

idealised pre-Norman past. He was not a revolutionary, though he supported both the American and French Revolutions. His radicalism, if he was a radical, has none of the agrarian utopianism or artisan populism to be found in some of his contemporaries. Nor, I believe, was he in any obvious sense a republican: he was not much bothered by mobile property, standing armies, division of labour, or indirect political representation; he did not see personal virtue as fulfilled in political action, nor did he believe that the well-being of the state rests heavily on the virtue of its citizens.

Yet if all this is true – and I shall provide at least some argument for some of these claims – in what sense did he belong to the eighteenth-century tradition of liberal radicalism? Is he a quite new departure within that somewhat complex collection of ideals and ideas? Do we need a new category here? Geoff Gallop has suggested the concept of ‘commercial radicalism’.<sup>1</sup> This seems about right to me, but it leaves out the moral and religious background which makes Priestley both commercial and radical. The problem of evil, I shall suggest, is for Priestley in part a political problem and the problems of politics are aspects of the problem of evil. My purpose will be to show how his moral theology ties together his commercialism and his radicalism. The ironic, or tragic, twist at the end of this story is that it was at least in part his moral theology that desensitised him to the actual evils brought about by the radical cause that he supported in France.

Priestley's political views are of course religious in a quite obvious sense. As a primitivist Protestant (primitivist at least in his view of Revelation, not in his philosophical theology) he believes that worldly power is both unnecessary and positively harmful to the cause of true religion, and that the New Testament directly opposes state involvement in matters of religion. As a Dissenter he is committed to the full toleration of Dissenters and to their right *qua* citizens to participate fully in all civil offices. As a Rational Dissenter he is committed to the full toleration of all religious or non-religious minorities, if they abide peacefully by the laws of the state. As a believer in the rationality of true religion he regards political support for religion as heterogeneous and distracting. On religious grounds, then, he wishes to see a complete separation between Church and state, entailing the disestablishment of the Church of England. Most of Priestley's efforts in practical politics are directed to

<sup>1</sup> Geoff Gallop, ‘Politics, Property and Progress: British Radical Thought, 1760–1815’ (D. Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 1983), pp. 208–24.

## CHAPTER II

### *Priestley on politics, progress and moral theology*

Alan Tapper

My aim in this chapter is to set Priestley's political theory in its theological context. The whole subject is larger than I can manage here, so a few restrictions are required. Priestley interests us partly because we want to understand how intelligent thinkers can have been so naively optimistic about the French Revolution. My discussion is designed to lead up to that question, to supply some of the background to it; but I will not otherwise be concerned with his practical politics. Priestley, though not a political actor, was a frequent commentator on the events of his day, but his views on practical politics are rather complexly related to his general political theory. My purpose will be only to make sense of the general theory.

On the theological side I will not attempt to discuss Priestley's millenarianism, which is itself closely interconnected with his general theological thought. In the late 1790s his millenarianism, his political utopianism, his more general progressivism and his personal disappointments all interact in a way which is fascinating, confusing and unsettling. My central subject is not the deeply troubled Priestley of these last years, but the serene, active and boundlessly optimistic younger man at the height of his powers – ‘the Voltaire of Unitarianism’, as Hazlitt described him – just before the intellectual world he so much symbolised, the confident world of Rational Dissent, began to disintegrate under pressure from events in the political arena.

Some of my subject is familiar, perhaps over-familiar. Is there anything still to be explained about Priestley's political theory? I will not attempt to answer that question directly here, but that there is something to be explained may be suggested by beginning from what he did not hold to. Priestley was not a natural-rights theorist, at least not a defender of natural rights. He was not a democrat who tied political status to (male) personhood. He was not a radical individualist or anarchist in the manner of Godwin. Nor was he a primitivist radical looking back to an

this end, nor can we imagine him holding any political philosophy that conflicted with that cause. However, it does not follow that his political philosophy is simply Dissenter politics writ large. Rather, he regarded the cause of the Dissenters as fitting easily into a larger development, the growth of liberalism.

