
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



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History of Political Thought seeks to provide a forum for the interpretation and discussion of political thought in its historical context. It is intended to foster exchange and communication between scholars in the English-speaking world and those on the continent and elsewhere.

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THE BEGINNINGS OF PRIESTLEY'S MATERIALISM

Alan Tapper

The mature materialism of Joseph Priestley's *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* of 1777 is based on three main arguments: that Newton's widely-accepted scientific methodology requires the rejection of the 'hypothesis' of the soul; that a dynamic theory of matter breaks down the active/passive dichotomy assumed by many dualists; and that interaction between matter and spirit is impossible. In *Matter and Spirit* it is the first two arguments which are given greatest prominence; but it is the third argument which first brought Priestley to take materialism seriously. It was an argument which had persistently troubled him in his dualist years, but it was not until 1774 in the *Examination* that (as he tells us) he 'first entertained a serious doubt of the truth of the vulgar hypothesis' (III, 202).¹ Underlying this fact is an episode of some complexity. The *Examination* was Priestley's reply to the three Scottish Common Sense philosophers, Thomas Reid, James Beattie and James Oswald, with appendices on Richard Price and James Harris. Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* of 1764 was Priestley's main concern, and the subject of the debate was not the nature of mind but scepticism, realism and the 'Theory of Ideas'.

The 'sceptics' under discussion were Berkeley and Hume. Both Reid and Priestley thought Berkeley and Hume had denied the reality of the external world, and both wished to reinstate external reality. Priestley thought the sceptical challenge could be met without any great difficulty. It was, he held, based on a misunderstanding of the canons of scientific reasoning: the assumption that whatever can not be demonstrated is not worthy of rational belief.

It is quite sufficient if the supposition [of an external world] be the easiest hypothesis for explaining the origin of our ideas. The evidence of it is such that we allow it to be barely possible to doubt of it; but that it is as certain as that two and two make four, we do not pretend (III, 46-7).

¹ All references in the text are to *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, 25 volumes in 26, edited by John Towill Rutt (London, 1817-32; reprinted New York, 1972). The full title of the *Examination* is *An Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense; Dr Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; and Dr Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*.

Priestley's realism was 'representative' realism. He took the Lockean Theory of Ideas—the theory that all our perceptions are mediated to us by sensations—to be one of the best established achievements of modern philosophy, and he could see nothing in Berkeley or Hume capable of undermining that achievement.

Reid, by contrast, thought that Berkeley and Hume had brought about an upheaval in philosophy and that order and sanity could only be restored by abolishing the whole tradition of 'ideas'—a tradition which goes back to Democritus and Aristotle. The defence of realism against Humean scepticism required a new conception of the powers and operations of the human mind. The capacity to perceive reality had to be counted as one of the native powers of the mind, and this power is not to be explicated by reference to representative ideas. The Theory of Ideas is, in fact, to be regarded as the principal source of Humean scepticism. Priestley, on the other hand, thought the Theory entirely innocent; on his view, Hume's scepticism stemmed from his theory of causation and causal reasoning. For Reid, Hume's 'destruction' of causal relations is only one casualty in the general 'destruction of worlds' produced by the Theory of Ideas.

Reid appealed to common sense to support his belief in the mind's ability to perceive reality directly. In Priestley's eyes, this appeal is itself a manoeuvre fraught with sceptical implications. It disputed the sufficiency of scientific reasoning to furnish us with a realist world-view, and thereby compelled us to regard as knowledge a lot of mere 'instinctive persuasions, depending upon the arbitrary constitution of our nature' (III, 71). He allows that, if science is to be possible, some propositions must be taken as self-evident and foundational, but he confines self-evidence to analytical propositions—subject and predicate must be 'different names for the same thing' (III, 17). The elementary propositions of mathematics ('twice two is four') fall within this category, but the other sciences—metaphysics, morals, theology, natural science and politics—can produce no comparable 'elementary propositions' which can be accepted as self-evident.² According to Priestley, Reid's relatively circumscribed appeal to common sense inevitably leads his successors, Beattie and Oswald, to enlarge its jurisdiction to include 'the primary truths of religion' and the evidences of Christianity (Oswald) or all truth ('that to us is truth which we *feel* that we must believe', he quotes from Beattie [III, 72]).

