many African slaves, “[t]hrough agony of mind, ... put an end to their own lives”; but released from this “agony of mind,” slaves can enjoy peace of mind or true happiness. Priestley (rightly) considers Africans not to be inferior to Europeans. Therefore, he argues, they must be treated equally to Europeans. Priestley feels that it is cruel for African slaves’ human development to be hindered because they are not free.

5 Smith’s and Priestley’s economic arguments against slavery

In his argument against slavery, Smith points out its economic disadvantages without referring to humanitarian aspects. Smith appears to feel that there is a limit to the humanitarian argument.¹⁴

Why was slavery created to begin with? In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith considers slavery to stem from “the pride of man, [which] makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to

¹³ See Priestley (1772–1774).

¹⁴ Recall Smith’s criticism of Hutcheson (1755), which shows that humanitarian perspectives were apt to stress benevolence. Smith says, “Carelessness and want of oeconomy are universally disapproved of, not, however, as proceeding from a want of benevolence, but from a want of the proper attention to the objects of self-interest” (Smith 1790, 304). See Raphael (2007, particularly ch. 5).

persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen” (Smith 1776, 388–389).

However, Smith also believes that work done by freemen is cheaper than work done by slaves. His criticism of slavery places its main emphasis on this aspect.

In *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith 1978a), Smith writes that to keep slaves is “unhappy” not only for slaves but also for slaveholders and is highly unproductive for people. “It is evident that the state of slavery must be very unhappy to the slave himself. This I need hardly prove ... it will not be difficult to shew that it is so to the masters. That is, that the cultivation of land by slaves is not so disadvantageous as by free tenants; that the advantage gained by the labours of the slaves, if we deduce their originall cost and expence of their maintenance, will not be as great as that which is gained from free tenants” (Smith 1978a, 185).

A more detailed argument is given in an early draft of *The Wealth of Nations* included in *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith 1978b). Smith explains that slaves’ work costs more than that of freemen, whether in manufacturing or agriculture. “When land is divided in great portions among the powerfull, it is cultivated by slaves, which is a very unprofitable method of cultivation (523).” Smith goes on to argue that slaves’ work is disadvantageous for the slaves as well as for waged employees, because the slave’s motivation for labor is “the dread of punishment (523)” rather than the possibility of improving their lot; this deprives slaves of their will to work.

The labour of a slave proceeds from no other motive but the dread of punishment, and if he could escape this he would work none at all. Should he exert himself in the most extraordinary manner, he cannot have the least expectations of any reward, and as all the produce of his labour goes to his master, he has no encouragement to industry. A young slave may perhaps exert himself a little first, in order to attain his master’s favour, but he soon finds that it is all in vain, and that, be his behavior what it will, he will always meet with the same severe treatment. When lands, therefore, are cultivated by slaves, they cannot be greatly improven, as they have no motive to industry. (523)

In the case of manufacturing, virtually the same argument is repeatedly given. Smith writes,

In all places where slavery took place the manufactures were carried on by slaves. It is impossible that they can be so well carried on by slaves as by freemen, because they can have no motive to labour but the dread of punishment, and can never invent any machine for facilitating their business. Freeman who have a stock of their own can get any thing accomplished which they think may be expedient for carrying on labour. If a carpenter thinks that a plane will serve his

purpose better than a knife, he may go to a smith and get it made; but if a slave makes any such proposal he is called a lazy rascal, and no experiments are made to give him ease. (526)

Smith finally notes in the draft that “the work which is done by slaves always coming dearer than that which is done by freemen” (579).

Therefore, according to Smith, employees could cut down on expenses by giving slaves their freedom and employing them as free workers. “The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any” (Smith 1776, 387). Smith notes the situation in the American Thirteen Colonies as a typical example (this is the example quoted by Priestley earlier).

Smith also discusses how best to control slaves (586–588). He contends that the French control their slaves better than the English, since France is a tyrannical country where the masters do not have *carte blanche*, as they do in free Britain. Thus, the masters are less able to use violence on the slaves, since the state will intervene. “The protection of the magistrate renders the slave less contemptible in the eyes of his master, who is thereby induced to consider him with more regard, and treat him with more gentleness. Gentle usage renders the slave not only more faithful, but more intelligent, and therefore, upon a double account, more useful. He approaches more to the condition of a free servant, and may possess some degree of integrity and attachment to his master’s interest” (587).

Therefore, the French colonies have expanded. However, Smith does not believe that the British should establish a system like the French because according to him it is important not to regulate economic activity by law but to maintain a liberal economy.¹⁵ He insists instead that it is necessary to give up employing slaves and create free workers; thus, he is consistently and continuously opposed to slavery.