There is another sense in which his moral theology feeds into his political theory. Before he was a political theorist Priestley was a philosophical theologian. In his first published work, the three-volume *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772-4), and pervasively in much else that he wrote, in ways which seem peculiar to us, Priestley turned and returned to the problem of evil. Taking his writings as a whole he presents five distinct 'answers' to the problem: that good can only be appreciated fully if evil exists as a contrast to it; that any finite creation must be imperfect; that the evils attendant upon a system-like natural order are less than those that are produced when every natural occurrence is a particular act of God; that human virtues can only be acquired in a struggle against adversity; and that history shows divine providence steadily bringing good out of evil, which affords a presumption that this process of amelioration will continue, even beyond death. The one defence not employed by him, the appeal to free-will, is of course precluded by his determinism.

John Hick's distinction between 'Augustinian' and 'Irenaean' theodicies is useful here, though it is striking that Priestley sees no difficulty in being both Augustinian and Irenaean.<sup>2</sup> His first three defences, resting on the notions of contrast, finitude and system, are plainly Augustinian but the dominant 'character-formation' theodicy, involving moral progress through the discipline of suffering, is unmistakably Irenaean.

The relation between virtue and suffering is a central theme in all Priestley's moral, political and historical thought. When he has to summarise his theodicy as briefly as possible it is to the character-formation defence that he turns.

This world, we see, is an admirable nursery for great minds. Difficulties, opposition, persecution, and evils of every other form, are the necessary instruments by which they are made.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London, 1966), ch. 12. Hick makes no mention of Priestley, and presents Schleiermacher as the first modern 'Irenaean'.

<sup>3</sup> The Dedication to *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, 2nd edn (1782), in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. J.T. Rutt, 25 vols. in 26 (London, 1817-31; repr. New York, 1972), vol. III, p. 450 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

Further, his historical progressivism contains a kind of gradualist conservatism: change is justifiable only if it preserves the accumulated achievements of past generations. Lasting human happiness can only be won in a lengthy struggle:

all great improvements in the state of society ever have been, and ever must be the growth of time, the result of the most peaceable but assiduous endeavours in pursuing the slowest of all processes — that of enlightening the minds of men.<sup>4</sup>

This slowest of all processes cannot be hastened without losing the object to be obtained, and is thus the fastest route to its destination.

The connection in Priestley's thought between theology and politics is not simply through the theory of historical progress, for that theory itself involves a relation to progress in science which requires more discussion. Social progress is in part modelled on scientific progress. Scientific knowledge flourishes best where there is free exchange of ideas, and so too does social improvement.

The acquisition of scientific knowledge depends vitally on the free exchange of ideas, for this stimulates the imagination and thus promotes the production of hypotheses. Without imagination to suggest hypotheses science could not begin. Hypotheses in turn suggest experiments. In the practical arts and in social affairs the same holds good: according to the *Essay on Government*, 'of all arts, those stand the fairest chance of being brought to perfection, in which there is opportunity of making the most experiments and trials, and in which there are the greatest number and variety of persons employed in making them'.<sup>5</sup> And the greatest barrier to social progress is state-imposed uniformity, whether that uniformity be religious, intellectual or economic.

The acquisition of scientific and social knowledge through the free exchange of ideas is part of the story of progress but for the progressivist it is equally important to explain how such knowledge might accumulate. This part of the process of progress contains a difficulty. With progress in science and society, the *Essay on Government* tells us,

nature, including both its materials and its laws, will be more at our command; men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable; they will probably prolong their existence in it, and will grow daily more

<sup>4</sup> *The Proper Objects of Education in the Present State of the World* (1791), in Priestley, *Works*, vol. xv, pp. 438-9.

<sup>5</sup> *An Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty*, 2nd edn (1771), Section IV (hereafter cited as *Essay on Government*), in Priestley, *Works*, vol. xxii, p. 44.

happy, each in himself, and more able (and, I believe, more disposed) to communicate happiness to others.<sup>6</sup>

'More able', yes, but 'more disposed'? Priestley's hesitation here has an explanation. He is not certain that achievements in morality can be accumulated in quite the same way as can achievements in science and society.