² George Campbell was quick to observe that Priestley had failed to supply any criterion for distinguishing acceptable self-evidence, nor had he given any non-mathematical examples of it. Cf. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London, 1850), 39.

Only a part of Reid's *Inquiry* consists of assertions based on self-evidence or common sense. That there is no external world is self-evidently false, Reid argues; but that 'ideas' do not exist is not self-evident. Reid's argument against the existence of ideas depends in part on his claim that belief in ideas leads to an 'absurd' denial of external existence: put this way, the argument is designed to give pause to any followers of Hume and Berkeley who value common sense. But against the followers of Locke, his argument has to consist of a demonstration that belief in ideas *does* entail a denial of matter, and this side of Reid is more difficult to reconstruct. Reid believes that this demonstration has already been performed by Berkeley and Hume, and he takes the demonstration, together with the argument from common sense, as constituting a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Theory of Ideas. Priestley's purpose is to show that Reid's 'demonstration' is a failure. The Theory of Ideas is, in his opinion, entirely innocent of the sceptical progeny Reid accused it of fathering. Reid's appeal to common sense is not only dangerous; it is also unnecessary.

The Reid-Priestley debate about ideas has a number of aspects, but it revolves around a central proposition: that sensations and ideas (if ideas exist) do not resemble the qualities of external objects. Reid thinks this is a truth discovered by Berkeley and Hume, which served as the 'innocent mother' when the Theory of Ideas begat the sceptical denial of external reality. Throughout the *Inquiry* Reid also assumed that ideas *must* resemble objects if they are to represent them; for him, then, ideas must be *images* of external things.³ The main point in Priestley's *Examination* is his denial that ideas must resemble what they represent. In arguing thus, he openly concedes that they do not resemble their objects. Reid, he says, has

suffered himself to be misled . . . merely by philosophers happening to call ideas the *images* of external things; as if this was not known to be a figurative expression denoting not that the actual shapes of things were delineated on the brain, or upon the mind, but only that impressions of some kind or other were conveyed to the mind by means of the organs of sense and their corresponding nerves, and that between these impressions and the sensations existing in the mind there is a real and necessary, though at present an unknown connexion (III, 36).

Priestley is defending the Lockean claim that 'ideas' mediate perceptions. Lockean mediation is usually thought of as twofold: 'ideas' both represent their objects and they stand as part of a causal explanation of perception. Perception is to be thought of as the outcome of the causal sequence object—

³ On this aspect of Reid see Selwyn Grave, "The 'Theory of Ideas'" in *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations*, eds. Stephen F. Barker and Tom L. Beauchamp (Philadelphia, 1976), 55–61.

(physiological) impression-sensation or idea. In defending ideas, Priestley defends this causal theory, and he seems to assume that by so doing the representation issue is also satisfied. He does, indeed, talk about two aspects of mediation in the first two (of six) 'fallacies' which he sees as 'the principal source of [Reid's] mistakes', but these aspects are both presented in causal rather than representational terms.

- (1) Because he cannot perceive any resemblance between objects and ideas, he concludes that the one cannot produce the other.
- (2) Because he cannot perceive any necessary connexions between sensations and the objects of them, and therefore cannot absolutely demonstrate the reality of external objects, or even of the mind itself, by the doctrine of ideas, he rejects that doctrine altogether, and has recourse to arbitrary instincts (III, 34).

The first point here shows that Priestley thought Reid's denial of likeness between objects and ideas was aimed at refuting the causal rather than the representational aspect of mediation.

