MEADVILLE/LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

FREEDOM, DETERMINISM AND LIBERAL RELIGION: THE THOUGHT OF JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

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I find it absolutely impossible
to produce such a work
that shall be anything like complete . . .

In completing one discovery
we never fail to get
an imperfect knowledge of others,
of which we could have no idea before;
so that we cannot solve one doubt without
creating several new ones.

- Joseph Priestley

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....1

The Topic of This Dissertation
Outline of Chapters
Why This Dissertation Was Written

Chapter

I. "NECESSITY" IN THE THOUGHT OF AUTHORS PRIESTLEY CITED.....10

Introduction
Thomas Hobbes
Anthony Collins
Francis Hutcheson
David Hume
Conclusion

II. PRIESTLEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF "NECESSITY".....29

Introduction
Arguments for Philosophical Necessity
Objections to Necessarianism
Implications Priestley Drew From the Doctrine of Necessity
Necessity in Priestley's Life
Conclusion

III. RICHARD PRICE AND JOSEPH PRIESTLEY: A DEBATE ON "NECESSITY".....58

Introduction
Richard Price: Contemporary Critic
Cause and Effect
The Soul and Material Existence
Self-Determination
"Candour"
Conclusion

IV. "NECESSITY" AMONG PRIESTLEY'S FRIENDS AND IN LATER GENERATIONS.....77

Introduction
The Doctrine of Necessity Among Priestley's Contemporaries
The Doctrine of Necessity in Later Generations

V. CONCLUSION.....93

Introduction
The "Necessity" of Priestley and the "Necessity" of Other Thinkers
Implications That Can be Drawn From Priestley's Doctrine of Necessity

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY.....110

INTRODUCTION

The Topic of This Dissertation

Modern Unitarian Universalism has many deep roots. One such root which has uniquely contributed to this contemporary expression of liberal religion is in the English Enlightenment. This thesis explores an important aspect of the thought of one of the significant Unitarian figures of that era, Joseph Priestley. That aspect of Priestley's thought to be explored is his determinist outlook.

In this thesis it will be shown that Priestley has been claimed to be part of the liberal religious tradition by many religious liberals. The general question raised by this thesis is this: Is it possible for someone holding a determinist viewpoint to still be a religious liberal, and if so, how is it possible? This question is explored through the specific problem of whether of not it is possible to consider the determinist, Joseph Priestley, a religious liberal, and if so, how.

Related to this are two additional points. The first of these is the fundamental issue of approaching a definition of liberal religion (at least in the Unitarian, and Unitarian Universalist context). Or to put it more

precisely, what might be some of the basic self- defined characteristics of liberal religion? Secondly, what issues might be raised for religious liberals through an understanding of Priestley's determinism

To address what has been raised in the questions which have been posed above, this dissertation has been divided into two sections. The first section (the first three chapters) explores Priestley's concept of determinism: what it was, how he expressed it, what its sources were, what relationship this conception might have had with his life. The second section (the last two chapters) deals with the implications of Priestley's doctrine of determinism: what effect it might have had on contemporaries and later generations of religious liberals, what might be special or unique about Priestley's conception, how it is relevant to an understanding of what constitutes religious liberalism.

Outline of Chapters

CHAPTER I "'NECESSITY' IN THE THOUGHT OF AUTHORS PRIESTLEY CITED": This chapter helps to provide the background and context for a conversation about Priestley's doctrine of determinism (or what he called either "necessarianism" or "the doctrine of philosophical necessity"). Priestley claimed that many thinkers had arrived at a somewhat similar view of necessarianism to his own. The thoughts of Thomas Hobbes, Anthony Collins, Francis Hutchesson, and David Hume, on this subject, are examined. These thinkers are examined

on the basis of a particular category of determinism (so called "soft" determinism) to which they all seem somewhat related.

CHAPTER II "PRIESTLEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF 'NECESSITY'": This second chapter deals with what Priestley, himself, understood necessarianism to be. The chapter begins with Priestley's arguments for necessarianism. These arguments are based in both "natural" and "revealed" religion, that is to say, Priestley's arguments arise out of the evidence of nature and how he understood nature, as well as the evidence of revelation (especially scriptural revelation) and how he interpreted revelation. In addition to his philosophical arguments, Priestley claimed that there was a value in a necessarian viewpoint because of the positive effect it had on one's life. This chapter concludes with an examination of how Priestley tried to incorporate that viewpoint into his own life.

CHAPTER III "RICHARD PRICE AND JOSEPH PRIESTLEY: A DEBATE ON 'NECESSITY'": This chapter describes the details of a written debate between Priestley and another dissenting minister, Richard Price, on the subject of necessarianism. This chapter helps to clarify some of the elements of Priestley's doctrine raised in the previous chapter. It also helps to show that a necessarian viewpoint was far from being unanimous among liberal dissenting ministers in

eighteenth century England. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the way in which Price and Priestley engaged in their debate. Thus, this chapter not only serves to clarify Priestley's positions on certain aspects of what he understood to be of religious importance, but it also serves to show how he understood that these matters ought to be explored: openly, publicly, and with "candour."

CHAPTER IV "NECESSITY AMONG PRIESTLEY'S FRIENDS AND IN LATER GENERATIONS": This chapter demonstrates that, at best, Priestley's doctrine received only a lukewarm response from his contemporaries, and that it had almost no effect on later generations of Unitarians on both sides of the Atlantic. This chapter goes on to demonstrate that later generations of religious liberals continued to recognize Priestley as part of the tradition of religious liberalism. Yet these later generations ignored or underplayed Priestley's necessarian viewpoint.

CHAPTER V "CONCLUSION": This chapter begins with a comparison between Priestley and some of the other thinkers he cited as necessarians (explored in detail in Chapter I). This comparison has been left for the conclusion because it indicates some of what is unique about the philosophical arguments Priestley presented. The chapter then examines the basic assumptions Priestley had when constructing a

determinist doctrine. It is then demonstrated that these very assumptions allow Priestley a legitimate place within the tradition of Unitarian liberal religion. This chapter concludes with three reasons for why an understanding of Priestley's doctrine of necessarianism is important for liberal religion: First, determinism is not a dead issue, and Priestley demonstrated that it is possible to be a liberal and a determinist. Second, Priestley's doctrine accounted for suffering and evil, and religious liberals have often failed to adequately address this issue. Third, Priestley provides a model for moving concepts such as "free inquiry" and the "free and disciplined search for truth" from abstract conceptions into realized accomplishments.

Why This Dissertation Was Written

The question of whether or not humans possess a free will, is an old but unsettled question. In contemporary philosophical circles, it is a question which still endures. John Thorp has given testimony to this in the introduction to a defense of free will he recently wrote.

> The problem of freedom and determinism is one of the most enduring and one of the best, problems of philosophy; one of the best because it so tenaciously resists solution while yet always seeming urgent, and one of the most enduring because it has been able to present itself in different ways to suit the pre-occupations of different ages.[1]

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[1] John Thorp, Free Will: A Defence Against Neurophysiological Determinism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 1.

To find evidence that the question has interest for persons other than professional philosophers, one need look no farther than Paul Davies' recent book on the current state of the science of physics.[2] An entire chapter of this book was directed to the question of freedom versus determinism. It is of note that this widely-read book was aimed at a general, and not a scientifically literate audience.

Consideration of this question has not left liberal religious circle either. The writing of Ralph Wendell Burhoe, for example, hints at a doctrine of determinism. Despite Burhoe's specialized vocabulary, those hints seem strong, especially is passages such as this:

> Most scientific cosmologies or world systems indicate the essentially inevitable or predestined motion from one level to another in evolution according to nature's intrinsic, hidden preference. If we cast our lot to continue working for god's kingdom thus defined, we are bound to triumph with it.[3]

The question of determinism versus free will is still a debated question, although it does not seem to have the kind of urgency it did in Priestley's day. Further, as Burhoe demonstrates[4] it is a question that has not entirely left

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[2] Paul Davies, God and the New Physics (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1983), chapter 10.

[3] Ralph Wendell Burhoe, Toward a Scientific Theology (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1981), p. 133.

[4] One should also consider interest in this question expressed in the writings of contemporary philosophers, such as Corliss Lamont, or Charles Hartshorne to name two diverse

liberal religious circles. Yet Priestley's version of determinism, a doctrine about which he stated: "There is no truth about which I have less doubt"[5], is rarely mentioned by the very liberal religion that honors Priestley as part of its heritage.

For example, Earl Morse Wilbur, in his History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America had the following to say about Priestley's conception of philosophical necessity: "... he set forth the view ... that there is no freedom of the will."[6]

George N. Marshall, however, has provided a more extensive description of necessarianism:

> Like the Deists and other representatives of the Enlightenment, he accepted the twin concepts of Necessity and Freedom, which appear to be contradictions. To accept Necessity meant to accept the scientific view of the universe - cause and effect; it meant to accept the unalterable laws of Nature as against superstition and supernaturalism. It, therefore, seemed indIspensable for all who held "enlightened and just view of Nature" to be Necessitarians. "Necessity makes for morality where Calvinism undermines it." "Under Calvinism, he says in effect, you cannot urge anyone to turn from his wickedness and live: under Necessity you can and

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examples, who have a certain popularity in liberal religious circles.

[5] Joseph Priestley, The theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S., &c. ed. by J. T. Rutt, vol. 3: The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 454.

[6] Earl Morse Wilbur, A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America (Boston: Beacon Press. 1945), p. 314.

must. Why? Because men's conduct follows necessarily from their motives..." He draws from this doctrine also concepts of perfectibility.,[7]

Finally, The Epic of Unitarianism, which was edited by David Parke,[8] and The Unitarians and the Universalists by David Robinson,[9] both discuss Priestley without mentioning, or alluding to his doctrine of philosophical necessity.

In recent years there has been a revival of scholarship on the thought of Joseph Priestley in academic circles. His doctrine of philosophical necessity has not gone without scholarly examination.[10] Most of this current scholarship does deal with philosophical necessity in one way or another. The basic outline of Priestley's doctrine is generally presented in a similar manner in these accounts.

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[7] George N. Marshall, Challenge of a Liberal Faith, rev. ed. (New Canaan, Connecticut: Keats Publishing, 1970), p. 77.

Marshall's source of information and quotations is Basil Willey's The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period.

[8] David B. Parke, ed., The Epic of Unitarianism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960)

[9] David Robinson, The Unitarians and the Universalists (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985)

[10] In particular:

Lloyd W. Chapin, Jr., "The Theology of Joseph Priestley: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Apologetics" (Th.D. dissertation: Union Theological Seminary, 1967)

Robert Schaberg, "Providence and Necessity: The World View of Joseph Priestley" (Ph.D. dissertation: Saint Louis University, 1979)

James John Hoecker, "Progress, Perfectability, and the Thought of Joseph Priestley: A View of Eighteenth-Century Liberalism" (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Kentucky, 1975)

None of these presentations, however, deals exclusively with necessity, but rather a discussion of it is included in each to buttress some larger scheme or model of interpretation of Priestley's thought.[11] Within studies of Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity there are some areas which remain unexamined.

The first of these areas is suggested by Priestley's description of a life lived with and through an understanding of necessarianism. The description reads almost like the description of a mystical experience and it suggests that there is something personal and existential about Priestley's determinism beyond his logical arguments. Thus, a portion of this dissertation focusses on the role an understanding of necessarianism actually played in Priestley's life.

The second unique area this dissertation examines is the relationship of Priestley's determinism to a larger liberal religious context. This relationship is examined historically, but the implications of Priestley's doctrine for contemporary Unitarian Universalism are also drawn.

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[11] Schaberg was trying to show Priestley's ideas were related to his sense of optimism; Hoecker was trying to show Priestley's ideas were related to his sense of progress; and Chapin, who tried to present Priestley's theology systematically, was arguing that Priestley was engaged in apologetics.

CHAPTER I

"NECESSITY" IN THE THOUGHT OF AUTHORS PRIESTLEY CITED

Introduction

There are many roots of Joseph Priestley's doctrine of "Philosophical Necessity." They include: the philosophical background to the question, and Priestley's own personal story. The philosophical background to the question encompasses general arguments for determinism which influenced Priestley and which were current in the age in which he lived, as well as arguments based on the materialism and associationist psychology of Hartley This chapter covers the general arguments which influenced Priestley.

In the following pages the thoughts of Hobbes, Collins, Hutcheson, and Hume on the subject of necessity are presented.[1] More thinkers could have been presented here,

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[1] Collins served as Priestley's first real inspiration to accept a "necessarian" viewpoint, while Hobbes and Hume are frequently cited by him as necessarians. Hutcheson is also mentioned, although infrequently. See for example: Joseph Priestley, A Letter to Jacob Bryant, Esq., in Defense of Philosophical Necessity (London: printed for J. Johnson, 1780), p. 63.

but to avoid repetition of arguments, only a representative sample has been included.[2] Hobbes was seen by Priestley as being the first person to understand necessity fully[3]; Collins was the first necessarian with whom Priestley agreed; Hume was one of the greatest thinkers among Priestley's contemporaries who accepted a doctrine of necessity; and Hutcheson (who was an important influence on Hume) is not often described as a determinist, yet Priestley saw hints of necessarianism in his writing.

On the surface, it seems odd that Priestley could not find a doctrine similar to his own prior to Hobbes. Robert Schaberg described this situation as follows:

> Historically, Priestley traced the necessitarian [sic] position back to Thomas Hobbes, which, therefore, marked it, in Priestley's mind, as a modern theory. It is remarkable that this was perhaps the only major position that he held, which had any theological significance, that was not regarded by him as having an ancient history; in spite of his radicalism, Priestley usually saw himself as recovering the lost truth and not as taking essentially new positions.[4]

It is more astute then remarkable when considered in

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[2] Priestley himself mentions such thinkers as Jonathon Edwards and Lord Kames, for example.

Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. gen. ed. J. T. Rutt. Vol. 3: The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated. 2d. ed. (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), pp. 453 - 4.

[3] Ibid., p. 455.

[4] Robert Schaberg, "Providence and Necessity: the World View of Joseph Priestley" (Ph. D. dissertation: Saint Louis University, 1979), p. 171.

the light of an observation on determinism William James made in the nineteenth century. James receives credit[5] for making a distinction between "hard" and "soft" determinism. He briefly described the two in this way:

> Old-fashioned determinism was what we may call hard determinism. It did not shrink from such words as fatality, bondage of the will, necessitation, and the like. Nowadays, we have a soft determinism which abhors harsh words, and, repudiating fatality, necessity, and even predetermination, says that its real name is freedom; for freedom is only necessity understood, and bondage to the highest is identical with true freedom.[6]

Priestley had written that the variety of necessarianism he espoused was first articulated by Hobbes. If one chooses the criteria suggested by James, then there is some truth in Priestley's claim. While James may have meant soft determinism to be a pejorative it can also serve to identify a tradition which sought to identify a kind of freedom not transcending a determined universe, but as an integral part of the determinist scheme itself.[7]

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[5] Paul Edwards, "Hard and Soft Determinism" in: Sidney Hook, ed., Determinism and Freedom (New York: New York University Press, 1958), pp. 104 - 112. For reasons he does not explain, Edwards suggests James would actually include Priestley and Collins in the category of hard determinists.

