

P

Price, Richard



Alan M. S. J. Coffee
King's College London, London, UK

Introduction

Richard Price (1723–1791) was a notable eighteenth-century philosopher, activist, and dissenting clergyman. He made significant contributions to moral, political, and religious philosophy, as well as to mathematics and finance. He was known for his resolute commitment to the ideal of liberty, and his subsequent support for a number of progressive causes, including the abolition of slavery, the easing of political and civil restrictions on non-Anglicans, the eradication of the national debt, and, especially, the American and French Revolutions. In light of this, Price has been described as “the first and original Left Wing intellectual” in British history (Pocock 1984). While he was very well known in his lifetime, not only in England but also in America and France, his influence waned rapidly after his death. Today, Price is best known for his 1789 sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, which prompted Edmund Burke to respond with his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* a year later. In recent years, however, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in Price’s moral, legal, and political philosophy.

Background and Life

Price was born in Llangeinor in Glamorgan, Wales, the son of a non-conformist minister. At the age of 16, following the death of both his parents in quick succession, he moved to London to study at the dissenting academy in Moorfields. In 1757, Price became the minister at the Presbyterian chapel at Newington Green, a post he retained for almost 30 years. Shortly after taking up this position, he published his most important philosophical book, *A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals* (1758, corrected and edited in its third edition in 1787 simply as *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*).

In 1765, Price became a Fellow of the Royal Society, most likely because of his substantial work in editing and posthumously publishing his friend Thomas Bayes’s seminal essay, *An Essay towards solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chance* (1761). Price was himself a first-rate mathematician. His book *Observations on Revisionary Payments* (1771) is considered to be the first major work on actuarial science in general (Ogborn 1956). This was followed by *Observations on the Proper Method of Keeping the Accounts* (1774), which is also regarded as a key document in the field. Price is held up within the profession as a pioneering consulting actuary, serving for 15 years as an advisor to the Society for the Equitable Assurances on Lives and Survivorships (which became Equitable Life until its

demise in 2019) on calculations, the valuation of policies, and the treatment of the Society's surplus.

In *Revisionary Payments*, Price included a section on the history and dangers of government debt, a subject with which he was preoccupied for most of his life. The following year, he published *An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the National Debt* (1771) in which he argued for the creation of a sinking fund to be used to pay off the national debt. There was, according to Price, a direct relationship between the level of national debt and the happiness, security, and character of the people. As the public debt grew dramatically during the American Revolutionary War, Price's warnings and proposed solution came to the attention of the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, who established a sinking fund along similar lines in 1786, although without crediting Price. Although economists question the soundness of the scheme, the debt was reducing until the long Napoleonic Wars put too much pressure on the nation's finances.

Price was a central figure in several influential London philosophical dining clubs, including the Royal Society Club, the "Bowood Circle" that met at the house of the future Prime Minister Lord Shelburne, and the "Honest Whigs," whose membership included Benjamin Franklin (who had proposed Price's admission to the Royal Society), James Burgh, author of *Political Disquisitions* (1774), and Price's close personal and intellectual friend, Joseph Priestley. Though Price disagreed strongly with Priestley on several important theological, moral, and scientific views, they were united on more issues than they were divided and shared a commitment to many of the same civil and political causes centered on the ideal of liberty, so much so that their names are often closely linked in historical discussions. Between 1777 and 82, for example, there was an academic journal specializing in Enlightenment and Dissent in the eighteenth century entitled *The Price-Priestley Newsletter*. The Honest Whigs group's meetings were also attended variously by James Boswell, the notable radical historian Catharine Macaulay, and the American patriot Josiah Quincy, Jr.