The second point highlights a different dimension of the debate about ideas. The *Inquiry* contains a subsidiary attack on the Theory of Ideas which turns not on the issue of resemblance between objects and ideas but on conditions governing causal relations between body and mind. Reid's 'resemblance' argument can be phrased as running: 'no representation without resemblance'. His subsidiary argument claims that we can only speak of causal relations between two entities when we can discern the mechanism of 'necessary connexion' between cause and effect. Priestley quotes Reid: 'We are inspired by the sensation, and we are inspired by the corresponding perception, by means unknown.'⁴ For Reid, we cannot know that objects cause ideas because we do not know of any means by which they do so. Priestley thought this argument fallacious. Priestley and Reid disagree about perception partly because they dispute whether ideas must be images, but also because they dispute whether it is necessary to know the mechanism by which a putative cause produces its effect.

⁴ *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. W. Hamilton, 7th ed., 2 Vols (Edinburgh, 1872), I, 188. Reid is certainly occasionalist with regard to physical transactions. In nature, he says, 'we neither perceive the agent nor the power, but the change only . . .' Real efficiency belongs only to the 'metaphysical cause', 'the agent behind the scene', which for him must be supernatural agency. *Ibid.*, II, 523. His denial of physical action on mind is similarly inspired. Reid, however, felt no doubts about the reality of mind's action on matter.

However, while it is easy to distinguish between these two arguments in the *Inquiry*, Priestley's way of handling the arguments blurs the distinction between them, even as he talks about Reid's 'two fallacies'. He reads 'no representation without resemblance' as tantamount to 'no causal relations without resemblance'. In this way the first argument becomes, like the second, a causal argument. And, for Reid, the second argument rests on the assumption that mind and body are so dissimilar that there *could* be no intervening mechanism by means of which they could interact. Both arguments, then, involve the question of resemblance. Priestley contends that both lack of resemblance between cause and effect, and ignorance of mechanisms, is no barrier to knowledge of causation.

The disagreement between Reid and Priestley about mechanisms affects not only their attitude to the causal theory of perception: it is also fundamental to their positions for and against free-will. (Priestley will argue that 'correspondences' show motives to be causally bound to actions, just as objects are bound to ideas.) In the absence (as he thinks) of a well-authenticated mechanism of perception, Reid feels entitled to claim that the 'images' allegedly transmitted by the nerves are mere fictions, of no evidential value. Hartley's theory of nervous 'vibrations' is likewise dismissed as conjectural. He adds that these 'theories' are equally lacking in explanatory force: 'If any man will show how the mind may perceive images in the grain, I will undertake to explain how it may perceive the most distant objects'.⁵ On Priestley's account of causal reasoning, these objections carry no weight. The 'correspondences' between objects and sensations provide evidence of causation which cannot be overruled by gaps in our understanding of the perceptual process.

I know . . . that the eye is the instrument of vision, because without it nothing can be seen . . . I am equally certain that the brain is necessary to all perception because if that be disordered, thinking either entirely ceases, or is proportionably disturbed (III, 38).

The philosopher is entitled to fashion hypotheses about the causal mechanism, and these cannot be dismissed if they 'suit the phenomena' (*ibid.*). It is interesting to note in passing that Reid's rhetoric against ideas—'unphilosophical', 'no foundation in fact or observation', etc.—corresponds closely to Priestley's language against the soul in *Matter and Spirit*. The difference between them is that for Priestley, unlike Reid, not all conjectures are unphilosophical. Priestley is committed to the view that ideas are, but the soul is not, a philosophical conjecture. A philosophical conjecture is one which conforms to the first two of Newton's 'Rules of Reasoning in

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 157; quoted by Priestley at III, 38.

Philosophy', namely, 'We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances', and, 'to the same natural effects we must, as far as possible, assign the same causes' (Motte's translation).