[6] William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism" in The Will to Believe and Other Popular Essays in Philosophy (n.p.: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 149. It is worth noting that of the two possibilities, James had much less respect for a soft determinist position.

[7] "By soft determinism he [James] meant all those theories, like those of Hobbes, Hume, and Mill, which affirm that determinism is true and then, by means of what he considered sophistical and contorted definitions, somehow manage to preserve a semblance of certain moral notions like liberty,

Thomas Hobbes

Joseph Priestley did more than just attribute the founding of the "modern" concept of philosophical necessity to Thomas Hobbes[8]; he often cited Hobbes to buttress his own arguments.[9] Although Hobbes' doctrine of necessity was not the first Priestley had encountered, nor was it as clearly expressed as others, yet Hobbes' expression of that doctrine had a fundamental importance for Priestley for Hobbes virtually began the tradition Priestley saw himself in. It

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responsibility, and so on that, according to James, are plainly obliterated by any theory of determinism."

Richard Taylor, "Determinism" in: The Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol 2, Paul Edwards, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967), p. 368.

8 "Mr. Hobbes, I am still of opinion, was the first who, in this or any other country, rightly understood, and clearly stated, the argument; but he wrote nothing systematical, and consequently nothing that could be of much use to a student." (written by Priestley and taken from his preface to his edition of Collins' work)

Anthony Collins, A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty ed. Joseph Priestley in The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. gen. ed. J. T. Rutt. Vol. 4. (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 257.

9 Priestley, Illustrations, Below are some of Priestley's more significant references.

p. 456 Hobbes presents a "perfect" understanding of necessity in Laviathan

p. 456 Hobbes supports "cause and effect" argument

p.460 Hobbes' definition of liberty (absence of external impediments)

p. 471 Hobbes' argument from divine prescience

p. 504 Hobbes describes prayer as only functioning to give thanks.

p. 511 Hobbes unwilling to describe God as "author of evil".

was a tradition which proclaimed necessity, and yet also seemed to want to provide a place for a kind of freedom.[10]

For this discussion, the salient points of Hobbes' thought are his definition of necessity and his understanding of where human freedom lies.

In the dialogue The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance, Hobbes provided this definition of necessity:

> [My opponent] might easily have seen, that the necessity I hold, is . . . a necessity of things future, that is, an antecedent necessity derived from the very beginning of time; and that I put necessity for an impossibility of not being, and that impossibility as well as possibility are never truly said but of the future. I know . . . that the cause, when it is adequate . . . or entire, as I call it, is together in time with the effect. But for all that, the necessity may be and is before the effect, as much as any necessity can be. . . . The fire burneth necessarily; but not without supposition that there is fuel put to it, and it burneth the fuel, when it is put to it necessarily . . .[11]

Hobbes first important point was a variation on the argument from cause and effect. The second point to be gained from Hobbes, however, indicates some of the originality in his thoughts on determinism. He stated that the will is by no means free. Any freedom which exists is

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[10] "Hobbes enunciates the principle of this tradition: that free will is consistent with determinism since it does not imply the freedom of something called the "will" from causal determination, but rather the freedom of the man from compulsion." (from the editor's introduction)

Sidney Morgenbesser, and James Walsh, eds. Free Will (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 12.

[11] Excerpted in Morgenbesser and Walsh, Free Will, p. 47.

in the ability of the human to act upon a desire which has resulted from a necessary will.[12] Put another way, the human is "not free to will" but only free to "act upon his will."[13] For Hobbes, then, everything is subject to necessary cause and effect relationships, including the human will. But while humans do not have the freedom to actually will, there is a "freedom" which exists in the human ability to act upon that will. All of this, he concludes should be obvious from experience.

Anthony Collins

Priestley wrote in his Memoirs about a time, early in his life, when he had undertaken a defense of "philosophical liberty." This defense was in the context of correspondence with one Mr. Annet, the author of a short-hand method Priestley had admired and hoped to improve. The correspondence on the subject of necessity seems to have

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12 "For will itself is an appetite; and we do not shun something because we will not to do it, but because now appetite, then aversion, is generated by those things desired or shunned, and a preconception of future pleasure and displeasure necessarily follows from those same objects. . . When desiring, one can in truth, be free to act; one cannot, however, be free to desire; a fact that is made so obvious to anyone by his own experience that I cannot but be amazed that there are so many people who do not understand how this can be."

Thomas Hobbes, De Homine. Translated by Charles T. Wood, edited by Bernard Gert in Man and Citizen (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972; reprint ed., n.p.: Humanities Press, 1978), pp. 45 - 6.

13 Morgenbesser and Walsh, Free Will, p. 48.

been genial, and in fact, Mr. Annet frequently requested permission to publish the letters the two had exchanged. Priestley never agreed. He summarized the situation this way:

> . . . the correspondence was closed without my being convinced of the fallacy of my arguments, though upon studying the subject regularly, in the course of my academical education afterwards, I became a confirmed Necessarian, and I have through life derived, as I imagine, the greatest advantage from my full persuasion of the truth of that doctrine.[14]

Priestley did not mention in this anecdote what he encountered in the course of his education which confirmed his necessarianism. It was the writing of Anthony Collins.[15]

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[14] Joseph Priestley, Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795, Written by Himself: With a Continuation, to the Time of His Decease, by His Son, Joseph Priestley: and Observations on His Writings, by Thomas Cooper, President Judge of the 4th District of Pennsylvania: and the Rev. William Christie (Northumberland, Pa.: John Binns, 1806), pp. 15 - 6.

[15] "But the obscurity that was thrown on this subject [necessity] by Mr. Locke was effectually cleared up by Mr. Collins, in his Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty, published in 1715. This treatise is concise and methodical, and is, in my opinion, sufficient to give entire satisfaction to every unprejudiced person. I wish this small tract was reprinted and more generally known and read. It will, however, remain, and do the greatest honour to the author's memory, when all the quibbling answers to it shall be forgotten. It was in consequence of reading and studying this treatise, that I was first convinced of the truth of the doctrine of necessity, and that I was enabled to see the fallacy of most of the arguments in favour of philosophical liberty; though I was much more confirmed in this principle by my acquaintance with Dr. Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind. . .

Priestley, Illustrations, p. 457. The first edition of the Illustrations was published in 1777, and thirteen years later, Priestley published an edition of Collins' work.

Collins' arguments for "necessity" were presented in his A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty[16] which was written in 1715. In this work, Collins tried to state the question in the terms of a simple dichotomy. He wrote that either humans are "necessary agents" or they are "free agents." If the former is true, then all actions in the past had to occur exactly as they did, and all actions in the future must be what they are going to be. If however, humans are "free agents" they are able to "do different things," that is, a human is a free agent "if he is not unavoidably determined in every point of time by the circumstances he is in, and the causes he is under, to do that one thing he does, and not possibly to do any other."[17] To prove that humans are necessary agents, Collins provided six arguments for necessity.

Collins' first argument for necessity is an argument from experience. This argument rests on the reader being able to reflect on his or her own experience along the lines Collins suggested. He declared that such reflection could only lead one to the conclusion that all actions are based upon choices. If one makes a particular choice, there were reasons (however slight) for making one choice over any other, so one necessarily would have to make a particular

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16 Collins, Human Liberty, pp. 255 - 310.

17 Ibid., p. 269.

choice. In other words:

> . . . there are few if any objects of the will that are perfectly alike; and because necessity is hereby allowed to take place in all cases where there is a perceivable difference in things, and consequently, in all moral and religious cases, for the sake whereof such endeavours have been used to maintain so absurd and inconsistent a thing as liberty, or freedom from necessity. So that liberty is almost, if not quite, reduced to nothing, and destroyed, as to the grand end in asserting it.[18]

He concluded his argument from experience with a comparison which seems almost enlightened for its suggestion that humans are not entirely and uniquely different from other animals. He wrote that one can assume animals (that is, "beasts" other than "man") are necessary agents. If one accepts that point, then one also has to agree that "man" is a necessary agent. Although humans may have more "powers" and "weaknesses" than animals, yet of themselves these qualities do not confer any liberty on humanity. The only real difference between humans and animals, for Collins, is a difference of degrees.[19]

Collins' second argument for necessity is much simpler than his first. He described it with this title: "Second

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[18] Ibid., p. 282.

[19] "But these larger powers and larger weaknesses, which are of the same kind with the powers and weaknesses of sheep, cannot contain liberty in them, and plainly make no perceivable difference between them and men, as to the general causes of action, in finite intelligent and sensible beings, no more than the different degrees of these powers and weaknesses among the various kinds of beasts, birds, fishes and reptiles do among them."
Collins, Human Liberty, p. 286.

Argument taken from the Impossibility of Liberty." In fact, what he presented was an argument from cause and effect. Simply put, everything[20] must have a beginning - it must be caused. A cause that is not a necessary cause is, for Collins, not a cause at all. If this is not the case, he reasoned, one could accept the "Epicurean system of chance" or any other similar "atheistic" system.[21]

In his third argument, Collins tried to show that liberty was imperfect and necessity was perfect. In the face of necessity, liberty cannot thus describe how reality

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[20] In his own words: ". . .whatever has a beginning must have a cause. . ." His words were chosen with care to allow for that which has no beginning, and thus no cause - God.
Collins, Human Liberty, p. 286.

[21] Ibid., p. 287.
Collins' description of the Epicureans as supporters of liberty, and his description of their opponents, the Stoics, as supporters of a notion of "necessity by fate" is brief, but not entirely inaccurate. Eliade has described the two schools in these terms:

"[Epicurus] admitted the existence of the gods. However, the gods had nothing to do with either the cosmos or with mankind., The world was a machine, which had come into being in a purely mechanical way, without author or purpose. It followed that man was free to choose the mode of existence that best suited him. . . . The founder of Stoicism articulated his system in opposition to the doctrine of Epicurus. According to Zeno and his disciples, the world developed from the primordial epiphany of God, the fiery seed that gave birth to "seminal reason". . .that is, to universal law. . . . It is true that the world and human existence unfold in accordance with a strictly predetermined plan; but, by the mere fact that he cultivates virtue and does his duty - that, in short, he accomplishes the divine will - the wise man proves that he is free and transcends determinism."

Mircea Eliade, A History of Religious Ideas: Volume 2, From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 206 - 7.

functions since it is imperfect. It is in this argument that Collins explicitly described necessity as resulting from the divine will. If that is the case, then as a divine attribute it must be perfect as are all the attributes of God, according to Collins. To show that necessity results from the divine will, Collins wrote:

> For if all things are indifferent to him [God], as some of the advocates of liberty assert, and become good only by his willing them, he cannot have any motive from his own ideas, or from the nature of things, to will one thing rather than another, and consequently he must will without any reason or cause; which cannot be conceived possible of any being, and is contrary to this self-evident truth, that whatever has a beginning must have a cause. But if things are not indifferent to him, he must be necessarily determined by what is best. Besides, as he is a wise being, he must have some end and design; and, as he is a good being, things cannot be indifferent to him, when the happiness of intelligent and sensible beings depends on the will he has in the formation of things.[22]

Collins last three arguments are all quite short.[23] They are: Liberty violates divine prescience; Reward and punishment can only be useful if cause necessarily leads to effect; and, Humans must be necessary agents "determined by pleasure and pain" otherwise there is no motive for humans to behave morally.[24]

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22 Collins, Human Liberty, p.293.

23 Priestley, himself, presented these same arguments with much brevity. Yet when his elaborations are compared with the versions Collins provided, Priestley's work seems to be quite detailed, and Collins seems to provide mere statements. (See Chapter II for Priestley's arguments).

24 Collins, Human Liberty, pp. 295 - 9.

Priestley appreciated Collins' work on necessity. When Priestley chose to re-publish that work in 1790 (75 years after its original publication), he articulated the debt he owed to Collins. He wrote:

> The great merit of this piece consists in its conciseness, its clearness, and its being the first regular treatise on the subject. Mr. Hobbes, I am still of opinion, was the first who, in this or any other country, rightly understood, and clearly stated, the argument; but he wrote nothing systematical, and consequently nothing that could be of much use to a student. For this purpose, this treatise of Collins's is excellent, there being few topics in the whole compass of the argument which he has not touched upon; and, being methodical, it is valuable as an elementary treatise.[25]

The arguments Collins presented converted Priestley to a belief in necessity. And those same "systematical" arguments would be echoed and expanded in Priestley's own work.

Francis Hutcheson

Priestley had claimed that both Hutcheson and Hume were necessarians. There are many connections one could draw between Hutcheson and Hume, and one of those connections is their methodology - empiricism.[26] Although taking a similar

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25 Ibid., p. 258 (Priestley's Preface).

26 Francis Hutcheson, Illustrations on the Moral Sense, ed. Bernard Peach (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), editor's introduction p. 18.

methodological approach, however, they did not quite reach the same conclusions regarding human freedom. Priestley's claim that Hutcheson supported necessity may seem at first to be weak, it is possible, however, to find hints of a soft determinism in Hutcheson's writing.

For Hutcheson, empiricism lead to an understanding of what he called the "moral sense" in humans.[27] Hutcheson's "moral sense" is the sense he postulated as needed for the approval of benevolence. Bernard Peach has tried to explain how this moral sense leads us to benevolence, but not in a truly "deterministic" way, by describing it as "defeasible."[28] So Hutcheson's "moral sense" seems a powerful cause of human action, and yet a cause which can be subverted.

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[27] Ibid., editor's introduction p. 19.

[28] Ibid., editor's introduction p. 59 . "For Hutcheson, it is necessarily the case that the moral sense is disposed to approve benevolence, that it has a tendency to approve benevolence if and when it should appear, that it is benevolence-approbative. Yet he recognizes that there are different occasions on which this disposition may manifest itself, that it may be subject to the influence of many factors, some of which may be favorable, some not, and that some factors may actually prevent approval. Expressed in current language, the doctrine that the moral sense approves benevolence in necessary, but <u>defeasibly</u> so.

Most simply, a defeasibly necessary principle is a statement of what will happen unless something prevents it. On this interpretation, then when Hutcheson says that the moral sense approves benevolence, he means that the moral sense will approve benevolence unless something prevents it. The relationship between the moral sense and its disposition to approve benevolence is necessary. Even though Hutcheson admits that God could have made man differently, he insists that He <u>did</u> make man with a moral sense disposed to approve benevolence."