Accumulation involves transmission, for if each, or any, generation fails to pass on what it has learnt, no level of achievement, no matter how great, can amount to real progress. Conversely, the smallest achievements, if passed on incrementally, may eventually constitute some large improvement in the human lot. While the painfully acquired habits of virtue may make the practice of virtue easier within one person's life, there is no obvious sense in which such habits can be collective achievements. They are not readily or reliably transmissible from person to person or from generation to generation.

This is not, from Priestley's perspective, merely an unfortunate obstacle to moral improvement. His whole account of character-formation entails that moral achievements can not be passed on directly, for the simple reason that the struggle and suffering that produced them cannot be shared. The attempt to pass on even ordinary goods, to be enjoyed without effort, is likely to misfire:

when a provident, but unwise parent, submits to toil and hardship, in order to leave an estate to his son, he only provides him something to waste and dissipate, but not to enjoy. The prodigal youth is even generally much less happy in spending the estate than the father in getting it; though the object of his toil has been to make his son more happy in being exempt from it.

This comes from the *Observations on Education* of 1778, which itself arose partly from the difficulties he experienced in designing a 'liberal and virtuous' course of education for sons of the aristocracy, when he supervised the studies of Lord Shelburne's sons.<sup>7</sup> Such considerations were still in his mind thirteen years later in his *Political Dialogue*:

The man who makes a sensible use of riches which he has not acquired must be something almost above humanity; and therefore it is not to be expected in the ordinary course of things; and when hereditary titles, and other distinctions, are added to hereditary wealth, the danger must be greatly increased.<sup>8</sup>

Here the individualism of Priestley's morality has come into conflict with the collectivism of his theory of (moral) progress, and it is the

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> J. Priestley, *Miscellaneous Observations relating to Education*, in *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> J. Priestley, *A Political Dialogue on the General Principles of Government* (1791), in *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 93.

progressivism that has to give way. If morality cannot progress of and by itself, what is needed is some other account of how progress in general can lead to progress in morals. Somehow progress that is morally neutral must lead to morally desirable results.

However, there is in Priestley's thought another variation on the relation between scientific and moral matters. As he maintains in the preface to his *History of Electricity*, science has a moralising influence because it reinforces the credibility of theism.

The more we see of the wonderful structure of the world, and of the laws of nature, the more clearly do we comprehend their admirable uses to make all the percipient creation happy, a sentiment which cannot but fill the heart with unbounded love, gratitude, and joy. Even every thing painful and disagreeable in the world appears to a [natural] philosopher, upon a more attentive examination, to be excellently provided, as a remedy of some greater inconvenience, or a necessary means of a much greater happiness . . . Hence he is able to venerate and rejoice in God, not only in the bright sunshine, but also in the darkest shades of nature, whereas vulgar minds are apt to be disconcerted with the appearance of evil.<sup>9</sup>

Suffering ennobles, but its influence is restricted to the improvement of individuals. But science also edifies, theologically, and progress in science, by strengthening theism, thereby promotes progress in morality.

Even so, moral character depends more on the experience of adversity than on the inspiration available from the contemplation of design, though both contribute to moral ends. The two are complementary: scientific progress reinforces theism, which in turn motivates a movement towards the mastering of adversity and evil, out of which may arise a deeper understanding of the purposes of Providence.

Priestley's world, in which science, religion and morality enjoy such harmony, may strike us as remote. Yet Burke, for instance, was a progressivist of a kind, and it is interesting to compare his view of the place of religion and science in progress with Priestley's. When Burke attacks the abstract reasoning of the radicals he does so in the name of the accumulated wisdom of past ages; he assumes that history is, on the whole, a process of gathering and preserving such wisdom. Yet his theory of progress is mechanically quite opposite to Priestley's. Instead of science supporting religion and morality through the idea

<sup>9</sup> J. Priestley, *The History and Present State of Electricity, with Original Experiments* (1767), Preface, in *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 351.

of design, for Burke it is religion and morality that made science possible. Only when once-mediaeval Christianity and chivalry had tamed and civilised men was it possible for the great co-operative ventures of modern science, technology, commerce and industry to flourish.