Priestley's view of causal reasoning rules out, for him, the possibility of occasionalism or parallelism: we know that mind and body do interact. Reid's different view makes the denial of interaction a possibility. Priestley's two main points against Reid—Reid's first two 'fallacies'—are seen by him as nullifying the force of the *Inquiry*, but his *examination* also mounts a counter-offensive which seeks to drive Reid into the occasionalist camp, or, further still, into idealism. It is from this counter-offensive that Priestley's early materialism largely derives. In a section entitled 'Mr Locke's Doctrine not so favourable to Berkeley's Theory as Dr Reid's', he assembles various passages from the *Inquiry* where Reid approaches occasionalism. In these passages Reid's dualism is so absolute as to make interaction doubtful. Mind and body are so different, Reid says, that 'we can find no handle by which one may lay hold of the other' (III, 48).⁶ And, following Berkeley, he asserts that 'sensations and ideas in our minds can resemble nothing but sensations and ideas in other minds' (ibid.).⁷ Dissimilarity has here become not a contingent fact, discovered by careful attention to the phenomenology of sensations, but a necessity, consequent upon the nature of the mind and matter. Priestley quotes a third passage which goes to the source of Reid's dualism: 'I take it for granted, upon the testimony of common sense, that my mind is a substance . . . and my reason convinces me that it is an unextended and indivisible substance; and hence I infer that there cannot be in it anything that resembles extension' (III, 47).⁸ Reid's dualism, it seems, is based on the traditional contrast between matter's complexity and mind's 'simplicity'. Substances so dissimilar, he is inclined to suggest, are unable to interact; and if Reid himself hesitates to draw this conclusion, Priestley will draw it for him.

Priestley goes on to argue that this 'occasionalism' leads readily to Berkeley's idealism. His reasoning here rests on the principle which underlies the later materialism of *Matter and Spirit*, the principle of simplicity as embodied in Rule I of Newton's 'Rules of Reasoning'. If all our perceptions and thoughts would remain exactly as they are if matter did not exist, then belief in a material world is otiose. If occasionalism is true, then the external world,

⁶ Ibid., 187.

⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸ Ibid., 210.

can be of no proper use to give us sensations and ideas. It must be [God] himself who impresses our minds with the notices of external things, without any real instrumentality of their own; so that the external world is really a superfluity in the creation (III, 47).

Deny interaction and it follows that 'this external world, which has been the subject of so much controversy, can have no existence', for a wise God would create nothing superfluous.

Priestley's 'counter-offensive' rests not just on the principle of simplicity, but also on the proposition that interaction between dissimilars is impossible. By now it may be beginning to appear that this proposition conflicts with his whole defence of the Theory of Ideas, but this apparent conflict can be examined in a moment. The proposition also forms the basis of Priestley's early materialism, and we can now see how this materialism followed from his encounter with Reid. Priestley was willing to regard Berkeley's idealism as a serious option—he could not dismiss it as contrary to common sense. He tells us that 'when I first entered upon metaphysical inquiries, I thought that either the *material* or *immaterial* part of the universal system was superfluous' (III, 201), and Reid's *Inquiry* seems to have returned him to the same point. Despite the problem of interaction, Priestley could not deny that interactions between mind and matter did occur. It is, for him, more certain that there are causal relations between matter and mind than that the mind is or is not material (III, 154), whereas for Reid the mind's immateriality is the fundamental certainty. The Theory of Ideas itself requires that there is a material world producing ideas in the mind. The causal theory of perception, and the theory of causal reasoning underlying it, are Priestley's primary concerns; to protect them involves rejecting idealism. But beyond this, he thinks that the principle of simplicity can also be enlisted against idealism. The chief defect of Berkeley's scheme is that it supposes a multitude of divine interpositions which, while not impossible, is not 'consonant to the course of nature in other respects' (III, 23). The view that ideas are caused by their objects 'is recommended by the same simplicity that recommends every other philosophical theory, and needs no other evidence whatever'. It 'exhibits particular appearances as arising from general laws, which is agreeable to everything else we observe (ibid.)'. Realism is, then, a superior scientific theory.