The "moral sense" Hutcheson claimed to identify in humans does seem to have a certain "determining" character about it. Yet he asserted that in its full reality, it was not to be taken as completely deterministic. He summarized what he understood about that element of the moral sense in this way:

> If any say, 'This moral sense is not a rule' what means that word? It is not a straight rigid body. It is not a general proposition, showing what means are fit to obtain an end. It is not a proposition asserting that a superior will make those happy who act one way and miserable who acts the contrary way. If these be the meanings of rule, it is no rule; yet by reflecting upon it our understanding may find out a rule.[29]

In the title of the fifth section of Illustrations on the Moral Sense Hutcheson announced that he was going to consider the subject of merit. The first paragraph of this section is a provocative statement. One of the essential arguments made in this statement is that there is a distinction between actions which are the result of instinct or "affections" and those actions which are voluntary; merit can only be applied to the latter.[30]

In his analysis of this statement, Hutcheson wrote that his opening statement could only be acceptable if the meaning of "instinct" were made clear and precise. If instinct is that which "determine[s] us without knowledge or

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29 Ibid., p. 164.

30 Ibid., p. 165.

intention of any end"[31], it cannot be the source of virtue. Nonetheless, Hutcheson went on to point out that "the soul may be as naturally determined to approbation of certain tempers and affections, and to the desire of certain events when it has an idea of them . . ."[32] This, too, can be called instinct.

Hutcheson concluded:

> But perhaps it is not the mere freedom of choice which is approved but the free choice of public good without any affection . . . Perhaps free election is a conditio sine qua non, and public usefulness the immediate cause of approbation; neither separately, but both jointly are meritorious. Free election alone is not merit, public usefulness alone is not merit, but both concurring.[33]

So for Hutcheson, our moral sense has a determining character about it, yet it is not a rigid rule; freedom of choice is possible. In fact, if one is to engage in meritorious action, freedom of choice is required.

David Hume

David Hume addressed the question of human freedom both in A Treatise of Human Nature,[34] and in An Enquiry

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 166.

33 Ibid., p. 167.

34 David Hume, Moral and Political Philosophy, ed. Henry D. Aiken, (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), pp. 11 - 22.
Liberty versus necessity was discussed by Hume in Book II, Part III, Sections 1 and 2.

Concerning Human Understanding.[35] In these works Hume supports a necessarian point of view. While it may be accurate to describe his view as "soft-determinism," the kind of soft-determinism he advocated had his own stamp upon it. Or as D. G. C. MacNabb has written: "Hume sides definitely with the determinists in this ancient controversy, but is a manner peculiarly his own."[36]

For Hume, the "ancient controversy" was not a problem of philosophy. It resulted from the ambiguities of terminology.[37] If the meanings of the terms involved were clear, then all thinkers would agree.[38]

Of all the terms in the discussion, one of the most significant for Hume was "causation." Hume declared that it

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[35] David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1902), Section VIII.

For ease of locating citations, I will list Hume's own Section numbers and Selby-Bigge's marginal numbers from the above edition when referring to this text. This practice has had wide scholarly acceptance.

[36] D. G. C. MacNabb, David Hume: His Theory of Knowledge and Morality (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951), p. 199.

[37] "But if the question regard any subject of common life and experience, nothing, one would think, could preserve the dispute so long undecided but some ambigous expression, which keep the antogonists still at a distance, and hinder them from grappling with each other."
Hume, Enquiry, Sect. VIII, Part I, No. 62.

[38] "This has been the case in the long disputed question concerning liberty and necessity; and to so remarkable a degree that, if I be not much mistaken, we shall find, that all mankind, both learned and ignorant, have always been of the same opinion with regard to this subject, and that a few intelligible definitions would immediately have put an end to the whole controversy"
Hume, Enquiry, Sect. VIII, Part 1, No. 63.

is not the case that there is a necessary connection between a cause and its effect, but rather, "causes" precede "effects" as a succession or conjunction of objects.[39] He described his own understanding in this way:

> It has been observed already that in no single instance the ultimate connection of any objects is discoverable either by our senses or reason, and that we can never penetrate so far into the essence and construction of bodies as to perceive the principle on which their mutual influence depends. It is their constant union alone with which we are acquainted; and it is from the constant union the necessity arises.[40]

Hume thus meant something specific by "causation." He further argued that causation (as he described it) must

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[39] Hume's understanding of causation was much more complex and subtle than Priestley's. It also does not seem to have been static. As J. A. Passmore has written: "Whereas in the Treatise Hume's critique is directed as much against the possibility of demonstrating that every event has a cause as against the possibility of demonstrating that A (in particular) is the cause of B, in the Enquiry the general causal principle is not critically considered. Selby-Bigge found in this omission evidence of 'the lower philosophical standard of the later work.' The explanation, I suggest, lies rather in Hume's determination, in the later work, to insist upon the broad tendency of his argument. For a variety of reasons, he must press the point that an effect is never deducible from its cause; but he is anxious to say nothing which might suggest that a cause is perhaps not always necessary, that absolute contingency is conceivable...'Being once convinced that we know nothing farther of causation of any kind than merely the constant conjunction of objects and the consequent inference of the mind from one to another...we may be more easily led to own the same necessity common to all causes.' On the other hand, to question whether every event has a cause is to undermine science of every kind, moral no less than physical, and to leave the way open for enthusiasm and superstition."

J. A. Passmore, Hume's Intentions (London: Cambridge Universisty Press, 1952), pp. 53 - 4.

[40] Hume, Treatise, p. 12.

occur in the world of matter, and in the functioning of the human will upon human actions.[41] MacNabb summarized Hume's argument as follows:

> Hume argues that the liberty of spontaneity is, indeed necessary for moral responsibility, but the liberty of indifference would entirely destroy it. Unless human actions were caused by the motives, characters and termperaments of the agents, if they were mere disconnected flukes, however deplorable and unfortunate they might be, they would not be proper objects of the passions of anger and hatred on which vengeance is founded. And unless they were affected by the thoughts and wishes and fears of the agents, rewards and punishments would be quite ineffective in controlling them.[42]

Thus, Hume equated "liberty" with chance[43] and then

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41 "It would seem, indeed, that men begin at the wrong end of this question concerning liberty and necessity, when they enter upon it by examining the faculties of the soul, the influence of the understanding, and the operations of the will. Let them first discuss a more simple question, namely, the operations of body and of brute unintelligent matter; and try whether they can there form any idea of causation and necessity, except that of a constant conjunction of objects, and subsequent inferences of the mind from one to another. If these circurstances form, in reality, the whole of that necessity, which we conceive in matter, and if these circumstances be also universally acknowledged to take place in the operations of the mind, the dispute is at an end; at least, must be owned to be thenceforth merely verbal...For as it is evident that these [actions of the human will] have a regular conjunction with motives and circumstances and characters, and as we always draw inferences from one to the other, we must be obliged to acknowledge in words that necessity, which we have already avowed, in every deliberation of our lives and in every step of our conduct and behaviour."
Hume, Enquiry, Sect. VIII, Part I, No. 72.

42 MacNabb, Hume, 201.

43 "According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation; and consequently liberty, by

stated there must be a connection between actions of the will and motives.[44]

Conclusion

Priestley claimed a kind of intellectual kinship with a group of thinkers whom he characterized as necessarians. None of the necessarians he cited would have agreed with each other on all the details of the kind of determinism they advocated. Yet Priestley was accurate to the extent that he identified a kind of determinism which affirmed moral responsibility and repudiated fatalism.

Collins was closest to Priestley's own formulation. Hutcheson, who was most concerned about the functioning of the moral sense, and Hume, who explained "necessity" only through his particular understanding of the nature of causation, were farthest away from Priestley's own conception. Yet all these thinkers were together in arguing in one way or another for a "soft-determinism" which specified that something was necessary in the connection between the motive and the action of humans. Priestley's own formulation of necessity is the subject of the next chapter.

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removing necessity, removes all causes and is the very same thing with chance."
Hume, Treatise, p. 18.

[44] He concluded Sect. II of Book III, Part III of the Treatise by stating that he had proven "all actions of the will have particular causes." and then announced that the description of those causes would be proveded in the next section of the book. That section deals with "The Influencing Motives of the Will."

CHAPTER II

PRIESTLEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF "NECESSITY"

Introduction

In a general sense, this chapter is meant to answer the question: How did Joseph Priestley explain the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity? Specifically, the focus is on his mature and relatively systematic expression of that doctrine. The discussion of that expression is then augmented by a brief examination of how Priestley saw necessity functioning in his own life.

Certainly Priestley's conception was not cast in concrete, but variations, and embellishments, (especially those which arose in the context of debate) are best discussed elsewhere. For if a discussion of these is to make any sense there must be a "standard" with which they are compared and contrasted. This chapter presents that "standard."

The discussion of the arguments Priestley advanced is based primarily on his Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated. This is his longest sustained explanation of

necessarianism.[1] While he may have wanted to settle the issue with this treatise, he succeeded in fanning further controversy with it. The section of this chapter which deals with Priestley's demonstration of philosophical necessity functioning in his own life is primarily based on his Memoirs.

The following discussion begins with a presentation of what seem to be Priestley's major arguments for necessarianism: an argument based on the Bible, an argument based on cause and effect relationships and Priestley's materialist view of the universe, and an argument based on a doctrine of divine prescience.

Priestley explored various objections to a doctrine of necessity which can be made, and these are presented along with his attempts to refute the objections. His success in refutation is evaluated.

This is followed by some suggestions as to what Priestley saw as the outcome of a life lived in accord with necessarian concepts.

In addition to the various rational arguments he advanced, Priestley used his own life as an illustration of the value of philosophical necessity. This chapter con-

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[1] Hoecker, for example, refers to the Illustrations as Priestley's "major exposition and defense of the doctrine" of necessity.

James John Hoecker, "Progress, Perfectibility, and the Thought of Joseph Priestley: A View of Eighteenth-Century Liberalism." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1975), p. 71.

cludes with an examination of how he understood necessity to be working in his life.

Arguments For Philosophical Necessity

Scriptural Argument

Nowhere within his scriptural argument did Priestley try to prove the value or utility of the Bible. Nor did he concern himself with arguments supporting a conception of the Bible as the most accurate recording of God's revelation. These were assumed by him to be facts which had already been proven. He was trying to argue that, given these facts, both Old and New Testaments of the Bible lent support to a necessarian position. To this end, within the course of The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated he cited over forty individual scriptural passages. These passages range in length from single lines (1 Peter 5: 10: "But the God of all grace - make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you.") to whole stories (the hardening of Pharaoh's heart before Moses, or the selling of Joseph into slavery in Egypt).

Priestley argued that hints of necessarianism could be seen throughout the Bible for three reasons. First, God is consistently described as governing the world. Second, the good works of man are frequently ascribed to God. Third, God is often described as being responsible for determining

the "present and future 'destination' of men."[2]

Priestley wrote that the Bible pointed toward necessarianism or provided hints of it, because he could not actually find a full presentation of that doctrine within the scriptures:

> Not that I think the sacred writers were, strictly speaking, Necessarian, for they were not philosophers, not even our Saviour himself, as far as appears, but their habitual devotion naturally led them to refer all things to God, without reflecting on the rigorous meaning of their language; and very probably had they been interrogated on the subject they would have appeared not to be apprised of the proper extent of the Necessarian scheme, and would have answered in a manner unfavourable to it.[3]

"Cause and Effect" Argument

Priestley wrote that he could find "no more conclusive argument" for philosophical necessity than the argument based on the notion of cause and effect.[4] While he did resort to additional arguments, this one seems to have had particular strength for him because it was drawn from his understanding of the material universe.

The first point Priestley made in his line of argument

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2 Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt. Vol. 3: The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated. 2d. ed. (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), pp. 524 - 6

The first edition of the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity was published in 1777, and the second in 1782.

3 Ibid., p. 526.

4 Ibid., p. 470.

represents a simple assertion which is, nonetheless, the foundation upon which the entire argument was constructed. The point is: Identical consequences result from identical circumstances.[5] Put another way, he was trying to say that a particular cause would invariably yield a particular effect. And if the connection between a cause and its effect were invariable, then, Priestley concluded, the effect would be the "necessary" result of the cause.

In his system a cause would always be followed by its effect, and that effect in its turn would serve as cause for a further effect, and so on. He traced this chain of cause and effect relations back to the original cause - God. The notion of pointing to God as ultimately the cause of all subsequent effects did not originate with Priestley, neither does it seem to have been intended by him simply to make his argument neatly logical. Priestley stated emphatically that a conception of God as the ultimate cause represents the only irrefutable argument for the existence of God.[6] Whatever the merits or faults of this point of view, Priestley held fast to it.[7] Thus it is inconceivable that Priestley

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5 Ibid., p. 462.

6 Ibid., pp. 463, 465 and p. 467. See also:
Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt. Vol. 3: Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit. 2d. ed. (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 326.
"[God is the] first, eternal, unchangeable and intelligent cause of all things."

7 "For the same reason that the table on which I write, or the watch that lies before me, must have had a maker,

would place his cause-and-effect argument in any position but that of highest importance within his scheme of philosophical necessity, for it was rooted in one of the fundamentals of his theology.

Priestley declared that the relation of cause and effect as he described it was a universal truth. It could be easily illustrated by examples drawn from the physical world. He went further, however, to argue that the relation he described represents a universal truth in the functioning of the human mind as well.[8] It was possible for Priestley to make this leap from the physical sphere to the mental sphere because of the materialist outlook which he maintained. He had derived this position from his understanding of the work of David Hartley.[9] Priestley, himself,

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myself, and the world I live in, must have had a maker too; and a design, a fitness of parts to each other, and to an end, are no less obvious in the one cause than in the other table, or of the watch, must be different from the table, or the watch, it is equally manifest that the maker of myself, of the world and of the universe (meaning by it all the worlds that we suppose to exist), must be a being different from myself, the world or the universe; which is a sufficient answer to the reasoning of Spinoza who, making the universe itself to be God, did, in fact, deny that there was any God."

Priestley, Disquisitions, p. 324.

8 Priestley, Illustrations, p. 463.

9 "Surprisingly, Priestley's materialism was enlisted primarily in the service of religion and psychology, not the physical sciences. It is important to note that materialism is a concept susceptible of varying definitions, the most important one here being simply a denial of the matter-spirit dichotomy and an affirmation that all phenomena result from the action of physical matter."

Hoecker, "Progress, Perfectibility", p. 67.

observed:

> . . . the uniform composition of man, or that which we call mind, or the principle of perception and thought, is not a substance distinct from the body, but the result of corporeal organization; and what I have advanced preliminary to this, concerning the nature of matter, though subservient to this argument, is by no means essential to it; for, whatever matter be, I think I have sufficiently proved that the human mind is nothing more than a modification of it
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> . . . the doctrine of "necessity,". . . is the immediate result of the doctrine of the materiality of man; for mechanism is the undoubted consequence of materialism. But, whether man be wholly material or not, I apprehend that proof enough is advanced that every human volition is subject to certain fixed laws, and that the pretended "self-determining power" is altogether imaginary and impossible.[10]

Priestley had demonstrated his familiarity with the materialist philosophy of Hartley through the publishing of his own edition of the latter's work.[11] The relationship of physical to mental activity in Hartley's scheme can be clearly seen in two of the propositions he advanced in his Observations on Man. These propositions form an essential foundation to Hartley's psychology, also called "the Asso-

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[10] Priestley, Disquisitions, p. 220.