From these opposite starting-points Burke and Priestley draw opposing political conclusions. In Priestley's view progress rests on a broad social base – the 'industrious classes', of which the scientist, the industrialist and the merchant represent only the tip. For Burke the heart of all progress remains with the guardians of good manners, the nobility and the clergy. For Burke progress can never be more than extremely fragile, for everything depends on the ability of the clergy and nobility to preserve and propagate the special and difficult ethos of civilised restraint, and the clergy at least must be always vulnerable to materially powerful predators. For Priestley, by contrast, the civilising agencies are also the creators of a new kind of material power and prosperity. Progress is intrinsically robust; it is not always, as Burke thought it was, in danger of sinking into barbarism.

Various eighteenth-century thinkers, of whom Rousseau is only the best known, had come to the conclusion that progress, Priestley's kind of progress, is a self-defeating process: the more the arts and sciences contribute to human well-being, the more they sap men's capacity for genuine virtue. Progress, by making life easier, makes character-formation more difficult. For Priestley character-formation requires adversity, and we might expect this side of his theodicy to lend itself to a Spartan conception of private and civic life. However, in political matters this Spartanism is one of the things he seeks to combat. The dominant theme of his politics is a defence of liberalism based on his progressive interpretation of history. The interesting theological issue is whether this defence requires him to sacrifice the emphasis on adversity and difficulty so prominent in his purely theological writings.

After the American Revolution Priestley shared with the radicals the belief that (in England at least) liberty had begun to decline, but he rejected their diagnosis of the causes of the decline. He sought to draw a sharp distinction between 'luxury', which was on the whole a good, and 'idleness', which he saw as the chief cause of his age's ills. Luxury is evil only in so far as it is associated with idleness; in every other way it is to be approved of. This distinction, as I shall try to show, is the key to his politics.

'Idleness', Priestley tells us, is 'the great inlet to the most destructive

vices'.<sup>10</sup> By 'idleness' he means, of course, not rest after labour but life without labour. We are constitutionally unfitted for a life of ease, and without 'the constant, but moderate, exertion of our faculties' we cannot be happy, his *Observations on Education* argue.<sup>11</sup> Material progress ('luxury') is morally beneficial so long as its connection with effort is not broken; when, however, we seek enjoyment without effort ('idleness') the result is morally detrimental. The theological aspect of his view of labour and leisure is obvious: idleness is simply the avoidance of the kind of difficulty prescribed by the character-formation regimen, while luxury is the morally harmless end-product of the long historical struggle against adversity.

Priestley's belief in the corrupting effects of idleness underlies his disagreement with Burke in the 1790s. Less obviously, his defence of luxury marks him off from many of his fellow radicals, who attacked aristocratic predominance in government (and Burke as its apologist) for its propensity towards a corrupting surrender to luxury.

To summarize it very diagrammatically, the debate over the French Revolution was triangular, though not in the sense of a disagreement about three possible rates to a single process of change; rather, three positions were taken about two possible kinds of change. One axis of the argument concerned political participation, with opposing views about the virtues and vices of aristocracies and democracies. The other axis was economic, about the virtues and vices of economic progress. The radicals tended to regard economic progress as detrimental to political liberty. Burke defended aristocratic leadership, but in a manner that included a commitment to the generally beneficial effects of material and scientific progress. Priestley's position cut across these two, to form the third corner of the triangle. He belonged with the radicals in rejecting aristocracy, which Burke saw as essential to political order. But he also rejected the economic assumptions of the radicals, and thus sided with Burke in defending the main trend of progress. He was both politically radical and economically progressive, and at bottom this combination rested on theological premises.

By 1789 Priestley had concluded that the governments of both Britain and France were on the brink of financial bankruptcy and that the cause of this imminent catastrophe was to be found in the moral bankruptcy of their aristocracies. Burke shared Priestley's sense of financial crisis, the

<sup>10</sup> J. Priestley, *Lectures on History and General Policy* (1788), Lecture I, in *Works*, vol. xxiv, p. 340.