Smith focuses on economic views only: work done by a freeman is cheaper than work done by a slave. There are no humanitarian elements to Smith’s argument. In contrast, Priestley’s arguments include both humanitarian and economic perspectives.

Concerning the economic advantages brought about by abolishing slavery, Priestley cites two different opinions: (1) “Some say that if we abandon the Slave-Trade, we give up a valuable source of national profit, and yield it to our rivals”; (2) “Some will say, how shall we get sugar, and the other products of the West-India islands, now raised by slaves, if slavery be abolished?” (382).

In reply to the first argument, Priestley says the slave trade itself is “wicked and unlawful (382)” from the beginning, and advantages derived from it cannot

¹⁵In Britain, Edmund Burke (1729 or ‘30–1797) suggested controlling slaves by means of gradual reform, but also committed to eventual abolition. See Burke (1780).

be justified. Slaves should be liberated and contribute to production in their own countries, while Britons should make things in Britain and its colonies. Priestley believes that if prosperous independent nations trade their products with each other, a division of labor will be prompted, and wealth accumulated reciprocally. He eventually concludes that “the manufacturers of this country in general would find a great benefit from a change of the system, and not one of them would be a loser” (382).

With regard to the second argument, Priestley writes, “our first care should be to do justice and shew mercy” (382–383); he declares the priority of humanitarian considerations over economic ones. He repeatedly argues that slaves should be liberated and treated equally to other people. However, he believes that these humanitarian arguments are inadequate as realistic means to achieve abolition. Therefore, Priestley adopts Smith’s economic arguments as well.

Like Smith, Priestley refers to the prices of commodities. Luxury goods (Priestley mentions sugar in particular) produced by slaves are relatively cheap, and if slavery were abolished, their price would rise beyond the means of poor Britons. However, if slavery were abolished, Africans could labor as freemen. As a result, they could produce luxury goods and the supply of these goods would increase through the effects of trade, with their price falling. Priestley brings up the liberation of slaves in Pennsylvania as a good example (and one also cited by Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*).¹⁶

Priestley’s remarks discussed above clarify the following two contentions: (1) Because slavery and the slave trade are extraordinarily unjust and cannot be accepted, slaves in the British Empire should be liberated; and (2) if the slaves were liberated, there would be virtually no negative impact on the market; instead, in fact, there would be an increase in wealth. Smith says that the division of labor is tied to the scale of the market. The more the market expands, the more pronounced the division of labor becomes. Priestley accepts this thesis, and in addition shares Smith’s belief that the division of labor within a society directly facilitates the international division of labor.¹⁷ In short, Priestley learns a lot and is inspired by *The Wealth of Nations*.¹⁸

¹⁶Quakers actively led anti-slavery movement in America through the eighteenth century. Their efforts bore fruit in 1780 as ‘An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.’

¹⁷With regard to the debt owed to Smith by Priestley, also see Mudroch (2001) and Claeys (1999).

¹⁸However, in terms of their perception of human nature, Priestley differs from Smith, who considers human nature selfish, and his political economy is based on the assumption of a general orientation of self-interest. In contrast, Priestley’s theory is founded on the assumption of human benevolence. For Priestley, self-interest “holds a kind of middle rank between the vices and the virtues; and ... its principal use is to be a means of raising us above all the lower and vicious pursuits, to those that are higher, and properly speaking virtuous and praise worthy” (1772–1774, 38–39).

6 Conclusion

Priestley regards slavery as an evil, but he is hesitant to advocate the immediate end of slavery like Darwin does, because “[t]hose who have been long slaves, would not know how to make a proper use of freedom” (383). In suggesting that the slave trade be terminated before the final abolition of slavery, Priestley is hopeful that masters can learn to treat slaves humanely. Like Smith, he insists on gradual reform. Priestley believes that this reform will result in benefits to slaves as well as to their masters;¹⁹ he also considers the elimination of this evil to be a step toward world peace. People “should be brought to perfection by degrees” by abolition.²⁰

However, Priestley does not discuss how slaves’ livelihood or survival is to be secured after their liberation. The elimination of the evil of slavery is the central point for him. The removal “will make even this world a real paradise, and fit us for a state of greater glory and happiness in another” (387). Therefore, Priestley does not think it necessary to discuss slaves’ integration into society, which he implies will take care of itself.

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¹⁹This view is very similar to that of Thomas Paine (1737–1809), who also argues against the immediate emancipation of slaves and suggests that after they are freed, their former masters rent land to the new freemen for a “reasonable rent” and see that they can save money. See Paine (1775).

²⁰With regard to Priestley’s argument regarding universal peace, also see Priestley (1789), particularly ch. 14. In the book, supporting the French Revolution, Priestley writes that revolution results in the operation of reason given by God. He believes that if reason were to dominate over the world, war would disappear and peace would reign.

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