[11] Priestley only published that portion of Hartley's work which dealt explicitly with the "association of ideas," omitting those ideas of Hartley's which he described as being too "difficult" and "intricate" for the public to understand. Priestley believed that these two qualitites had led to a lack of general acceptance of Hartley's concepts.

Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt. vol. 3: Introductory Essays to Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas. 2d. ed. (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 169.

ciation of Ideas." They are:

> Any Sensations A, B, C, &c. by being associated with one another a sufficient Number of Times, get such a Power over the corresponding Ideas, a, b, c, &c. that any one of the Sensations A, when impressed alone, shall be able to excite in the Mind, b, c, &c. the Ideas of the rest. [12]

> If any sensation A, idea B, or muscular motion C, be associated for a sufficient number of times with any other sensation D, idea, E, or muscular motion F, it will, at last, excite d, the simple idea belonging to the sensation D, the very idea E, or the very muscular motion F.[13]

Hartley was proposing the concept that an interconnection among sensation, ideas, and motion exists.[14] Yet

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[12] David Hartley, Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations. 6th ed. (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1834), p. 41.

[13] Ibid., p. 65.

[14] Brett summarized Hartley's scheme as follows:

"If we now imagine a number of vibrations A, B, C, D to be excited at one time, the natural vibrations in each part will be partly overcome; so that if A occurs again, B and C and D have a latent readiness to occur. In time, this will become a necessary sequence, so that the occurrence of any one of the vibrations will cause the occurrence of all the others. This is the fundamental principle of Association. It is not an association of ideas but of sensations, and of sensations only as being identical with vibrations. It is not the psychological but the physiological law of association that Hartley seeks to establish; the association of ideas follows as a corollary. For the vibration A is the physical concomitant of the sensation A; and the residual vibration which is left when the object ceases to act on the sense organ (the so-called little vibration or vibratiuncle) is the comcomitant of ideation. . .

In thus establishing a connexion between sensation, ideation, and motion Hartley gives to association a meaning quite distinct from that given it by Locke or Hume. A closer analogy would be found in Hobbes and, through Hobbes, in Aristotle. For this is not merely a way of saying that we have trains or sequences of ideas; it is rather an attempt to exhibit man as a microcosm, a world ruled by law

Hartley was never able to accept an entirely materialist view of the human being. He found it necessary to uphold a notion of "mind" which could still allow for the immaterial.[15] Priestley, however, moved quickly from Hartley's materialism to a completely materialist understanding of the human. He chronicled this movement in a passage in his Memoirs.

> In the preface [to An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry . . . Dr. Beatties's Essay . . . and Dr. Oswald's Appeal . . .] I had

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and by the laws of the universe outside him . . . In Hartley we see a man whose mind naturally took up and maintained that point of view of the organism as a whole."

George Sidney Brett, A History of Psychology, vol. 1: Mediaeval and Early Modern Period (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921), p. 282 - 283.

(It is frequently noted that when Priestley chose to publish his own edition of Hartley's work, he did not include much of the material on the nature of vibrations which is essential to Hartley's thought. On this subject Priestley wrote: "As, however, I am far from being willing to suppress the doctrine of vibrations, thinking that Dr. Hartley has produced sufficient evidence for it, or as much as the nature of the thing will admit of at present, (that is, till we know more of the structure of the body in other respects,) I have not thought it necessary scrupulously to strike out the word vibrations, or vibratiuncles, wherever they occurred. As the words themselves are sufficiently intelligible, they can occasion no difficulty or embarrassment to the reader."

Priestley, Introductory Essays to Hartley, p. 169)

[15] Basil Willey has observed: "According to [Hartley's] associationism, we are passive all along the line; as he has said, the moral sense 'is' generated in us mechanically. Yet he goes on to describe the transformation of sensuality into spirituality as the great business of life: we 'must' not rest content with the pleasures of the senses or of the imagination; we 'ought' never to be satisfied until 'we arrive at perfect Self-annihilation, and the pure Love of God'."

Basil Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 153.

> expressed my belief of the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, but without any design to pursue the subject, and also my great admiration of Dr. Hartley's theory of the human mind, as indeed I had taken many opportunities of doing before. This led me to publish that part of his Observations on Man which related to the doctrine of association of ideas, detached from the doctrine of vibrations, prefixing three dissertations, explanatory of his general system. In one of these I expressed some doubt of the immateriality of the sentient principle in man; and the outcry that was made on what I casually expressed on that subject can hardly be imagined. In all the newspapers, and most of the periodical publications, I was represented as an unbeliever in revelation, and no better than an Atheist.
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> This led me to give the closest attention to the subject, and the consequence was the firmest persuasion that man is wholly material, and that our only prospect of immortality is from the christian doctrine of a resurrection. I therefore digested my thoughts on the subject, and published my Disquisitions relating to matter and spirit.[16]

Priestley was asserting that humans were of an entirely material nature. He declared that even the human thought process could be understood by a materialist explanation. But to show that all of the process of thinking depends on "mere matter," Priestley found it necessary to adopt a new theory of matter, itself, to overcome the generally accepted contemporary conception of matter as solid, impenetrable, and inert.[17] He summarized his theory as follows:

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[16] Joseph Priestley, Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795, Written by Himself: with a continuation, to the Time of His Decease, by His Son, Joseph Priestley: and Observations on His Writings, (Northumberland, Pa.: John Binns, 1806), pp. 79 - 80.

[17] Priestley, Disquisitions, p. 222.

> An atom, by which I mean an ultimate component part of any gross body, is necessarily supposed to be perfectly solid, wholly impervious to any other atom; and it must also be round, or square, or of some other determinate form. But the parts of such a body (as this solid atom must be divisible, and therefore have parts,) must be infinitely hard, and therefore must have powers of mutual atraction infinitely strong, or it could not hold together, that is, it could not exist as a solid atom. Take away the power therefore, and the solidity of the atom entirely disappears. In short, it is then no longer matter, being destitute of the fundamental properties of such a substance.[18]

Roger Joseph Boscovich[19] and John Michell[20] were

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[18] Ibid., pp. 223 - 224.

[19] Boscovich (1711 - 1787) was an Italian/Yugoslav Jesuit and scientist. Like Priestley, he was an acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin and a member of the Royal Society (elected in 1761). His single most important work on a theory of matter was A Theory of Natural Philosophy Reduced to a Single Law of the Actions Existing in Nature published in 1781. Lancelot Whyte, a noted authority on the work of Boscovich, brielfly described this theory in this way:

"Boscovich developed the idea that all phenomena arise from the spatial patterns of identical point particles (puncta) interacting in pairs according to an oscillatory law which determines their relative acceleration . . . The complexity of the world, according to Boscovich, arises from two factors; the varied arrangement of different numbers of particles, and the parameters determining the law of oscillation"

Lancelot Law Whyte, "Roger Joseph Boscovich" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol. 1., ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1967), pp. 350 - 353.

[20] "Most scientists, however, in eighteenth-century England had no interest in fundamental structure; their attention was given to practical experiment. So Boscovich was more or less ignored - though John Michell (1724 - 93) astronomer and geologist, did comment to Priestley, perhaps soon after 1760 (the year in which he met Boscovich in Cambridge), on the advantages of physical point-centres over hard finite atoms [which had been Newton's formulation]." (From the editor's introduction)

Joseph Priestley, Autobiography of Joseph Priestley: Memoirs Written by Himself; and an Account of Further

credited[21] by Priestley for providing the basis of his new understanding of matter.[22] For Priestley, the human was only composed of matter, and even mental processes were the result of material interaction. Therefore, he maintained that the laws of nature which applied to matter also applied to mental activity. Furthermore, natural laws of cause and effect must also, then, apply to mental activity.

To restate the first point of Priestley's argument for necessity from cause and effect: A person is not able to do

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Discoveries in Air ed. and intro. by Jack Lindsay (Teaneck, N. J.:Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p. 48.

[21] Lloyd W. Chapin, Jr., "The Theology of Joseph Priestley: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Apologetics" (Th.D. dissertation: Union Theological Seminary, 1967), pp. 226 - 227.

[22] Schaberg described that new understanding in these terms:

"The view of matter proposed by Priestley was more active and forceful than the prevailing concept of matter. His aim was to show that sensation and thought were not incompatible with matter as they had long been held to be. He stated; '. . . matter, destitute of what has hitherto been called solidity, being no more incompatible with sensation and thought, than that substance . . . we have been used to call immaterial.' And, 'If you say that is is impossible to conceive how the properties of perception and thought should result from any organization of mere matter, I say it is equally impossible to conceive how the properties of gravitation, of magnetism, or of electricity, should result from the substances which we find to be endued with them.' Priestley felt personally that his view of matter, adopted from Boscovich and Michell, could therefore be used to account for both the physical and mental phenomena in man, and he thought that it would also, perhaps, overcome the popular prejudice against matter as being totally inert and absolutely incapable of sensation and thought."

Robert Schaberg, "Providence and Necessity: the World View of Joseph Priestley" (Ph.D. dissertation: Saint Louis University, 1979), pp. 187 - 188.

"several things when all the previous circumstances (including the state of his mind and his view of things) are precisely the same."[23] That is, given a particular set of circumstances and a particular frame of mind, people will always act in a specific way.[24]

By Priestley's explanation, when a human chooses an action, that choice has been determined by a variety of things which have preceded it.[25] The human will, according to Priestley, is not independent and self-determining but it is a part of nature and subject to nature's laws - the will is affected by external causes.[26] By Priestley's account, given a particular frame of mind, particular external causes will thus always yield a specific act.[27] In the cases he was describing, "motive and choice" mean the same as "cause and effect."[28]

If one were to object to this argument on the grounds that it is possible to have two (or more) equally sufficient causes for action, Priestley would have a response. He wrote that our choices are never random and that in the case of equally sufficient causes we are necessarily inclined to

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23 Priestley, Illustrations, p. 461.

24 Ibid., p. 462.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 " . . . every choice is made in the same manner and governed by the same rules."
Priestley, Illustrations, p. 474.

28 Ibid.

choose one over another. Our inclinations (or "motives") have had their own causes.[29] Furthermore, Priestley argued that any discussion of "the will" and its "motivation" was flawed. In a strict sense, he held that human will was not a separate faculty, although it may sometimes be convenient to speak of it in those terms. Priestley understood "will" simply to be part of the mechanism of the "association of ideas." The latter was a term he acquired from Hartley's attempt to describe and explain the process of human thought.[30]

Even in the midst of an argument for necessity based on an understanding of cause and effect, Priestley tried to present a determinism that is not entirely fatalistic. He declared that human actions can be voluntary. Necessity is not opposed to that, rather that which is "involuntary" is in opposition. That which is "contingent" is opposed to necessity. In Priestley's understanding, the causes of an act may "exist and operate" entirely within a person, thus the person acts voluntarily; yet that action is subject to the fixed laws of nature and regulated by them.[31] This line of reasoning represents one of Priestley's less successful attempts to reconcile a mechanical, determined universe with

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29 Ibid., p. 468.

30 Ibid., pp. 476 - 7.

31 Ibid., pp. 465 - 6.

a sense of free choice common to many humans.[32]

If we learned our lessons from Priestley about the material nature of the universe (and humans), and about the necessary connections between causes and effects, could we then accurately predict human actions in any particular situation? Priestley could only answer "no" to this question. He used a simple analogy. He pointed out that we understand many of the principles of motion and yet we are unable to predict if the wind will blow tomorrow, and in what precise direction and with what amount of force if it does.[33]

"Divine Prescience" Argument

This is a much less complex argument than the "Cause and Effect" argument. Perhaps this is because this seemed to be a self-evident argument to Priestley. A more probable reason, however, is that this argument depends on scripture and it can readily be seen as part of Priestley's argument for necessity based on the Bible. It was Priestley's claim that the entire "history of revelation" indicates that the every determination of the human mind was fore-known by God.[34] Priestley believed that to argue otherwise undercut

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[32] Schaberg tried to describe it in these words: "Priestley believed that, when a person made a choice, he actually did make it, but he did not feel that this person could have made any other choice in the same exact circumstances."
Schaberg, "Providence and Necessity", pp. 173 - 4.

[33] Priestley, Illustrations, p. 464.

[34] Ibid., p. 471.

the foundation of revealed religion.[35]

A concise example of Priestley's argument reads as follows:

> The death of our Saviour is a remarkable instance of this kind. This event was certainly foreseen and intended, for it most particularly entered into the plan of Divine Providence; and yet it appears from the history, that it was brought about by causes perfectly natural, and fully adequate to it. It was just such an event as might have been expected from the known malice and prejudice of the Jewish rulers, at the time of his appearance. They certainly needed no supernatural instigation to push them on to their bloody and wicked purpose; and Pilate, disposed and situated as he was, needed no extraordinary impulse to induce him to consent to it, notwithstanding his hesitation, and his conviction of the malice and injustice of the proceedings; and both he and the Jews were righteously condemned and punished for it; which, I doubt not, will have the happiest effect in the system of the divine moral government.[36]

As this example indicates, Priestley was not trying to argue that God provides "supernatural interference" in human affairs to make them coincide with his plans. Rather, God sets all conditions to be such that, eventually, what he knows will happen, necessarily does.

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35 Ibid., p. 470.

36 Ibid., p. 471.

Objections to Necessarianism

It Eliminates Human Responsibility

One could object to a doctrine of necessity on the grounds that it negates a person's responsibility for their actions and so makes any notion of reward or punishment absurd. Priestley indicated that this objection was one of the most difficult to overcome for anyone seriously considering the subject.[37]

To answer this objection, Priestley provided a hypothetical situation in which a parent was to react to the behavior of two children - one of the children being subject to necessity, and the other was entirely free and self determined.[38] In his example, the free mind is not

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[37] Ibid., pp. 492 - 3.

[38] "It has been seen that punishment would have no propriety or use upon the doctrine of philosophical liberty; blame also, upon the same scheme, would be equally absurd and ill-founded. If my child A [subject to necessity] acts wrong, I tell him that I am exceedingly displeased, because he has shewn a disposition of mind, on which motives to virtue have no sufficient influence; that he appears to have such a propensity to vicious indulgences, that I am afraid he is irreclaimable, and that his utter ruin will be the consequence of it. This is the proper language of blame, and, upon a mind constituted like that of A, may have a good effect, as well as the discipline of punishment.

But if the constitution of the mind of B [a mind at liberty] be attended to, it will be seen that blame is equally absurd, as punishment is unavailing. If he has acted the same part that A has done, the language which I addressed to A will not apply to him. It is true, that he has done what is wrong, and it must have bad consequences; but it was not from any bad disposition of mind, that made him subject to be influenced by bad impressions. No, his determination had a cause of quite another nature. It was a choice directed by no bad motive whatever, but a mere will, acting independently of any motive, and which, though it has been on the side of vice to-day, may be on the side of

necessarily caused to act by punishment (or praise). He concluded, therefore, since praise or blame only have a use when they necessarily have an effect, they only have a use within the context of his scheme of philosophical necessity.

