

Belsham, Thomas, and Ricardo

Thomas Belsham (1750–1829), formerly a minister of the Independent Church, was appointed in 1789 as Professor of Divinity at the newly formed Unitarian college at Hackney, and after its dissolution in 1796 was first in charge of the New Gravel Pit Chapel at Hackney and then moved to Essex Street Chapel in Central London in 1805 (Webb, 2004).

Unitarianism came into existence as a self-standing body in 1774, when Theophilus Lindsey, a minister who withdrew from the Church of England on anti-Trinitarian grounds, founded a chapel in London at Essex Street. In the same years, Dissenter Joseph Priestley, the philosopher and chemist, founded another Unitarian chapel in Bristol. Other ministers joined the movement, coming mainly from the English Presbyterians. The unifying trait of Unitarianism was a rejection of a view of salvation based on the Trinitarian dogma, including inherited guilt, eternal punishment, vicarious atonement, and the godly nature of Jesus. They were among radicals and reformers at the time of the French Revolution and they campaigned consistently for religious toleration from which they would themselves benefit (Anonymous, 1823a).

Ricardo's 'conversion' to Unitarianism

Until Sraffa's (1951) edition of his *Works*, Ricardo's adhesion to Unitarianism was ignored in the literature. Most sources used then did not mention his conversion to Christianity and even the author of the 'Memoir' avoided any mention of his liaison with what was still perceived as a dangerous sect of radicals (*Works*, X: 39–40; Henderson, 1997: 164). The facts are that, shortly after marriage in 1793, he appears to have become Belsham's 'hearer' at New Gravel Pit Chapel in Hackney from 1794 to 1805, then Robert Aspland's at the same chapel from 1805 to 1812, and again Belsham's at Essex Street Chapel (Anonymous, 1823c). Whether being a 'hearer' meant being a full member of a congregation or rather a fellow traveller or sympathizer is still in doubt. Apparently Ricardo kept his liaison with the Unitarians alive until his death, as proved by the respectful and warm obituary published in *The Monthly Repository*, the Unitarian review (Anonymous, 1823b), following the detailed report of Ricardo's Parliamentary speech for religious toleration in the same issue (Anonymous, 1823c), both of which have been missed by biographers. There is no plausible doubt that can be raised about Ricardo's own sincere interest in religion in spite of the bizarre conjecture that he, being a rational and modern mind, was an obvious atheist, and therefore his conversion to Unitarianism was just a means of acquiring social respectability at the cheapest price (Depoortère, 2002). The answer is that, even if one felt like doing history without evidence, such a conjecture would labour under a fatal logical weakness, namely a need to prove that the choice of joining a radical congregation looked at with suspicion as an alleged hotbed of revolutionaries could be a convenient arrangement for gaining social respectability. Archival sources may yet reveal whether he ever opted for formal affiliation to the Unitarian Congregation or remained forever a 'hearer' or sympathizer, but the evidence suggests that Ricardo was introduced to the ideas of the philosophical tradition deriving from Priestley and Hartley, with which Belsham

himself was associated. Needless to say, such ideas had a philosophical character and were just those favoured by Unitarians of the time for contingent reasons not dependent on faith and theology. For sure, Ricardo never adhered to the established Church – he did not take Holy Communion according to the established rite on his nomination as a High Sheriff of Gloucestershire in 1817 and nor did he on entering Parliament (*Works*, X: 42). On his travels on the Continent in 1822 he attended Sunday service on 30 July at the Engelse Kerk in Amsterdam, which is an English-speaking chapel of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (*ibid.*: 210). It is true that he was buried in an Anglican cemetery, but this was established practice for Dissenters and even Roman Catholics.

Belsham the philosopher

Belsham taught divinity for several years of his life and published exegetical studies where he argued that the doctrines of a divine nature of Jesus and a Trinitarian nature of God were completely absent from the original Christian preaching as reflected in New Testament scriptures. Moreover, he lectured on political philosophy, ethics, logic, and other philosophical subjects (Fitzpatrick, 1999). He published, besides sermons, collections of essays and exegetical works, a textbook, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Mind, and of Moral Philosophy. To Which is Prefixed a Compendium of Logic* (1801), in which he drew inspiration mainly from David Hartley and Joseph Priestley while often attacking Dugald Stewart.

As regards the method of natural science, he favours separation of scientific terminology and ordinary language (Belsham, 1801: xvi), contends that ‘observations of the senses do not teach us the real essence of substances’ (*ibid.*: xxxii) and that the sciences just establish regularities among phenomena. With regard to the social sciences, Belsham argues against Dugald Stewart that ‘as moral ideas are equally capable of strict definition with mathematical ideas, demonstration is equally applicable to moral subjects’ (*ibid.*: xlv), and, in some cases at least, explanation of the behaviour of voluntary agents may reach the same degree of precision as ‘that with which we foretell the effects of physical causes’ (*ibid.*: lxxxiii), since also in these cases ‘the same cause operating in the same circumstances will invariably produce same effects’ (*ibid.*: lxxxii–iii).