<sup>11</sup> Priestley, *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 60.

belief that 'Nations are wading deeper and deeper into an ocean of boundless debt', which 'threatens a general earthquake in the political world'; but, against that, he contended that the French nation was generally prosperous, and that the crisis gave no warrant to those who would exploit the situation for the purpose of political change.<sup>12</sup>

Priestley, by contrast, thought radical reform the only remedy. In *Political Dialogue on the General Principles of Government* the French national debt is central to his discussion; however, his objection is not to public credit itself, but to the misuse of public credit in the hands of the aristocracy. Government expenditure is out of control because fiscal decisions are in the hands of an hereditary class which bears no commensurate responsibility for the raising of revenue. Enjoying unearned honours, offices and authority, this class has occupied its idleness with grand schemes of empire and conquest, paying little regard to their cost to the public. The aristocratic system is not just inefficient, it is corrupting, and not least to those who appear to profit from it. It is the fate of men of rank to suffer 'debasement of their characters, with the deprivation of all real enjoyment'. The system is bound to fail, for it destroys the connection between difficulty, effort and virtue. It separates leisure from labour and thus causes luxury to degenerate into idleness. Public finances can only be restored when those who produce public monies, the 'industrious classes', have the greatest say in how they are spent. Then only will government work for the public good. The hereditary system must eventually bow before 'that prevailing spirit of industry and commerce to which it was ever hostile, and before that diffusion of knowledge on the subject of government . . . which has burst out in the last half century'.<sup>13</sup>

Priestley's views on aristocracy are best brought out by a contrast with those of Burke. Burke's defence of the French aristocracy is couched partly in terms of the utility and innocence of 'idleness'. A leisured class is essential to ensure the political wisdom that can come from education and financial independence, and hereditary privileges are the best security for such a class. Hereditary wealth and distinctions are, at their best, the privilege of men of virtue and ability, or of the patrons of such men; 'at the very worst, [they are] the ballast in the vessel of the commonwealth', a counterbalance to the disturbing effect of men with ability but no property. This stabilising influence is all the more necessary because it

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 263-5, 231-8, 127. <sup>13</sup> J. Priestley, *A Political Dialogue*, in *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 92.

is likely to be always under threat from the rest of the populace. However responsible the French aristocracy may be for the national debt (Burke thinks that France's fiscal difficulties result from mismanagement, not anything fundamental), any revolutionary régime that seeks to take the place of the aristocracy is certain to act with a 'contempt of justice'. Greed and envy will cause it to expropriate all that it can, even to the extent of debasing the currency in its own interests. In short, nothing good can be expected from the self-appointed representatives of the people, whatever motives they may profess, and the people themselves, lacking sufficient moral self-restraint, must be taught to hold their institutions in 'social awe'.<sup>14</sup>

Burke's argument is two-pronged: the aristocracy is on the whole protected from moral degeneration by the privilege of 'idleness', whereas when 'the people' try to overhaul society they are always in moral danger from the temptations of greed and envy. Priestley takes the opposite stance: idleness is the chief source of moral danger, and in civilised societies it is popular opinion that has come to embody 'a sense of justice and honour' in acting as a check upon encroachments by the state on civil liberties.<sup>15</sup> Yet while holding antithetical views on idleness, Burke and Priestley are in agreement about luxury, which they both see as socially beneficial. As Burke puts it, 'the love of lucre, though sometimes carried to a ridiculous, sometimes to a vicious excess, is the grand cause of prosperity to all states'.<sup>16</sup> In this respect they are both allies and heirs of Adam Smith.

Furthermore, Burke endorses Priestley's insistence on a theological dimension to the notion of difficulty. 'Difficulty is a severe instructor, set over us by the supreme ordinance of a parental guardian and legislator, who knows us better than we know ourselves, as he loves us better too'.<sup>17</sup> The words are Burke's, but could be Priestley's. Curiously, Burke's portrait or caricature of the radical, carried away by his 'idle' speculation and theoretical dreams, has features in common with Priestley's portrait or caricature of the 'idle' aristocrat. Burke's radical 'delights in the most sublime speculations; for, never intending to go beyond speculation, it costs nothing to have it magnificent'.<sup>18</sup> Priestley's aristocrat also favours the grandiose gesture, for it costs *him* nothing to have it magnificent, though it may bankrupt the state. The theological element in Priestley's

<sup>14</sup> Burke, *Reflections* (fn. 12), pp. 139-41, 236-7.