In the build up to the American Revolution, Price published *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776). This was a huge success on both sides of the Atlantic and led to Price being awarded the freedom of the City of London. He followed up this tract with some *Additional Observations* (1777). Subsequently, Price was offered American Citizenship and asked by the Continental Congress of the United States to help establish the finances of the new nation. Price declined the invitation. Franklin also provided the Comte de Mirabeau – a future leader of the French Revolution – with an introduction to Price when he visited London in 1784. Following his address in 1789, Price became a widely popular figure in France, receiving letters and visits from numerous revolutionary leaders.

Theology

Although a Presbyterian minister, Price's contribution to religious thought in the eighteenth century is rather more as a philosopher than as a theologian. He is often described as a Unitarian, as one who does not accept the doctrine of the trinity, but within this broad label his position was Arian rather than Socinian. This meant that, while he did not accept that Christ was divine, neither did he believe that he was a mere human being but instead held that Christ was God's begotten son through whom the world had been created. Price's denial of the doctrine of the trinity and his inability to affirm the Thirty-Nine Articles meant that he was subject to severe legal and civil restrictions.

While rooted in scripture, taking the Bible to have been both divinely inspired and historically accurate, Price's religion was nevertheless highly rational. He published *Four Dissertations* on religious questions in 1767 in which he defended, first, the doctrine of providence – the principle that the universe was created by, and remains under the control of, a benevolent and omnipotent God. Price understood this doctrine to have been supported rather than undermined by Newton's discoveries, though this was a subject of considerable philosophical discussion in the eighteenth century. The other three dissertations concerned

the coherence of prayer, the necessity of an after-life, and a refutation of Hume's arguments against miracles that incorporated Bayesian probability theory and which remains significant today (Earman 2000).

Price's religious and metaphysical beliefs provided the foundation for his ethical and political work. The God that sustains the world is a rational being whose principles are knowable to the human mind and include the principles of morality and virtue. Price understood this within a Platonist framework, an approach in which he followed Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) and Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688). The universe, he argued, is a copy of archetypal ideas used by God in his creation. These ideas are immutable and eternal while remaining independent of God himself, who knows them because they are identical with his nature. This gives the universe a rational structure which is accessible to human beings, whose minds are also a reflection of the archetype (Zebrowski 1994). It follows, then, that the principles of science, represented in Newton's axioms, and of moral duty and virtue are reflections of the divine reason. This is morally significant because it fixes the ideas of right and wrong according to nonarbitrary rational principles rather than according solely to either God's will (voluntarism) or human sentiment or emotion (sentimentalism). It also provides the basis for Price's ideal of social and political freedom as rational individual self-government under a system of similarly rational laws.

A millenarian aspect to Price's theology can also be detected, according to which not only do human beings have a duty to obey the moral law, but that in so doing they hasten the prophesied time of earthly paradise when the whole earth will be governed by an empire of reason and virtue (Fruchtmann 1983). As people, we must prepare for this coming reward by developing our intellectual and spiritual knowledge of the eternal truths and principles of virtue. Seen in this light, the struggle for religious and political liberty also represents a struggle between good and evil on a cosmic scale.

Moral Philosophy

Price was a rational intuitionist. Intuitionism was one of the dominant approaches to moral theory from the early eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century when it was largely abandoned, although interest in it has returned to some degree in our own century. Price's moral philosophy is set out in *A Review of the Principal Questions*, a book which was considered in its day as the most able defense of rational infusionism in the English language. The book was significant in its own time and Price's thought foreshadowed a number of the important developments in this field of the twentieth century by G. E. Moore (1873–1958), H. A. Pritchard (1871–1947), and, especially, W. D. Ross (1877–1971). For this reason, *A Review* should be regarded as a "permanent contribution to philosophical thought and a classic of the science to which it belongs" (Thomas 1924, 33). Nevertheless, like much of Price's work, the book's direct influence largely died with its author. *A Review* does, however, continue to be highly esteemed by those acquainted with it, with Robert Fogelin describing it as "a work that is rarely read without praise, but still rarely read" (Fogelin 1992, 132).