Far from the Theory of Ideas leading to Berkeley's 'scepticism' (as Reid thought), the Theory on Priestley's view, entails the falsity of idealism, and, further, Reid's denial of the Theory leads to idealism. But having thus tried to turn the tables on Reid, Priestley's own opinions also underwent a reversal. The problem of interaction between dissimilars was so great that if it was not alleviated, idealism would retain a measure of appeal. Interaction seemed impossible, and idealism seemed incompatible with the realism assumed by

the Theory of Ideas. Priestley, then, had no alternative but to declare himself a materialist. No problem is presented by interaction between brain and body.

Two other difficulties did immediately present themselves: if the mind is the brain, are ideas also material? And, are there any *a priori* objections to identifying the mind with the brain? On the first point, Priestley took Hartley as his authority; on the second, Locke. He suggests that ideas no more resemble their objects than the stroke of a plectrum resembles the sound it produces. If Reid wishes to deny that objects cause ideas, then he must also deny that the stroke produces the sound.

The transferring of this comparison to the doctrine of ideas is very easy. If, as Dr Hartley supposes, the nerves and brain be a vibrating substance, the analogy will hold very nearly; all sensations and ideas being vibrations in that substance, and all that is properly unknown in the business being the simple power in the mind to perceive, or be affected by, those vibrations. And if, as Locke and others suppose, matter itself may be indued with that sentient power, even that difficulty, as far as the present problem is concerned, is removed (III, 36–7).

The points were to present more difficulty than Priestley realized: he was to equivocate later about whether ideas are merely brain-processes; and he was to be troubled by the question of how matter might think.

It remains to return to the apparent contradiction running through the *Examination*, both sides of which contribute to the formation of Priestley's materialism. In the defence of ideas he comments that 'it is impossible to say *how* [the nerves and brain] act upon the mind, or the mind upon them'—but, he adds, this is no ground for denying that they *do* interact. To reason thus would end in utter scepticism; by such sceptical reasoning 'we may deny every principle in nature' (III, 36). The implication is that science frequently makes progress despite an ignorance of mechanisms. And yet, when we come to the counter-attack on Reid, he asks, to reinforce the problem of interaction, 'how can any thing act upon another but by means of some common property?' (III, 47). The implication here is that the absence of a mechanism makes causal relations between matter and spirit impossible.

Priestley says no more than this, and his commentators have not pursued the matter. However, the 'contradiction' is only apparent. Priestley can be paraphrased as follows: Where we know *a priori* that there can be no mechanisms (as in the case of matter and spirit), there causation can be safely denied. Where we are simply ignorant of any mechanism, there knowledge of causation is a possibility. The difficulty in Priestley's case lies not at the level of these principles of causal reasoning, but at the point where he claims, while

still trying to be neutral about the nature of mind, that 'correspondences' show that objects do cause ideas.

Clearly, if objects are, and ideas are not material, then (for him) objects cannot cause ideas. He is not entitled to adopt even a temporary stance of neutrality towards the ontological question. He wants to claim we can know that objects cause ideas without knowing how they do so, but his own principles require him to show that a mechanism is at least possible in the case, and only materialism (or idealism) can guarantee this. It is not only his counter-attack on Reid that requires him to adopt materialism; his defence of the Theory of Ideas also requires it. The fact that he seems unaware of this suggests no more than that the *Examination* records his transition to materialism.

One other difficulty remains. It is a basic point in Priestley's defence of ideas that, *contra* Reid, ideas need not resemble their objects. However, his newly-adopted materialism holds that objects and ideas are not ontologically dissimilar. One is left to conclude that the dissimilarity is of a different kind, presumably qualitative or configurational dissimilarity. It is true that Reid argues (in what we have termed his subsidiary attack on ideas⁹) from an ontological dissimilarity between objects and ideas to the conclusion that ideas cannot resemble or represent objects in any way, but we can presume that for Priestley ontological dissimilarity is not the only kind of dissimilarity.

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⁹ See *ibid.*