<sup>15</sup> J. Priestley, *Essay on Government*, section III ('Of Civil Liberty'), in *Works*, vol. xxii, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Discussed in Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Oxford, 1980), p. 52. <sup>17</sup> Burke, *Reflections* (fn. 12), p. 278. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

later politics can be further highlighted by contrasting his road to reform with that taken by many of his fellow radicals. There are two essential contrasts here, one concerning natural political rights, the other concerning luxury. Out of these differences arise different pictures of the historical process.

Unlike Paine or Cartwright, and contrary to what is frequently implied by Burke, Priestley makes little of the notion of natural political rights. In limiting natural rights to civil rights Priestley and Burke are at this point in close agreement. Epistemologically, this is the view we might expect Priestley to hold – in politics, much as in moral theology, everything depends on ‘historical facts’, and observation and experiment are ‘the only safe guides’. His 1767 *Essay on Government* follows Pope’s maxim concerning forms of government: ‘Whatever is best administered, is best.’<sup>19</sup> This pragmatic attitude to political systems prevents Priestley from embracing complete democracy even when he has become hostile to aristocracy. The point requires emphasis because, from Burke onwards, the radicals have been regarded as if they were all natural-rights democrats in the manner of Paine. According to Burke the radicals ‘are always at issue with government, not on a question of abuse, but a question of competency, and a question of title’.<sup>20</sup> This seems inaccurate in Priestley’s case: his formal argument reasons from questions of abuse (the national debt) to questions of competence (the nature of aristocracy) and only then to questions of title (political rights).

Priestley differs from his fellow radicals in other ways. He is quite immune to the ‘primitivism’ of radical Whig mythology. Many of his fellow radicals looked back to pre-Norman England for their standard of virtue. Priestley could admire that era only relative to its position in the scheme of progress. He had no wish to return to a pre-commercial existence, with the urban poor resettled on the land. Economic redistribution, sometimes pursued as a means of abolishing luxury, was also no part of his programme. Fundamentally, he thought that if wealth had been honestly earned it could be safely enjoyed. Along with this went a defence of the means of modern wealth, commerce, credit and manufacturing. The defence rests on the assumption that wealth is the result of effort and industry, and thus has a theological sanction.

If the economic foundations of modern society are morally sound, then it can present no great danger at the political level. On the whole the effects of luxury will be favourable to liberty. ‘When men, by the

practice of the arts [of luxury], acquire property, they covet equal laws to secure that property.’<sup>21</sup> Nor does luxury endanger liberty by opening the commonwealth to the threat of external aggressors. It does not make men effeminate and cowardly: ‘surely more spirit and courage may be expected from a man who has had good nourishment, and who has something to defend, than from one who is almost starved, and who has little or nothing to fight for’.<sup>22</sup> Besides, Priestley adds, modern knowledge is itself a source of power for the defence of the state. The real danger to modern society has come from the enforced idleness of Europe’s aristocracies, leading as it does to fiscal disaster and, subsequently, to revolutions.

Priestley’s radicalism, then, rests on a different moral basis from that of the opponents of luxury. It derives from his theodicy which links difficulty, effort and character, while rejecting the Spartanism of some of the other radicals. This theodicy denies that material progress must produce its own moral nemesis and thus perpetuate a sequence of historical cycles. It contends for the opposite conclusion, that material progress brings both moral and political benefits. It is Priestley’s emphasis on the political benefits of progress that distinguishes him most sharply from both Burke and many of his fellow radicals. In his writings we can see how heavily early liberalism depended on the assumption of moral progress.

All their differences notwithstanding, the British ‘balanced constitution’, and the American and French Revolutions are, Priestley believes, the fruit of a long process of political maturation. In modern societies such as Britain, France and America, civil and political liberty is no longer constantly endangered by evil and corruption; in these societies liberty can indeed be safely expanded. The assumption of moral progress, as Margaret Canovan has observed, meant for Priestley that there was no longer any need for the state to watch jealously over the morals and manners of the citizens, and to fight constantly against human nature. Opinions and private habits were no longer politically important, and could become a part of civil liberty precisely because they had become politically indifferent, things that could neither make nor mar the state.<sup>23</sup>

Because he thought men had become more self-disciplined and governable, Priestley came to see the art of government as being less

<sup>21</sup> J. Priestley, *Lectures on History*, Lecture 51, in *Works*, vol. xxiv, p. 310.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Lecture 55, in *Works*, vol. xxiv, p. 339.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Canovan, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty – Eighteenth Century Style’, *The Price-Priestley Newsletter* 2 (1978), 38.