Priestley set up a clear dichotomy between the free and the determined mind. If he believed as he wrote: "The two schemes of liberty and necessity admit of no medium between them."[39] the poles found in his example were meant to represent real alternatives. It was his stated method to examine the "appearance of things" and then try to provide the simplest explanation possible.[40] For Priestley, it appeared that necessity, as he described it, would not allow for compromise. The mind is either subject to necessity or it is free.

Priestley was trying to argue that since all humans are subject to necessity, praise and punishment always have a necessary influence. But humans are still accountable, that is, "responsible"[41] for their own actions.

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virtue to-morrow. My blame or reproaches, therefore, being ill-founded, and incapable of having any effect, it is my wisdom to withhold them, and wait the uncertain issue with patience."
Priestley, Illustrations, pp. 497 - 8.

39 Ibid., p. 497.

40 Ibid., p. 472.

41 Ibid., p. 493.

"It Would Make Men Indifferent"

Priestley was familiar with the argument that a doctrine of philosophical necessity, were it well known and widely followed, would lead to moral indifference. He countered this objection by claiming that it would be a correct conclusion only if humans could not engage in voluntary behavior.[42] He tried once again to explain how it is possible for humans to be necessarily part of the chain of causes and effects, and at the same time to be responsible for their own actions. For his explanation, he provided an analogy. He wrote that just as our will is subject to the laws of nature, so also is all vegetation. If a farmer expects a good crop next year, he still must tend his fields. This is true even though "everything relating to vegetation is fixed and permanent, part of the laws of nature."[43] So, he concluded, if we are aware of the necessary connections of cause and effect, we will endeavor to achieve the best effect possible.

Taking his example farther than Priestley did, one might ask if the farmer had the free will to choose whether or not to tend his fields. Of course, Priestley would have to answer no, since he has denied free will exists. So the

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42 "I answer [necessarianism would make men indifferent] if their own actions and determinations were not necessary links in this chain of causes and events, and if their good or bad success did not, in the strictest sense of the word, depend upon themselves."
Priestley, Illustrations, p. 502.

43 Ibid., p. 503.

choice of the farmer whether or not to tend his fields depends ultimately on that chain of causes and effects which led up to the decision to tend or not tend the fields. That chain was originally caused by God. Even if one concedes the point that God is one's parent or governor,[44] and he is interested in our good, yet ultimately, isn't God responsible for the choice the farmer makes?

God is Made the Author of Sin

Of the many objections to a necessarian point of view Priestley tried to answer, this is one of the most interesting because, in part, Priestley conceded the point. He acknowledged that through an understanding of philosophical necessity ". . . everything, without distinction, may be safely ascribed to God."[45] In Priestley's scheme, God bears ultimate responsibility.

Although he conceded the point, Priestley went on to qualify his position in two ways. First, he argued that while the notion expressed above is accurate and even useful in speculation, we are finite, limited human beings and it is extremely difficult for us to make any practical use of this information.[46] Secondly, he argued that while every-

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[44] Ibid., p. 504.

[45] Ibid., p. 509.

[46] "[Everything being attributable to God is a principle] no wise man can or would choose to act upon, himself, because our understandings are too limited for the application of such a means of good; though a Being of

thing can be ascribed to God, using the term "sin" only serves to confuse because implicit in a definition of sin ought to be the principle of intent. In other words, God is responsible for evil, but that evil has only been created so that the greatest good will eventually be realized. God's intent, therefore, is to provide the greatest good, and thus it cannot be said that God is a sinful being.[47]

Implications Priestley Drew From the Doctrine of Necessity

Priestley stated that he had developed a scheme which could overthrow the "common sense" concept of liberty. That notion of liberty could inflate human pride and impair humility, he reasoned, because it implied complete human independence and human authorship of any good works.[48] Yet, can a person actually be a practicing Necessarian?

Priestley wrote that the results of living a life based on necessarianism could only yield good:

> Also, the full persuasion that nothing can come to pass without the knowledge and express appointment of the greatest and best of Beings, must tend to diffuse a joyful serenity over the mind, producing a conviction that, notwithstanding all present unfavourable appearances, whatever is, is

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infinite knowledge may introduce it with the greatest advantage."
Priestley, Illustrations, p. 510.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., p. 523.

> right;[49] that even all evils, respecting individuals or societies, any part, or the whole of the human race, will terminate in good; and that the greatest sum of good could not, in the nature of things, be attained by any other means.[50]

It was Priestley's understanding that it could be relatively easy for a person to be a speculative necessarian. In fact, he suggested that a person could as easily be a necessarian through speculation and yet not one in practice, as one could be a Christian in speculation and yet a "libertine" in practice.[51] However, Priestley recognized that to live one's entire life with a full consciousness of necessarianism, and that necessarianism put into practice, was virtually impossible. He stated that few who ever truly practiced a necessarian life could do so for

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[49] This quotation is taken from the first epistle of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" (as is the quotation on the title page of the Illustrations). If one examines the stanza in which this often quoted phrase is contained, one can easily see how Priestley found the sentiment expressed to be congenial.

> Cease then nor order imperfection name;
> Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
> Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree
> Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee
> Submit. - In this, or any other sphere,
> Secure to be as blessed as thou canst bear;
> Safe in the hand of one disposing Power,
> Or in the natal, or the mortal hour.
> All Nature is but art, unknown to thee;
> All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
> All discord, harmony not understood;
> All partial evil, universal good;
> And, spite of pride, in erring reasons's spite,
> One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

[50] Priestley, Illustrations, p. 507.

[51] Ibid., p. 517.

long because it demands a perfection humans do not have.[52] Priestley wrote that this full understanding of necessarianism is a rare achievement often encountered in seclusion and retirement.[53] And despite the rationalism of his era, and despite his own materialist and rational outlook, Priestley described real awareness of the implication of a life lived on necessarian principles in mystical[54] terms:

> It is acknowledged that a Necessarian, who, as such believes that, strictly speaking, nothing goes wrong but that every thing is under the best direction possible, himself and his conduct, as part of an immense and perfect whole, included, cannot accuse

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52 Ibid., p. 518.

53 Ibid., p. 524.

54 The experience to which Priestley was pointing seems as if it can best be described by the adjective "mystical" in the general sense of the word. If one chooses a more careful definition, Priestley's description may not fit in every detail, yet it is still strongly suggestive of the mystical experience. William James, for example, provided four points which were the essence of his definition of mystical experience. There are echoes of what Priestley was writing about in all of these points. They are:

" 1. Ineffability - . . . The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced . .

2. Noetic quality - . . . mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth umplumbed by the discursive intellect . . .

3. Transiency - Mystical states cannot be sustained for long . . .

4. Passivity - . . .yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power . . ."

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1902), pp. 371 - 2.

himself of having done wrong, in the ultimate sense of the words. He has, therefore, in this strict sense, nothing to do with repentance, confession, or pardon, which are all adapted to a different, imperfect and fallacious view of things. But then, if he be really capable of steadily viewing the great system, and his own conduct as a part of it, in this true light, his supreme regard to God, as the great, wise and benevolent author of all things, his intimate communion with him, and devotedness to him, will necessarily be such, that he can have no will but God's. In the sublime, but accurate language of the apostle John, he will dwell in love, he will dwell in God, and God in him; so that, not committing any sin, he will have nothing to repent of. He will be perfect, as his heavenly Father is perfect.[55]

Necessity in Priestley's Life

The Memoirs which Priestley wrote were to be published only after his death. It was his hope that this work may serve succeeding generations as well as his other writings had served his contemporaries. He wrote that it was his desire to promote through these Memoirs "virtue and piety, which I hope I may say it has been my care to practice myself as it has been my business to inculcate them upon others."[56] This work is unlike most of the other volumes of Priestley's writings. It does not present any intricate rational argument, it simply includes the facts of his life as he perceived and understood them. As an example, in the

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55 Priestley, Illustrations, p. 518.

56 Priestley, Memoirs, p. 1.

section of the book in which he wrote about a significant change in his Christological conception, he described the change in this way:

> By reading with care Dr. Lardner's letter on the logos, I became what is called a Socinian soon after my settlement at Leeds; and after giving the closest attention to the subject, I have seen more and more reason to be satisfied with that opinion to this day, and likewise to be more impressed with the idea of its importance.[57]

The narrative continues with a list of more books he read, and similar brief descriptions of how he reacted.

Yet this work serves as more than a list of the basic facts of Priestley's life. It is in Priestley's reaction to those facts and his simple interpretation of the nature of the events which made up his life, that one can begin to see an application of the doctrine of necessity which Priestley advocated.

There are some instances where his inclination to interpret his life in necessarian terms is present but barely noticeable. For example, he wrote that he had hoped to accompany Captain Cook on his second voyage to the Pacific. He was eventually rejected because some influencial ministers objected to his religious views. Rather than express regret at not having been selected to join in a voyage that ought to have appealed to his scientific curiosity, he concluded:

> As I had barely acquiesced in the proposal, this was no disappointment to me, and

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[57] Ibid., p. 57.

> I was much better employed at home, even with respect to my philosophical pursuits. My knowledge of natural history was not sufficient for the undertaking; but at that time I should by application have been able to supply my deficiency, though now I am sensible I could not do it.[58]

By his own doctrine of necessity, Priestley could only conclude about this or any other incident in his life, that it was the result of the will of a benevolent God that things turned out as they did. Whether or not Priestley could immediately understand what good could come out of being denied the opportunity to travel with Captain Cook, it was his belief that "whatever is, is right."

Priestley presented a similar attitude when describing his own health:

> My father, grand father, and several branches of the family, were remarkably healthy, and long lived; and though my constitution has been far from robust, and was much injured by a consumptive tendency, or rather an ulcer in my lungs, the consequences of improper conduct of myself when I was at school (being often violently heated with exercise, and as often imprudently chilled by bathing, &c.) from which with great difficulty I recovered, it has been excellently adapted to that studious life which has fallen to my lot.[59]

The incidents described above seem almost trivial in the way in which Priestley wrote about them. But Priestley was consistent in the application of his doctrine of necessity. He could find it at work in almost all aspects of his life. Near the conclusion of the first section of

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58 Ibid., p. 67.

59 Ibid., p. 101.

the Memoirs he wrote:

> In reflecting on my past life I have often thought of two sayings of Jacob. When he had lost one of his sons, and thought of other things that were afflictions to him, he said, "all these things are against me," at the same time that they were in reality making for him. So the impediment in my speech, and the difficulties of my situation at Needham, I now see as much cause to be thankful for, as for the most brilliant scenes in my life.[60]

That portion of the Memoirs, however, was written before the riot in Birmingham, and Priestley's journey to America. After those monumental turns in his life, he resumed his Memoirs still able to affirm necessity in his own life:

> When I wrote the preceeding part of these Memoirs I was happy as must have appeared in the course of them, in the prospect of spending the remainder of my life at Birmingham, where I had every advantage for pursuing my studies, both philosophical and theological; but it pleased the sovereign disposer of all things to appoint for me other removals, and the manner in which they were brought about were more painful to me than the removals themselves. I am far, however, from questioning the wisdom of the goodness of the appointments respecting myself or others.[61]

Priestley continued to face trials. His wife died 1796; his finances were in a perilous condition; his daughter (who remained in England) was diagnosed as having consumption. Added to this list is perhaps one of the most difficult incidents in his life, which occured after the

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60 Ibid., p. 111.

61 Ibid., p. 114.

conclusion of his Memoirs. It was reported in the Reading, Pennsylvania, newspaper that Priestley's son William tried to poison his father and the rest of the family.[62] The allegation was never proven, and in fact Priestly himself publically denied it. Yet something must have happened.[63]

Whatever did happen may have hurt Priestley deeply, yet it did not finally shake his belief in necessity in his own life. None of his tragedies did. Just a few months after the incident with his son, Priestley wrote to Lindsey:

> My conviction of the infinite wisdom in the structure and government of the world increases continually, and the satisfaction I derive from it is greater than ever; probably in consequence of being shut out from many other sources of enjoyment and pleasing reflection. Without this, I assured you that I should be very melancholy; but with it, I am, in all my trials, cheerful and happy. I can even look beyond any thing that is painful in my reflections on the conduct of _____. I trust in a good providence, with respect to the issue both in this world and the next . . . the hand of God is in everything.[64]

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[62] F. W. Gibbs, Joseph Priestley: Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 240.

[63] Priestley wrote to his brother-in-law: "For I must not wholly desert him [his son William], and indeed I feel more compassion than resentment on his account. He is gone to seek a settlement in the Western Territory, and I do not expect or wish to see him any more, but I shall continue to write to him, and give him my best advice."
Gibbs, Priestley, p. 241.

[64] Quoted by Schaberg, "Providence and Necessity", p. 472.

Conclusion

There were two aspects to Priestley's understanding of Philosophical Necessity. The first was the rational argument he presented for it. That argument was tested by debate. His debate on the subject is the topic of the next chapter. But the other aspect of Priestley's understanding of necessity was how it actually functioned in his own life. As he recognized, necessity could not always be felt to be functioning in his life, but when he was able to feel it, he was able to feel that there was some meaning in life, and he could find peace.

CHAPTER III

RICHARD PRICE AND JOSEPH PRIESTLEY: A DEBATE ON "NECESSITY"

> "The battle over free will is ancient and neither side can win, because satisfactory evidence on the subject can never be found."
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> - Jacques Barzun

Introduction

Richard Price (1723-1791) was both a close friend and critic of Joseph Priestley. Price and Priestley, both of whom were Dissenting ministers, met for the first time in 1766. Price was a member of the Royal Society, and he introduced Priestley to that society which elected him to fellowship that same year. Price helped secure a position for Priestley in the household of Lord Shelburne. He also introduced Priestley to Benjamin Franklin. Priestley came to Price's defense when the latter's political philosophy was attacked by Burke through his Reflections on the Revolution in France. Priestley succeeded Price in the pulpit of the Gravel Pit Meeting in Hackney after Price

died in 1791.[1] Despite their close friendship and agreement on many issues of the day,[2] there were some things on which they could not agree. While Priestley moved toward a "Socinian" Christology for example, Price remained an Arian.[3] They held different conceptions as to the nature of the soul. Also, Price believed that humans have free will, while Priestly supported a doctrine of "philosophical necessity." When Priestley produced his treatise on the nature of materialism and a subsequent treatise outlining his conception of necessity,[4] Price immediately responded by letter. The two friends began regularly corresponding on the subject. The result of that correspondence was then published by mutual agreement.[5] That discussion is the

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[1] For a detailed account of Price's life and his relationship with Priestley, see: Carl B. Cone, Torchbearer of Freedom: the Influence of Richard Price on Eighteenth Century Thought (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1952)

[2] Including religious tolerance and the revolutions in France and America.

[3] Michael Watts, The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 474.