Belsham used to stress the importance of education while recommending ‘to select and pursue with particular assiduity two or three branches of science only’ (Williams, 1833: 398), and suggesting that these should be chosen among the ‘useful’ ones, unlike those, for example, metaphysical enquiries, which are ‘without the grasp of the human mind’ (Belsham, 1826–27, II: 55).

What Ricardo may have learnt from Belsham

Ricardo had recently become Belsham’s ‘hearer’ when he started studying mathematics, geology, mineralogy and chemistry. In his brother’s wary wording, he was drawn to these scientific interests by the ‘example and instigation of a friend’ (*Works*, X: 6). Belsham could have been both a ‘friend’ who could have encouraged him in such pursuits, and one whose name could have prompted prudence. Belsham was aware of Ricardo’s achievements, and he even criticized him on one point – population theory – by writing:

It is really astonishing that a doctrine so absurd and so contradictory to plain and obvious fact as that of Malthus, should have gained a moment's credit with any person of common understanding. And yet it is wonderful to see what numbers are fascinated with it: among others, my late friend, Mr. Ricardo. He made some use of it in his theory of political economy, which I could never well understand. ('To Mr. Broadbent', 19 September 1823, in Williams, 1833: 749).

What Ricardo may have learnt from Belsham on methodology is that knowledge of essences is impossible, that causal relations in the real world are under the sway of probability, and accordingly we may try at most to establish connections between a restricted number of basic phenomena, and such explanations should be in terms of 'laws', not 'causes'. This may shed some light on a few matters from Ricardo's debate with Malthus. Ricardo comments on the impossibility of controlling the plurality of causes at work behind any particular effect, suggesting that we should rather stick to simplified ideal cases, the only ones for which we are in a position to establish causal links. He insists on a distinction between the variety of facts and a few general phenomena and on the usefulness of deduction from a restricted number of principles. These claims, albeit arising out of a discussion with another practising economist, and thus reflecting more a kind of reflection on positive practice than mere repetition of philosophical theses, present remarkable similarity with the Priestley-Hartley-Belsham tradition, the main rival to the Scottish tradition (Cremaschi and Dascal, 1996, 1998).

Needless to say, such contextual considerations about the milieu that exerted an intellectual influence on Ricardo at an early stage of his intellectual career have little to do with Ricardo's religious beliefs (Cremaschi and Dascal, 2002). The plain facts are that Ricardo did hear Belsham's weekly instructions for almost three decades. Possible implications for Ricardo scholars are that Ricardo had received some decent, albeit not advanced, education before he met James Mill, that he had been conversant with someone cast among British early nineteenth-century philosophers on a higher level than James Mill himself before he started writing on political economy and before he ever met Mill, Bentham and Malthus (Cremaschi, 2004). This may prompt careful consideration of one more source for Ricardo's methodological ideas, namely the above-mentioned Priestley-Hartley-Belsham tradition, and the suggestion that Ricardo's relationship to James Mill may be seen in a different perspective.

SERGIO CREMASCHI

See also:

Jewish Background; Life and Activities.

References

Anonymous (1823a), 'Parliamentary: Christians' petition against the prosecution of unbelievers', *The Monthly Repository*, **18**(212), August, 485–94.

- Anonymous (1823b), 'Obituary', *The Monthly Repository*, **18**(212), August, 551.
- Anonymous (1823c), 'Obituary', *Sunday Times*, 14 September 1823, 1.
- Belsham, T. (1801), *Elements of the Philosophy of the Mind, and of Moral Philosophy*, London: Johnson.
- Belsham, T. (1826–27), *Discourses, Doctrinal and Practical*, 2 vols, London: Hunter.
- Cremaschi, S. (2004), 'Ricardo and the Utilitarians', *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, **11**(3), 377–404.
- Cremaschi, S. and M. Dascal (1996), 'Malthus and Ricardo on economic methodology', *History of Political Economy*, **28**(3), 475–511.
- Cremaschi, S. and M. Dascal (1998), 'Malthus and Ricardo: two styles for economic theory', *Science in Context*, **11**(2), 229–54.
- Cremaschi, S. and M. Dascal (2002), 'The Unitarian connection and Ricardo's scientific style', *History of Political Economy*, **34**(2), 505–8.
- Depoortère, C. (2002), 'On Ricardo's method: the Unitarian influence examined', *History of Political Economy*, **34**(2), 501–4.
- Fitzpatrick, M. (1999), 'Belsham, Thomas', in J.W. Yolton, J.V. Price and J. Stephens (eds), *The Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century British Philosophers, Vol. I*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, pp. 72–3.
- Henderson, J.P. (1997), *The Life and Economics of David Ricardo*, with supplemental chapters by J.B. Davis, Boston, MA: Kluwer.
- Webb, R.K. (2004), 'Belsham, Thomas', in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. V*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 42–3.
- Williams, J. (1833), *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Thomas Belsham*, London: printed for the author.