<sup>19</sup> J. Priestley, *Essay on Government* in *Works*, xxii, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Reflections* (fn. 12), p. 149.

inherently difficult than it had been represented by earlier thinkers. Not so for Burke: for him the difficulty of rational government and the scarcity of political wisdom are leading considerations. In his view, only a wealthy, leisured and educated class can adequately master the required skills. He accuses the leaders of the French National Assembly of wanting to 'evade and slip aside from difficulty', preferring 'tricking short-cuts, and little fallacious facilities' to the hard business of reconciliation and compromise, so that in the end, by 'a slow but well-sustained progress', one advantage 'is as little as possible sacrificed to another'.<sup>24</sup> When it comes to matters of politics it is Burke who emphasises and praises difficulty, not Priestley.

For Priestley's *Political Dialogue* 'the business of states is not so difficult, but that persons who give proper attention to it may easily prepare themselves for the conduct of it'.<sup>25</sup> It is beyond the competence only of the uneducated and those morally disabled by habitual idleness. The skills required are relatively abundant simply because they are not particularly complex or special. Because of this there is nothing to be feared from an extension of the franchise. Priestley is voicing a commonplace when he observes that 'Virtue and public spirit are the necessary supports of all republican governments'.<sup>26</sup> What is novel in his outlook is the conviction that such virtue and public spirit are readily available to create a new kind of society.

Burke, arguing in the 1790s, will allow the people to dissolve a bad government only when they have been driven by it to sheer desperation. Any such dissolution would be a 'resort to anarchy', dissolving not just a government but the society itself. Popular revolution of any less desperate kind would be not just inept, but catastrophic. Yet elsewhere he wants to defend the common sense of the common man, as in his remark that 'The species is wise, and, when time is given, as a species it almost always acts right'.<sup>27</sup> Here, however, the qualification 'when time is given' is crucial, for, when time is not given, the popular mind will leap to disastrous conclusions. Much depends on whether their intellectual leaders allow the people to develop at their own pace or seek to hurry them along.

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Reflections* (fn. 12), p. 279.

<sup>25</sup> Priestley, *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> J. Priestley, *Lectures on History*, Lecture 41, in *Works*, vol. xxiv, p. 239.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by J.G.A. Pocock, 'Burke and the Ancient Constitution', in his *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and Ideology* (London, 1971), pp. 226-7, from Burke's never-delivered speech 'On a Motion Made in the House of Commons . . . for a Committee to Enquire into the State of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament'.

In general — we need to except the utopian phase aroused by the beginnings of the French Revolution — Priestley shares the gradualism Burke is here espousing. Even the Political Dialogue, his most radical tract, declares that 'Things once established should be respected by speculative politicians, because they will be respected by the people at large; but every thing should be put into the way of as much reformation as it is capable of'.<sup>28</sup> But he never concedes that the people are as easily inflamed by the rhetoric of agitators as Burke would have it. If such rhetoric succeeds there must be some substantial reason for the discontent it arouses. 'A whole people is not apt to revolt, till oppression has become extreme, and been long continued, so that they despair of any other remedy than a desperate one'.<sup>29</sup>

These differences about the moral and political competence of 'the people' is another version of the conflict between robust and fragile accounts of progress, and in turn this conflict rests on whether moral progress tends to follow material progress, as Priestley contends, or material follows moral, as Burke would have it. Burke's emphasis on fragility is remarkable: 'Rage and phrenzy will pull down more in half an hour than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years'.<sup>30</sup> Priestley will not allow that progress can so easily disintegrate, partly because for progress to occur at all it must become part of the ingrained character of a people, a second nature built up by innumerable habits or 'associations'. Curiously, Burke's conservatism employs a similar psychology. He defends 'prejudice' partly on the grounds that it embodies hard-won habits and national characters, the destruction or attempted destruction of which will be disastrous.