[4] Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt, vol. 4: Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, and The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.)

[5] Richard Price and Joseph Priestley The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt, vol. 4: A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence Between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley, to Which are Added, by Dr. Priestley, an Introduction (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.)

subject of this chapter. The correspondence with Price does not represent the only debate on the subject of necessity in which Priestley engaged. He responded to others' opinions as well, including John Palmer and Jacob Bryant. But the exchange with Price is unique in that both sides of the debate are preserved together in the same book, and thus the lines of dispute are readily apparent. In the cases of Palmer and Bryant, only Priestley's response is readily available. That aspect of the discussion between Price and Priestley which deals with Priestley's doctrine of necessity (and Price's critique of the position) will be this chapter's focus.

First, however, Price's moral philosophy must be encountered because many of his ideas, especially about liberty, are inextricably linked to that philosophy. But this encounter will be quite brief. Next the chief categories of disagreement between Price and Priestley will be outlined and then examined. Finally this chapter will conclude with an examination of the character of the debate itself, for the attitudes Price and Priestley brought to their exchange of ideas can help illuminate why and how both men thought debate over significant religious issues ought to be conducted.

Richard Price: Contemporary Critic

Richard Price is justly famous for his moral philosophy. He directly challenged the ideas of Hutcheson and Hume, among others.[6] He was one of the great minds among the British moralists of the seventeenth century. There is a clear relationship between his moral philosophy and his defense of human free will. Michael Watts has described that relationship in simple, but accurate terms: "[Price] had argued that without liberty, the power of self-determination, 'there can be no moral capacities'. The right to choose between right and wrong, Price maintained, lay in the understanding."[7] His interest in morality, and the freedom he saw necessarily supporting it, was maintained throughout his life.[8]

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[6] To oversimplify, Price took the position that our understanding was the faculty by which we perceive right and wrong. Our ideas, which are from the perceptions of our understanding, must have a correspondence with external reality. In his own words: "But if we have no such ideas, or if they denote nothing real besides the qualities of our own minds; I need not say into what an abyss of scepticism we are plunged." The object of understanding, for Price, is the truth. Our understanding, seeking the truth, perceives right and wrong in external reality. That is where, for Price, right and wrong are located - in external reality as perceived by a moral agent.

Richard Price, A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals in British Moralists: 1650 - 1800 vol. 2, ed. D. D. Raphael (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 134 - 139.

[7] Watts, The Dissenters, p. 476.

[8] "Price's concern throughout his life was with the question of human freedom, and quite naturally he conceived it his primary task to prove the objectivity of moral judgment."

If liberty is at the root of Price's moral philosophy,[9] it should not be surprising that he would come to its defense even against the onslaughts of his friend and colleague, Joseph Priestley. This defense is found among the exchange of letters and opinions which makes up the Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity . . . which was first printed in 1778.

Price took his definition of liberty from the work of Samuel Clarke[10] whom he understood to be saying that liberty is "a power of self-motion or self-determination."[11] To this simple statement, Price added three qualifications.

Cone, Torchbearer p. 21.

[9] Price believed that a perception of liberty was a general trait and not just an idiosyncrasy of his.

"It has always been the general, and it is evidently the natural sense of mankind, that they cannot be accountable for what they have no power to avoid. Nothing can be more glaringly absurd, than applauding or reproaching ourselves for what we were no more the causes of, than our own beings, and what it was no more possible for us to prevent than the return of the seasons, or the revolutions of the planets."

Quoted from Price's A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals by: D. O. Thomas, The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 166.

[10] Samuel Clarke (1675 - 1725) was an Anglican priest, friend and translator of Newton, and moral philosopher. Perhaps his single most famous work is the Boyle lectures for 1705 which he wrote, in large part, to respond to Hobbes. For a detailed description see:

Elmer Sprague, "Samuel Clarke" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol. 2., ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1967), p. 118 - 120.

[11] Richard Price, Principal Questions, p. 191.

First, liberty is something possessed by all animals.[12] Second, there is no middle ground between liberty and necessity, that is, one is either at liberty, or one is not.[13] The third qualification Price advanced goes to the very heart of Priestley's theology. Price declared that liberty, as he described it, must be possible. He wrote: "Somewhere or other there must exist a power of beginning motion, that is, of self-motion."[14] Even if one conceives of all actions as the result of a chain of necessary cause and effect relationships, Price pointed out that there had to be a first cause (which Priestley, himself, recognized and called God[15]), and that first cause must have "moved" itself. Liberty is not an impossible concept, even in Priestley's universe.[16] Therefore, Price concluded, liberty, indeed, must be possible.

Price initiated his discussion with Priestley on the subject of necessity by asking ten questions of Priestley. These questions fall into three general categories. The first two questions are directed at exploring the nature of

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12 Ibid.
It is worth noting that Anthony Collins, who was an important influence on Priestley, stated the opposite assumption. He had written that all animals are obviously subjects of necessity, therefore humans are as well. For Price, every animal possessed "powers of...spontaneity."

13 Ibid.

14 Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, p. 68.

15 See for example: Priestley, Disquisition, p. 324.

16 Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, pp. 68 and 76. Priestley did not directly respond to this point.

cause and effect relationships. They are:

> 1. Can any thing act on another without being present to it?
>
> 2. Can, therefore, matter act on other matter without contact and impulse?[17]

The next four questions deal with the nature of the soul, and immortality.[18] Indirectly, they question to what extreme Priestley wanted to take his doctrine of materialism.

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[17] Ibid., p. 66.

[18] Some of Priestley's fame among his contemporaries had been the result of his doctrine of the human soul. Typical of what he had to say on this subject, as well as on death and immortality, is the following passage:

" . . .it has been to an attentive study of the Scriptures chiefly, and not so much to the consideration of natural phenomena, that we are indebted for the downfall of it [traditional conceptions of "soul"]. We there find a total and remarkable silence concerning the unembodied state of man. Death is there considered as a state of oblivion and insensibility; and it is only at the general resurrection of the human race, that the rewards of virtue, and the punishments of vice, are expressly said to commence.

. . . the soul having served no other purpose [for religious thinkers of the past] but that of an hypothesis (being deemed incapable of subsisting, or at least of acting by itself), we are encouraged to lay aside all prejudice, and examine whether this hypothesis of a soul, distinct from the body, be favoured by fact and appearances. Finding it not to be favoured by any one fact or appearance in nature, I have ventured to reject it altogether; and here, and here only, [that is, of all the possible conclusions one could draw, only through this one] I find a perfect consonancy between the doctrines of revelation and the dictates of natural reason."

Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt, vol. 3: The History of the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning the Origin of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter; With Its Influence on Christianity, Especially with Respect to the Doctrine of the Pre-Existence of Christ; Being a Sequel to the Disquisitions Concerning Matter and Spirit (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 387.

> 3. Is not the soul, or what I call myself, a being or substance; and not merely a mode or property?
>
> 4. Does the soul lose its existence at death? Or am I, the subject of thought, reason, consciousness, &c, to be then annihilated?
>
> 5. If I am to lose my existence at death, will not my resurrection be the resurrection of a non-entity; and therefore impossible?
>
> 6. If I am not to lose my existence at death, may it not be properly said that I am naturally immortal?[19]

The four final questions get to the heart of the discussion of whether or not humans are self-determining creatures.

> 7. Do we not necessarily ascribe our volitions or actions to ourselves?
>
> 8. Do we not determine ourselves?
>
> 9. If we do not determine ourselves, are we not deceived when we ascribe our actions to ourselves; and, for that reason, reckon ourselves accountable for them?
>
> 10. Does it follow from its being certain, in any instance, that we shall determine ourselves in a particular way, that we do not, in that instance, determine ourselves at all?[20]

These are the questions with which Price began the discussion, and as such they were designed to lay out the basic framework of the topic as he perceived it. It was Price's declared hope that Priestley would answer each of these questions with a simple "yes" or "no" so that areas of

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19 Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, p. 66.

20 Ibid.

agreement and disagreement could be clearly outlined. Much to Price's surprise, the elusive Priestley either provided detailed responses (many were long restatements of his previous writings), or no response at all. Price summarized Priestley's response this way:

> But I find that we are more nearly agreed than I expected. To the two first queries, Dr. Priestley has given no direct answer; but what he has said in different places, seems to imply that he would agree with me in answering them in the negative. The 3d query he has. . . answered, as I should, in the affirmative; and the 4th and 6th in the negative. . .
>
> To the 7th query it appears also that he answers in the affirmative, and yet that to the 8th he answers in the negative. In other words, he acknowledges that we necessarily ascribe our determinations to ourselves, but denies that we do really determine ourselves; asserting, in answer to the 9th query, that we are deceived when we imagine that our volitions are not produced by a cause foreign to our wills, and on that account believe ourselves responsible for them; all self-determination being impossible, and accountableness or liableness to punishment being only the connexion which divine wisdom, in order to produce the greatest ultimate good, has established between certain voluntary though necessary actions and certain sufferings.[21]

This is a fair summary of Priestley's initial response. He either did or would agree with questions 3, 8, and 9. He would respond negatively to questions 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8. In addition to Price's comments, it should be noted that Priestley did not respond initially to the fifth question, probably because he had already dealt extensively with the subject elsewhere, such as in the *Disquisitions* for

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[21] Ibid., p. 67.

example, although Price did not note this. Nor did Priestley answer the last question. By his doctrine, we cannot determine ourselves in any way, particular or not, so the question would seem irrelevant to him.

The debate continued after this point in a somewhat random and haphazard fashion.[22] Perhaps the main points of discussion can be more clearly seen if they are presented in the three general categories suggested by Price's ten queries: "cause and effect," "materiality and the soul," and "self-determination."

Cause and Effect

By the answers, written or implied, to the first two questions, Price and Priestley can be seen to be starting from the same perspective about cause and effect relationships. They would both agree that for any action to be action, its cause must be immediate, that is, "present." This is emphatically so in the case of matter. For Priestley, all causes are ultimately physical causes. He also applied a mechanical, model to the functioning of the human mind. This was part of his basic explanation of human behavior.[23] It was this extension of the conception of a

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22 Cone described it this way: "The book was verbose and not particularly enlightening."
Cone, Torchbearer, p. 99.

23 See Chapter II.

physical cause and effect relationship to the functioning of the human mind and human behavior to which Price objected.

Relying once again on the thought of Samuel Clarke, Price suggested that there can be "physical causes," but there can also be an "influence of moral reasons."[24] Price charged that Priestley probably wouldn't acknowledge this as a possible distinction because: "He ascribes an impulsive force to them [ideas]; and asserts that they act by mechanical laws on the mind, as one material substance acts upon another."[25] Yet, Price continued, a real difference does exist between physical causes and the influence of moral reasons. The former always produce an effect, but the latter may produce one. Price tried to show the difference with this hypothetical example:

> It is, for instance, certain that a man dragged along like a piece of timber, will follow the superior force that acts upon him. It may be also certain, that a man invited by the hope of a reward, will follow a guide. But who sees not that these certainties, having different foundations, are of a totally different nature? In both cases the man might in common speech be said to follow; but his following in the one case, however certain in event, would be his own agency: in the other case, it would be the agency of another. In the one case, he would really follow; but in the other case, being dragged, he could not properly be be said to follow. In the one case, superior power moves him; in the other, he moves himself. In short, to ascribe a necessary and physical efficiency

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24 Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, p. 69.

25 Ibid.

> to motives, is (as Dr. Clarke has observed), the same with saying, that an abstract notion can strike a ball.[26]

In Price's understanding, the human will, can (and by its nature, actually does) seek guidance and rules. Yet it is fully capable of determining without such rules, or even in violation of such guidance. Priestley responded that this is an inconsistent opinion for it implies that the will can determine contrary to its motives. That, for him is an example of something "contingent" or "uncertain." It is like an effect without a cause.[27]

The Soul and Material Existence

It is evident from the writings of Price and Priestley that they used the terms "mind," "soul," and "spirit," interchangeably.[28] In the discussions on the doctrine of necessity Price did not pursue the questions any further. He probably submitted them only to clarify what may have seemed obscure in Priestley's Disquisitions. Price, who himself had a strong and well-defined understanding of an

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[26] Ibid., pp. 69 - 70.

[27] Ibid., p. 75.

[28] One could find this usage for example, in Section II of the following: Joseph Priestley, A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer, in Defence of the Illustrations of Philosophical Necessity, (London: J. Johnson, 1779).

Of course, one need look no farther than the sub-heading of the "Second Communication" from Price and Priestley's Free Discussion. It reads, "Of the Nature of Mind or Spirit."

immaterial soul, did pursue the issue in another section of the Free Discussion to the extent that he disagreed with Priestley about humans being only material.[29] For Price saw that this kind of materialism would "make nature the only Deity."[30]

Self-Determination

It was with his seventh question that Price pointed toward one of the implications of Priestley's doctrine. That is, if we are not self-determined, and Priestley would say that we are not, yet if we think that we have liberty and behave accordingly, and Priestley would agree that we

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[29] On this issue, Michael Watts has seriously misread Price. He has written: "Most important of all, Price put his finger on the great weakness of Priestley's theological system, his neglect, if not denial, of the work of the Holy Spirit . . . 'It is . . . the notion of spirit', complained Price, 'which is combatted through the greatest part of Dr. Priestley's work.'" (Watts, The Dissenter, p. 476.) It had been Priestley's argument that if one wants to talk about the Deity, one could do little more than describe the divine attributes, since all categories we humans are familiar with provide inadequate descriptions. The passage Watt cites is in a section of the Free Discussion which deals with an argument over the distinction between soul and matter. The sentence he quoted and the one which follows it read: "It is, however, the notion of spirit which is combatted through the greatest part of Dr. Priestley's work. Dr. Priestley's view in writing was, to prove that there is no distinction between matter and spirit, or between the soul and body; and thus to explode what he calls the heathenish system of Christianity, by exploding the doctrines of Christ's pre-existence and an intermediate state." (Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, p. 54) This hardly seems to be "a charge of neglecting the Holy Spirit."

[30] Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, p. 51.

do, then we are guilty of self-deception.

Priestley had frequently written that in the "vulgar conception" there is a sense or "consciousness" of liberty. He saw that sense as being consistent with his doctrine of necessity because, he believed, people didn't take a step beyond that basic feeling. He wrote:

> All the idea that the generality of mankind have of liberty, is perfectly consistent with, and , in fact, flows from, the principles of moral necessity; for they mean no more by it, than a freedom from the controul of others, and that their volitions are determined only by their own views of things, and influenced or guided by motives operating within themselves. Beyond this their ideas do not go, nor does the business of human life require that they should. They have, therefore, no apprehension of the real and unavoidable consequences of the principles they every day act upon. They would even be alarmed and staggered, if those consequences were pointed out to them. . . [31]

Price examined Priestley's elitist position and then recast it in slightly different terms. Those terms clarified the real nature of what Priestley was trying to say, that is, under his system most people are guilty of self-deception. Price described his restatement as an appeal to common sense:

> Let us suppose a common man, who knows nothing of those refinements on plain points which have disgraced human learning, and turned so much of it into rank folly; let us I say, suppose such a man asked whether, in all his actions, he does not determine himself? He would certainly answer, without hesitation, in the affirmative. Suppose him told, that he was mistaken; and that very

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31 Priestley, Illustrations, p. 505.