Moral intuitionists hold that moral truths are self-evident and refer to nonnatural properties. Because moral truths are self-evident, they can be known without the need either for argument or experience. Self-evident truths need not be obvious, but they can be discovered without the introduction of further principles. As to how moral truths are known, there are two broad approaches. One holds that human beings have a moral sense by which we make our judgments. This tradition is associated with the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), Frances Hutcheson (1694–1746), and David Hume (1711–78) and is sometimes referred to as moral sentimentalism. On the other approach, we are understood to grasp moral truths through the intellect. This is the tradition built upon by Cudworth, Clarke, and Joseph Butler (1692–52). Price belonged to the latter group, and *A Review* was written principally as a reply to the sentimentalism of Hutcheson and Hume. On the sentimental account, the criterion

of right and wrong was often identified with some natural but nonethical feature, such as the tendency to produce pleasure, whereas rationalists argued that moral principles were themselves basic, not reducible to any other quality, and in that sense were nonnatural. In this respect, Price anticipates – possibly originally – Moore’s famous “Open Question Argument,” according to which any attempt to define what is good in terms of a natural property is always left facing the question “but is this good”?

Legal and Political Philosophy

Price’s legal and political philosophy builds on his theological and moral commitments. In particular, his framework is constructed around the central idea of freedom, so much so that he was described in France by the National Assembly, which itself went into 6 days of mourning for him upon his death, as an “Apostle of Liberty” (Thomas 1924, 144–146). “Nothing,” Price argues in his *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, “can be of as much consequence to us as liberty. It is the foundation of all honour, and the chief privilege of and glory of our natures” (Price 1991, 23). Human beings have a natural and inalienable right to be free, and it is the principal purpose of government to protect that liberty, which includes ensuring that people’s property is secure. In addition to being a natural right, a free way of life is said to benefit society by allowing the individual and collective exercise of our minds, providing the necessary conditions in which the arts and sciences can flourish. These ideas stand within the Commonwealthman, or republican, tradition of political thought that animated the English Civil War as well as the American and French Revolutions, and of which Price was one of the most notable representatives at the end of the eighteenth century. In the twenty-first century, as interest in neo-republican political thought has increased, Price’s work has experienced a corresponding renewal of interest.

According to Price, and in line with republican theory, government is only ever legitimate where it is in the name of those it governs: “the people

(that is, the body of independent agents) are their own legislators. All civil authority is properly their authority. Civil governors are only public servants, and their power, being delegated is by its nature limited” (Price 1991, 15). Independence, in this context, is synonymous with freedom. A free person is independent in the sense of being self-governing, acting in his own right rather than being under the control of a master. Such a person is the equal of all others in the political community, subject only to a properly constituted law. Law does not inhibit individual freedom, rather government by law is itself liberty so long as “the body of people... participate in the making of [it]” (Price 1991, 17). Freedom of this kind must be thought of from two perspectives simultaneously, that of the free individual citizen and that of the free state. “A free state,” Price argues, “at the same time that it is free itself, makes all its members free” (Price 1991, 27). Just as a free person is self-governing, so too must be the state as a whole meaning that it must be independent from all foreign interference and control. Not only must the free state be independent of external power, it must also represent the will of all its members on pain of otherwise being a despotic government to those it subjugates. Freedom, then, is a complex ideal. It not only entails the twin perspectives of individual and collective freedom but comprises three distinct components. Alongside independence from external control and equality with all other citizens, freedom requires the exercise of civic virtue on the part of free individuals (Coffee 2013, 120). Virtue, here, refers to the capacity and willingness to regulate one’s conduct in accordance with reason and the rational moral law.