Liberty, both civil and political, according to Priestley's early *Essay on Government*, gives a man 'a constant feeling of his own power and importance, and is the foundation of his indulging a free, bold and manly turn of thinking'.<sup>31</sup> But this is an isolated remark: Priestley's commitment to political liberty has more to do with freedom of thought than with the feeling of power and importance. Political activity, important as it is, is not an essential part of a fully virtuous life. To hand over some responsibility to a parliamentary representative is, he contends against Rousseau, no great loss of liberty or virtue, for politics is only one among many possible spheres for progressive endeavour.<sup>32</sup> He considers civil affairs — commerce, industry, agriculture, science, philosophy and

<sup>28</sup> Priestley, *Works*, vol. xxv, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> J. Priestley, *Letters to Burke*, Letter 1, in *Works*, vol. xxii, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> Burke, *Reflections* (fn. 12), pp. 279-80.

<sup>31</sup> Priestley *Works*, vol. xxii, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. xxii, p. 10.

religion – the main arena for the pursuit of virtue, and these matters are for him all areas in which the state can make little useful contribution. In this respect it is Burke, not Priestley, who upholds the ‘republican’ tradition, usually associated with radicalism, according to which political wisdom and action is at the heart of manliness and self-mastery. By restricting the scope of government Priestley diminished the status of the political virtues. Priestley wants to replace an ‘idle’ political class unwilling to submit to moral discipline – the aristocracy – with a class which has learned self-discipline in the civil sphere; yet he employs the idea of moral progress to emphasise that the art of government is by no means as difficult as it has been traditionally thought to be.

The rediscovery of republicanism since the 1960s has greatly deepened our appreciation of the moral dimension of that one stream of political thought and action. Modern liberalism, when it is not utilitarian, tends to be morally agnostic. Priestley’s radical liberalism, or liberal radicalism, I suggest, is marked by its own particular moral ethos, an ethos that is in the first place theological. Its paradigm is not civic virtue, but commercial virtue; and its demands are perhaps no less strenuous than those of republicanism. It was a paradigm that did survive into the nineteenth century, but it had been wounded and weakened by its encounter with the (mainly republican) revolution in France. So severe was the blow that few afterwards were able to take seriously Priestley’s benign deity who makes his purposes known through science and social improvement. Personal piety could continue to see itself as guided by a severe instructor, and moral life be viewed as a struggle with adversity; but what was lost was the argumentative self-confidence that permitted Priestley to seek to unify all knowledge and social life as forms of rational piety.

## CHAPTER 12

*Rational piety*

R.K. Webb

To many, the title of this chapter must seem an oxymoron, in the ordinary, non-rhetorical sense of the word: an improper linking of two incompatible qualities of mind or personality. There are good grounds, both historical and psychological, to reject that contention, but establishing the legitimacy of rational piety is no easy task.

Indeed, the very notion of piety is shrouded in obscurity. The relevant entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (under the question-begging head of ‘the quality or character of being pious’) points to three categories – ‘habitual reverence and obedience to God (or the gods); devotion to religious duties and observances; godliness, devoutness, religiousness’ – each of which will find a place in this chapter.<sup>1</sup> Now, the earliest citations in the *OED* date from the beginning of the seventeenth century, but it seems possible that piety came into its own only later in that century, with ‘godliness’ the earlier preference.<sup>2</sup> The word was a commonplace to Tillotson, however, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was omnipresent in sermons and devotional literature and appears on thousands of tombstones and memorial tablets. To those who put it there, the word had to be more than merely gestural, yet when we search the interpretive scholarship for a fuller understanding of its function and significance, we are baffled. The concept makes no explicit appearance in Basil Willey’s *The Eighteenth Century Background*, in Gordon Rupp’s *Religion in England*,

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson’s *Dictionary* gives two trenchant meanings: (1) discharge of duty to God, (2) duty to parents and those in superior relation.

<sup>2</sup> To one Rational Dissenter in the eighteenth century, indeed, ‘piety’ and ‘godliness’ were interchangeable. See Nathaniel Lardner, *Posthumous Sermons III and IV* on ‘The Promise Annexed to Godliness’, in *The Works of Nathaniel Lardner*, 5 vols. (London, 1815), vol. v., esp. p. 203.



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