> wise men had discovered, that he no more determined himself in any of his actions than a stone determines itself when thrown from a hand. Would he not wonder greatly?[32]

Priestley had argued that motives necessarily determine actions, or as above, a persons "volitions are only determined by their views of things." Self-determination was not possible in Priestley's scheme because, he argued, it meant that actions would become uncertain since they were no longer necessarily determined. Price also found this to be curious in the light of common sense. He continued his example:

> Suppose him farther asked, whether there is not a certainty that he would accept a good estate if it was offered to him fairly? He would answer in the affirmative. Suppose it objected to him, that there could be no such certainty, because, being a self-determiner, he would be free not to accept. Would there be a possibility of puzzling him by such an objection?[33]

Finally, the debate came down to two fundamentally different points of view. Price, for a variety of reasons argued that humans have liberty and are self-determined, and Priestley took the opposite point of view. It is ironic that soft determinism, one of the elements of Priestley's necessarianism which helped to distinguish it from the "determinism" of other generations of thinkers, was not subject to debate. Price had dismissed it early in the discussion in one of his qualifications of the concept of liberty. He

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32 Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, p. 93.

33 Ibid.

had written that there are "no degrees of liberty." It either is, or is not.

Price's reaction to Priestley's scheme of philosophical necessity can be best summarized by his response to one of Priestley's own allegations. Priestley had written that it was possible to explain how God could "appoint" evil in a necessarian world, but it would be difficult to explain how God could permit evil in a universe subject to liberty.[34] Priestley wrote that it would be hard for someone holding views like those of Price to answer a child's question: "Why did God make the Devil, and why doesn't God confine or kill him?" Price responded:

> I should probably answer, that God made the Devil good, but that he made himself a devil; and that a period is near when the Devil and all wicked beings will be destroyed; but that, in the mean time, the mischief they do is not prevented by confining them, or taking away their power, for the same reason that a wise government does not prevent crimes by shutting men up in their houses, or that a parent does not prevent his children from doing wrong by tying up their hands and feet. I would, in short, lead the child to understand, if possible, that to prevent wickedness by denying a sphere of agency to beings, would be to prevent one evil by producing a greater.[35]

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34 Ibid., p. 78.

35 Ibid., p. 83.

"Candour"

Carl Cone has accurately suggested that the Free Discussion of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley was important not just (or necessarily) for the concepts advanced in it, as much as the spirit with which the two protagonists engaged in debate. Cone's assessment is that the book's "main attractions for readers of that time were its unusual plan and the spirit of friendly disagreement that prevailed throughout. The book was significant, not because of its intrinsic merit, but because of what it revealed about Price and the nature of his friendships."[36] The term Price and Priestley used to describe that spirit was "candour."[37]

Some of Priestley's own understanding of this principle can be seen in his remarks prefacing a refutation of comments made about his doctrine of necessity by Jacob Bryant. Priestley seems to have felt that Bryant personally

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[36] Cone, Torchbearer, p. 98.

[37] "One of the important elements in the ideal of candour is the claim that all beliefs should be subject to rational criticism. Beliefs that do not pass this test are to be dismissed as superstitions. Candour assumes that in principle the truth can be discovered and communicated - hence the importance to Price's position of the claim that our moral intuitions are objectively grounded - and denies that truth is either private or mysterious. Candour also assumes that knowledge is essentially explicable and communicable. The different associations of the term 'candid' point to these beliefs: the discovery of knowledge is associated with light and brilliance; by contrast, the unknown, the inexplicable and the incommunicable, is associated with darkness."
Thomas, The Honest Mind, pp. 99 - 100.

attacked him with an unnecessary viciousness. Priestley wrote:

> We are all too apt to lose sight of the persons of our opponents, and with that, to forget our good manners; and indeed custom has, in a manner justified a good deal of asperity in controversial writings of all kinds; so that the world in general is not so much offended at it, as they would be at any rudeness in conversation. And with respect to the proper use of controversial writing, I do not know but that this may have been the best upon the whole; as, by this means, men have been roused to exert themselves to the utmost in the defence of their several opinions; so that the subject in debate has been more thoroughly investigated, for the benefit of the cool bystander.
>
> But with respect to the writers themselves, if my experience may be thought to qualify me to judge in the case, the preference is unspeakably in favour of an amicable discussion of any important question.[38]

Price, too, wrote of the nature of controversial writing. The spirit he described embodies the best of what can come of sincere disagreements between two people who tried to deal with each other "in all candour." In his own introductory letter to the Free Discussion which is addressed to Priestley, he wrote:

> [This book] will afford a proof that two persons may differ totally on points the most important and sacred, with a perfect esteem for one another; and it may likewise give a specimen of a proper manner of carrying on religious controversies. . . In religion there is nothing so essential as charity, candour and benevolence. . . Will you give me leave, Sir, here to add that your opinions give a striking proof of a truth, which,

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[38] Joseph Priestley, A Letter to Jacob Bryant, Esq. in Defence of Philosophical Necessity (London: J. Johnson, 1780), p. iii.

> could it be stamped on every human mind, would exterminate all bigotry and persecution; I mean the truth, that worth of character, and true integrity, and consequently God's acceptance, are not necessarily connected with any particular set of opinions.[39]

Conclusion

The debate between Price and Priestley helped to define the differences between the two men. They disagreed on some basic premises. For example, they had different opinions on the nature of the human mind. They also disagreed on the necessity of causes. Yet there was some agreement between the two of them. They agreed that humans often feel as if they are at liberty. They agreed that humans must bear responsibility for their own actions (the disagreement was over which system made this possible). And they agreed that truth is and must be a thing publicly discovered and communicated.

The next chapter deals with the reactions of other of Priestley's contemporaries, as well as successors, to the "truth" he had found and wanted to share.

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39 Price and Priestley, Free Discussion, pp. 16 - 17.

CHAPTER IV

"NECESSITY" AMONG PRIESTLEY'S FRIENDS AND IN LATER GENERATIONS

"For the historian, it is a blind alley which must be explored only because so many good people lost their way in it."

- Conrad Wright

Introduction

In this chapter a sample of reactions to Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity is surveyed. This survey begins with a look at the mixed reactions of Priestley's friends and colleagues in England. To understand Priestley's American contemporaries, however, requires an understanding of the climate in New England among religious liberals relative to determinism and necessity. To provide that understanding, the work of historian Conrad Wright in this area is examined.

Finally, a variety of assessments of Priestley is examined. These date from the time of Martineau to 1972. The various works explored in this section are all by or aimed at Unitarians. This criterion was used because through an exploration of these works, one may gain a better

understanding of the impact of Priestley's doctrine of necessity on Unitarian and liberal religious circles.

The Doctrine of Necessity Among Priestley's Contemporaries

Joseph Priestley had a deep interest in a variety of subjects such as science, theology, philology, and philosophy. The one subject to which he always returned, however, was theology. He once wrote in a letter to Theophilus Lindsey: "Theology, notwithstanding my other pursuits, is my favourite study . . . "[1] Despite the theological implications of Priestley's defenses of a necessarian point of view, he always described the doctrine as either philosophical or metaphysical. It was, of course, an important doctrine for him.

> If I were to take my choice of any metaphysical question to defend against all oppugners [sic], it should be the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity. There is no truth of which I have less doubt, and of the ground of which I am more fully satisfied.[2]

Priestley did not, however, devote his entire life or energy to defending this doctrine against all "oppugners."

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[1] Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, L.L.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. by J. T. Rutt, vol. 1: Memoirs and Correspondence (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 121.

[2] Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, L.L.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. by J. T. Rutt, vol. 3: The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 454.

Priestley had taken up the defense of necessarianism in the mid 1770's, and by the next decade he was moving on to other more explicitly theological issues.[3]

Necessity was an important doctrine to Priestley[4], but he did not devote his life to defending it. While this doctrine also may have been popular among some of his co-

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[3] His first major defense of a necessarian point of view was written in 1774 in An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind . . . , Dr. Beattie's Essay. . . , and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense . . . . Priestley was trying to outline in brief form what he saw to be Dr. Beattie's misconception of the doctrine. Priestley published his own edition of Hartley's Observations on Man in 1775. The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated, his major work on the subject, was published in 1777. His Free Discussion with Richard Price was printed in the next year. In 1779 he published his two letters to John Palmer. His letter to Jacob Bryant was published in 1780. Priestley's only other major publication defending the doctrine of necessity was his republication of Anthony Collins' Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty with a new introduction, in 1790.

[4] Of course, he still held to this doctrine. In 1794, as part of his farewell address to his congregation he wrote: " . . . we shall be the less disturbed at the malignity of others, when we consider that our enemies, as well as our friends, are acting the part assigned them by the Supreme Ruler of the Universe: that they are in their proper place as well as we in ours; though, being instigated by their own bad dispositions, this is no apology for their conduct; and that the plan of this great drama in which we are all actors is so arranged, that good will finally result from the evil which we experience in ourselves or see in others . . . [A]ll the opposition we meet with makes part of the useful and necessary discipline of life, and no great character could be formed, or any great good be done, without it; - our Saviour, the apostles, the reformers from popery, the Puritans, and Noncomformists, were equally exposed to it. And shall we complain?" Quoted in:
Thomas Belsham, Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey, M.A. Including a Brief Analysis of His Works; Together With Anecdotes and Letters of Eminent Persons, His Friends and Correspondents; Also a General View of the Progress of the Unitarian Doctrine in England and America (London: J. Johnson, 1812), p. 369.

religionists, it hardly served as a defining characteristic for Unitarianism in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Priestley, himself, recognized that the doctrine of philosophical necessity was unpopular.[5] Nonetheless, he was aware that some individuals in his circle held to it. In the dedication to the Illustrations he noted that his friend John Jebb (to whom the book was dedicated) could be counted among the necessarians. He continued:

> [I am] Hoping to enjoy your communications and valuable friendship, together with that of our common and most excellent friend Mr. Lindsey, whose views of these things are the same with ours, and with whom, in principle and object, we cannot be too strictly united. . .[6]

Those among Priestley's friends who actually held to the necessarian viewpoint, however, seem not to have defended it with Priestley's tenacity. Lindsey, for example, is credited by Belsham with eighteen separate publications[7]; yet nothing in his list indicates that Lindsey engaged in an extensive defense or examination of the doctrine of necessity.[8]

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5 Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley L.L.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. by J. T. Rutt, vol. 3: The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 458.

6 Ibid., p. 452.

7 Belsham, Memoirs of Lindsey, p. 544.

8 Even Lindsey's Vindiciae Priestleyanae is described by Belsham as a "defence of his friend's character as a philosopher and a theologian." (emphasis added)
Ibid., p. 198.

Thomas Belsham, himself, did not have the same sense of certainty about the doctrine. In a letter he wrote in 1779 to his friend, the Rev. Timothy Kenrick, he tried to epitomize necessity, but he also conveyed his feeling that the question was not entirely settled:

> You write to me, my good friend, as if I were a confirmed necessarian. I confess myself as yet an inquirer into the subject, and I acknowledge there are many difficulties, which I do not well know how to solve: those which you mention are undoubtedly the principal. - But the question is, are not the difficulties equal on the side of liberty, or even superior? We must be content to choose the side where the difficulties are least, and to palliate them as well as we can. -The sensation of remorse is undoubtedly highly useful; but it is to be remembered that only one ingredient of that sensation is removed by Necessity, and perhaps that is not of so much consequence as is generally supposed.[9]

Some of Priestley's contemporaries expressed little doubt. They rejected philosophical necessity for a variety of reasons. Typical of this group is the Rev. W. Hopkins. In a letter he sent to Lindsey in 1784 he commented that he

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[9] John Williams, Memoirs of the Late Reverend Thomas Belsham Including a Brief Notice of His Published Works and Copious Extracts From His Diary Together With Letters To and From His Friends and Correspondents. (Hackney, England: G. Smallfield, 1833), pp. 171 - 2.

On page 173 Williams cites a letter from Belsham's mother which indicates even she took some notice of necessarianism: "Indeed, my dear Sir, I neither like Dr. Priestley nor his opinions, and believe you had a free will to write sooner to Bedford, and should have exerted it, as your negligence gave us some uneasiness, and your brother was obliged to write another letter to Mr. Whitbread, on that account."

had become familiar with a friendly debate between Price and Priestley on the subject of liberty versus necessity, although he did not have a copy of the book. He went on to state without equivocation: "I profess myself strongly attached to the cause of moral liberty in the strictest sense, in opposition to necessity of every kind, whether arising from external or internal causes."[10]

Another Dissenting minister who rejected philosophical necessity was Joshua Toulmin. He expressed himself clearly in a letter he wrote to the Rev. Joseph Bretland (another of Priestley's friends) in 1777:

> As I profess to be a lover of truth, and am inquiring, as far as my time and engagements will allow, why, my dear Sir, should you conclude that our sentiments on this point will continue to differ through life? Am I an obstinate heretic? or is my mind incapable of admitting light and evidence? I really wish my good friend [Priestley] will tell me what answer he would give to a drunkard, or any other vicious character, whom he was tenderly admonishing, that should allege the plea of necessity to extenuate his guilt. But perhaps I shall rather offend by resuming this subject.[11]

Richard Price was another critic of Priestley from among the circle of English Dissenting ministers. Price argued that humans were more than just material substance and that natural laws were not sufficient to explain all of human behavior. He also pointed out that Priestley's cause and effect argument was inadequate for it did not take

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[10] Belsham, Memoirs of Lindsey p. 512.

[11] Priestley, Miscellaneous Works (Memoirs and Correspondence), p. 303.

"moral influences" into account. Price demonstrated that, by Priestley's scheme, humanity was guilty of self-deception. That is, most people feel themselves to have a free will in making moral choices; yet if they do not actually have that freedom, they are deluding themselves.

Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity did not have a universal popularity in his own day even among his colleagues. He had failed to convert many to his own views on this subject, and he, himself, spent little time in defending, or even discussing the issue after 1780.

Priestley's doctrine was not widely accepted in his native land, even among his friends and colleagues. Circumstances which had occurred in America before Priestley ever wrote of philosophical necessity effectively prevented his doctrine from receiving a sympathetic hearing by the nascent liberal religious community on the western side of the Atlantic.

Priestley had written that if anyone wished a full understanding of necessity they ought to consult, among others, Jonathan Edwards.[12] He went on to describe Edwards as one who had provided good responses to many objections which had been raised about the doctrine.[13] He conceded,

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12 Priestley, Illustrations, pp. 453 - 4.
In this passage, he also recommended Collins, Hartley, Hume, and Lord Kames. Edwards wrote on necessity and free will in his treatise Freedom of the Will which was published in 1754.