Freedom, as Price understands it in its eighteenth century context, represents the antonym of slavery. To be under the control of another person’s, or another country’s, will was the definition of servitude, language that Price applies liberally throughout his political writings, including in the context of the America colonies’ subjection to British rule. Strictly, the right to freedom applies to all moral agents capable of independence living in the state. Where Price seems to have reservations about the idea of universal suffrage, it is

because the poor and uneducated would likely remain dependent on their employers and landlords unless there were accompanying policies of education and social reform. The most notable area where Price is silent about extending freedom is in the case of women. It would be left to his friend and protégée, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) who attended his church at Newington Green in the 1780s, and whose own philosophy is heavily indebted to Price's, to make this case.

Conclusion

Price is a versatile philosopher who made notable contributions to several areas of the discipline. He developed a systematic overall religious, moral, legal, and political philosophy (for an excellent introduction to his thought, see Thomas 1977). If Price's subsequent influence has not been what his achievements in lifetime might have suggested, this has most likely resulted from the contingencies of history rather than from any lack of quality in his thought. Revolutionary politics, for example, fell out of favor at the start of the nineteenth century, and Price's moral philosophy was eclipsed by that of Kant with whom he shares a great deal. And whereas the reputation of Price's contemporary, Priestley, was maintained for his scientific work, such as for the discovery of oxygen, the field of actuarial finance has not attracted the same historical attention. That Price's work is once more being discussed is a benefit to the history of philosophy.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Freedom](#)
- ▶ [Joseph Priestley](#)
- ▶ [Liberalism](#)
- ▶ [Mary Wollstonecraft](#)
- ▶ [Republicanism](#)

References

Works by Price

There is as yet, no published collection of Price's complete works. However, several of Price's most important Political works are collected as:

Price R (1991) Political writings. Thomas DO (ed). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1992)

A complete list of Price's works is given in:

Thomas DO, Stephens J, Jones PAL (1993) A bibliography of the works of Richard Price. Scolar Press, Aldershot

Works referred to in this entry:

Price R (1767) Four dissertations. T. Cadell, London

Price R (1771) Observations on reversionary payments; on schemes for providing annuities for widows, and for persons in old age; on the method of calculating the values of assurances on lives; and on the national debt. To which are added, four essays on different subjects in the doctrine of life-annuities and political arithmetick. Also, an appendix and supplement, containing additional observations, and a complete set of tables; particularly, several new tables of the probabilities of life in different situations, and of the values of annuities on lives. T. Cadell, London

Price R (1774) Observations on the proper method of keeping the Accounts, and determining from year to year the State of the Society for Equitable Assurances on Lives & Survivorships. T. Cadell, London

Price R (1776) Observations on the nature of civil liberty, the principles of government, and the justice and policy of the war with America. Edward and Charles Dilly, and Thomas Cadell, London

Price R (1777) Additional observations on the nature and value of civil liberty, and the war with America: also Observations on schemes for raising money by public loans; an Historical Deduction and Analysis of the National Debt; and a Brief Account of the Debts and Resources of France. T. Cadell, London

Price R (1787) A review of the principal questions in morals, 3rd edn. T. Cadell, London

Secondary Literature

Coffee A (2013) Mary Wollstonecraft, freedom and the enduring power of social domination. *Eur J Polit Theo* 12(2):116–135

Earman J (2000) Hume's abject failure: the argument against miracles. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Fogelin R (1992) Richard Price on promising: a limited defense. In: Philosophical interpretations. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Fruchtman J (1983) The apocalyptic politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. *Trans Am Philos Soc* 73(4):1–123

- Ogborn ME (1956) The professional name of actuary. *J Inst Actuaries (1886–1994)* 82(2):233–246
- Pocock JGA (1984) Radical criticisms of the Whig order in the age between revolutions. In: Jacob M, Jacob J (eds) *The origins of Anglo-American radicalism*. Allen and Unwin, Boston
- Thomas R (1924) Richard Price, philosopher and apostle of liberty. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Thomas DO (1977) *The honest mind: the thought and work of Richard Price*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Zebrowski M (1994) Richard Price: British Platonist of the eighteenth century. *J Hist Ideas* 55(1):17–35