13 Ibid., p. 512.

though, that Edwards had inadequately followed the doctrine to its logical conclusion: that the responsibility for sin lay with God, himself.[14] Priestley was accurate in placing himself in the same intellectual line as Edwards on the issue of necessity.[15] Priestley had written that the choices a human makes are never random and even in the case of equally sufficient causes humans are necessarily inclined to choose one over another - that inclination was called "motive" by Priestley. Edwards, too, held 'motive' to be important in his understanding of necessity. Edwards maintained that there may be much that influences human choice, but every act of the will necessarily follows the "motive."[16] Edwards and Priestley had somewhat similar views of necessity. If holding a doctrine of necessity is at all understandable in the case of Priestley, it is clearly surprising in the case of Edwards. As Conrad Wright has pointed out:

> . . . necessity was regarded [even in New England] as a doctrine not of the Calvinists, but of freethinkers; and when

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[14] Ibid., p. 513.

[15] Norman Fiering has pointed out that Edwards admitted a distinction between moral and physical causes, but the former were nonetheless causes in "as proper a sense as any causes whatsoever" in his scheme. Fiering adds: "A cause, in other words, is a determining antecedent; so once Edwards had established that choices are always governed by motives, and that motives are causes, the determinist conclusion was inescapable."

Norman Fiering, Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context (Chapel Hill, N. C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 307.

[16] Ibid.

> Edwards produced the Freedom of the Will [1754], he was classed, not with the Westminster divines, but with the Stoics, Hobbes, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Collins. Edwards himself took note of the accusation that his position was that of Hobbes, and denied that he had ever read him. Doubtless few of the Arminians had either. . .[17]

The Arminians in New England (the ancestors of Unitarianism in America) did attack the principles outlined in the treatise Edwards wrote which denied freedom of the will. Yet if religious liberals were congenial to the opinion that acts of the will had necessary moral causes, or that "man's actions are governed by moral necessity",[18] then why were the Arminians so eager to oppose Edwards?

Two of the New England Arminians had responded to Edwards' treatise on the freedom of the human will, and in their response can be seen one of the reasons for the strong Arminian opposition to the position taken by Edwards. James Dana and Samuel West both responded to Edwards' treatise many years after it first appeared. Fundamental to their response was an understanding of motive which differed sharply from Edwards' (and from Priestley's). Dana and West saw motives to be a kind of inducement rather than an actual physical cause. Wright summarized the difference between this position and that of Edwards by declaring that "The Arminians, then, thought of a motive as something external

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17 Conrad Wright, The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966; reprint ed., Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976), p. 93.

18 Ibid., p. 103.

to the mind - an object, reason, or inducement to action. Edwards conceived of it as internal - an object or inducement as viewed by the mind with favor or disfavor."[19]

A further difficulty, as Wright has clearly shown, was that Edwards was not just arguing for the necessity of the will, but he was arguing also that humans were necessarily depraved because of original sin. In other words: "This denial of the essential freedom of the will harmonizes well with Edwards' Calvinist belief in the total depravity of man and in predestination."[20]

Wright has provided a clear summary of the Arminian reaction to Edwards:

> The Arminians believed in the determination of character by environmental influences on a plastic original nature. Their position was not always clearly stated, nor was it free from contradictions . . . But if their constructive doctrine was ambiguous, their opposition to Edwards was not. They opposed the rigid determinism which attaches a man's moral character to the sin of Adam.
>
> By and large, the problem of the freedom of the will seemed less important to the Arminians than it did to Edwards. Most of the time, they appealed to experience and let it go at that . . . For however one phrased it, the Arminians were convinced that moral agents are free from any initial taint which would prevent them from responding to the monitions of conscience and the dictates of reason.[21]

The community which supported liberal theology in New

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19 Ibid., p. 108.

20 Armand A. Maurer, "Jonathan Edwards" in: The Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol.2, Paul Edwards, ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 462.

21 Wright, Beginnings of Unitarianism, pp. 113 - 4.

England could not provide fertile ground for the flourishing of a doctrine such as Priestley's. He had seen much that was commendable in Edwards' writing on the subject, but in New England, Edwards' point of view had provoked a long and hard battle.

The Doctrine of Necessity in Later Generations

Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity was not acceptable to all of his colleagues in his own day. After his death it had even less success. James Martineau, the greatest theological influence on English Unitarianism after Priestley, was aware of the enormous influence of Priestley's theology. Although he saw that influence dissipating, he went so far as to admit Priestly's work had been an influence on him personally.[22] Nonetheless, he

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22 "In a letter to Channing in 1840, after acknowledging his debt to Priestley's writings, 'to which I attribute not only my first call to the pursuit of religious philosophy, but the first personal struggles after the religious life,' he went on, to say that he had come to believe that 'his metaphysical system is incompatible with any true and operative sentiments of religion, that it is at variance with the characteristic ideas of Christianity, and will spontaneously vanish whenever our churches become really worshipping assemblies, instead of simply moral, polemical or dissenting societies'. Great changes, he said, were silently going on in the Unitarian body, which might even lead to its dissolution and re-emergence in a new form. There had been an increase of both theological doubt and devotional affection: 'there is far less belief, yet far more faith, than there was twenty years ago.'"

C. G. Golam, Jeremy Goring, H. L. Short, Roger Thomas, The English Presbyterians; From Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 256.

rejected the notion of philosophical necessity completely. According to H. L. Short:

> [Writing in 1839] Martineau explicitly rejected Priestley's favourite doctrine of philosophic necessity, which reduced God, he said, to 'the ultimate-happiness maker, by no means fastidious in his application of means, but secure of producing the end', and which stressed too much in morality the merely prudential motives.[23]

Martineau's rejection of Priestley's necessity was not unique. If one samples literature about Priestley aimed explicitly at Unitarians since Martineau's time, one will either find necessity portrayed in negative terms, or one finds almost no mention of the doctrine at all. Below are a few examples from both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1881 the Rev. H. D. Catlin wrote an article in which he tried to survey the life and works of Priestley for an American readership.[24] He mentioned necessarianism twice in his article. The first time was to note that Priestley had accepted necessarianism while at the Academy of Daventry. Catlin elaborated that this doctrine 'did not interfere with the marked personality and tireless activity of the man."[25] The second instance where necessity is encountered by the reader of this article is in a passage describing the

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23 Ibid., p. 255.

24 H. D. Catlin, "Joseph Priestley," The Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine 15 (January, 1881): 1 - 19.

25 Ibid., p. 4.

contents of one of the volumes of Priestley's collected works. Catlin wrote of his "surprise" at being reminded of Priestley's necessarian as well as his materialist views.[26] Catlin elaborated on the doctrine of materialism, but necessity is never explained, or mentioned again.

Fourteen years later, Alexander Gordon published a book in which he briefly outlined the history of English Unitarianism. To this history he added two lectures he had delivered. One was on the life and work of Richard Baxter, and the other was entitled: "Priestley as a Pioneer in Theological Science."[27] Priestley's views of matter are briefly summarized in this lecture,[28] but the doctrine of necessity is not described. In fact it is not mentioned, nor did Gordon even make an allusion to it.

A curious book appeared in England in 1906. It was a large collection of short biographies of a variety of people (predominantly English) whom the author of the book felt were Unitarians.[29] Unfortunately the name of the author is absent from the book. Nowhere in the thirteen pages devoted to the life of Priestley is any mention of necessity made. The unknown author does conclude, however, that "He was a

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26 Ibid., p. 12.

27 Alexander Gordon, Heads of English Unitarian History (London: Philip Green, 1895), pp. 102 - 134.

28 Ibid., p. 114.

29 Memorable Unitarians (London: British and Foreign Unitarian Association, 1906), pp. 116 - 128.

friend of popular education and the defender of liberty of conscience all the world over."[30]

In 1931 Anne Holt, the British scholar, wrote what is still the best general biography of Joseph Priestley.[31] An entire chapter (15 pages) was devoted to an explanation of Priestley's "metaphysics." Holt presented a concise but accurate and readable account of some of Priestley's philosophical positions. Her opinion, which is clearly unfavorable, does occasionally come to the surface. For example, in a discussion of the place of evil in philosophical necessity she wrote:

> Thus God, like the proverbial Jesuit, may inflict evil that good may come of it, conduct which would be wrong in any but an omniscient being, as he alone can be sure of the desired result. Evil, on the assumption that the universe is perfect, is hard to account for, and somehow the solution that Priestley supported, that pain and anguish were divine discipline, is unsatisfying. Misfortune does not distinguish between the deserving and undeserving, the good and bad. Priestley might dread French philosophy, but there is more humanity in the ridicule of Voltaire than in the "Whatever is, is right" of Pope or Hartley.[32]

Three years after the publication of Holt's biography, Frederick R. Griffin published a brief article on the life and work of Joseph Priestley in the Proceedings of the [American] Unitarian Historical Society. In the article,

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30 Ibid., p. 128.

31 Anne Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley (London: Oxford University Press, 1931)

32 Ibid., p. 122.

necessity is not discussed nor even mentioned.[33] Griffin summarized the nature of Priestley's theological and philosophical controversies as follows:

> In his lifetime Priestley was not a popular man although he had numerous friends and received many and conspicuous honors in recognition of his distinguished attainments. He was the object of bitter criticism because he attacked the externals of religion which is usually a hazardous thing to do.[34]

Finally, in 1972 Russell E. Richey presented an admirable attempt to show Priestley's theology in systematic terms.[35] His section 2a, "Understanding of Man" is the closest Richey ever came to describing necessity. In his description, the doctrine of necessity seems hidden in the background. With the necessary vagueness of his terminology and his attempt to explain Priestley's thought in an Arminian context, Richey succeeded in providing a description which could easily be misunderstood by anyone unfamiliar with the extent to which Priestley actually advanced his arguments for necessity.[36] A cause of possible

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[33] Frederick R. Griffin, "Joseph Priestley," Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society, vol.3, pt. 2 (1934), pp. 1 - 12.

[34] Ibid., p. 2.

[35] Russell E. Richey, "Joseph Priestley: Worship and Theology (Part 1)" Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society 15 (October, 1972): 41 - 53.
Part 2 of this article doesn't contribute further to an understanding of necessity.

[36] "Priestley offers a high appraisal of human faculties and abilities as we might expect from his emphasis on reason. God has declared his will for man in the Scriptures. Man is capable of understanding and obeying the will of God, though not entirely. . . The power to do the

confusion may arise from Richey having used primary sources which were written prior to Priestley's major formulations of the doctrine of philosophical necessity.[37]

Priestley's doctrine of necessity exhibited a remarkable lack of success in Unitarian circles. It was disputed by some of his own colleagues in his lifetime. It was dismissed by the leading figure in the next generation of British Unitarianism. In subsequent generations, it was recognized as unsatisfactory, or it was ignored entirely.

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will of God is situated in the human conscience when it has been well formed. . . It mediates between the principles of God's will, the good of others and one's own self-interest in determining choices, and it even judges after the choice original sin and human depravity. . . he argues that the functions of conscience - consent, remorse, guilt and repentance - have a meaning only for one's own sins; they cannot be activated for the sin of Adam; therefore, the sin of Adam can have no meaning for man since it does not touch his conscience."
Ibid., pp. 49 - 50.

[37] His chief sources for this section were Priestley's Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion of 1772, and his A Catechism for Children of 1767.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This concluding chapter begins by showing some connections between Priestley's thought and that of some thinkers he claimed were necessarians. There are enough similarities that one could consider "necessity" part of the "climate" of Priestley's time. Yet Priestley's formulation of the doctrine of necessity had unique elements.

The implications of these elements are explored in the second section of this chapter. In this section the discussion is then expanded to deal with the question of how Priestley might legitimately be seen as part of the Unitarian tradition despite his determinist views. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of what relevance Priestley's determinism (and its expression) may have for contemporary liberal religion.

The "Necessity" of Priestley And The "Necessity" of Other Thinkers

In his own writing, Priestley suggested that a number of thinkers held a version of a doctrine of necessity. To some extent these thinkers either influenced Priestley, or he thought they were expressing similar views to his own. There are some similarities and differences between Priestley's thought and the examples he cited. A brief comparison between Priestley and some of the other thinkers may help clarify Priestley's own doctrine.

Priestley claimed Francis Hutcheson as a necessarian, but there are some weaknesses in this claim. For Hutcheson, humans do have a God-given moral sense which is analogous to other human senses. He suggested it serves as a guide to action, but that it is not a rigid rule. Instincts do serve to determine action but instinctual behavior does not lead to merit, and so it ought not to be considered in quite the same category as the moral sense.

David Hume addressed the question of liberty versus necessity, and he declared his support for necessity. His understanding of necessity, however, can only be appreciated in the context of Hume's concept of causation.[1] Whereas Hume conceived of causes preceding effects as a succession or conjunction of objects, Priestley had a different conception which he described in these terms:

> In all these cases the circumstances

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[1] See Chapter I, above.

> preceding any change, are called the causes of that change; and since a determinate event, or effect, constantly follows certain circumstances or causes, the connexion between the cause and the effect is concluded to be invariable, and therefore necessary.
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> This chain of causes and effects cannot be broken, but by such a provision in the constitution of nature, as, that the same event shall not certainly follow the same preceding circumstances. In this case, indeed, it might be truly said, that any particular event might have been otherwise than it was, there having been no certain provision in the laws of nature of determining it to be this rather than that. But then this event, not being preceded by any circumstances that determined it to be what it was, would be an effect without a cause. For a cause cannot be defined to be anything but such previous circumstances as are constantly followed by a certain effect; the constancy of the result making us conclude, that there must be a sufficient reason in the nature of the things, why it should be produced in those circumstances.[2]

Priestley and Hume shared the understanding of "liberty" as "chance" or "randomness."

Priestley found much that he liked in the concept of necessity as Hobbes elaborated it. Priestley basically agreed with Hobbes understanding of cause and effect relationships. Both thinkers also appealed an argument based on "divine prescience." Significantly, Priestley recognized an unwillingness in Hobbes to describe God as "the author of evil." Priestley was not able to find a logical alternative to this position except to declare that

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[2] Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c. ed. J. T. Rutt, vol. 3: The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 463.

"ultimately" everything is pointing toward the good - for that is the end God has in mind.

Priestley admired Collins for the systematic way in which he presented a doctrine of necessity. There are many similarities between the system Collins developed and that which Priestley elaborated. They agreed that there can be no combination of liberty and necessity, either one or the other is present (even Richard Price agreed with this point, but to a different end). Both Collins and Priestley presented strong arguments based on an understanding of cause and effect. As with Hobbes, they supported an argument for necessity, in part, because the alternative would invalidate divine prescience as they understood it. And both Priestley and Collins maintained that reward and punishment only had effect if the doctrine of necessity were accurate. Otherwise rewards and punishments would have no effect and thus they would be meaningless.

There is a relationship (if sometimes tenuous) between Priestley and others he claimed as "necessarians." But there are also unique elements to the argument he presented. He relied more heavily on "revealed religion" than did most of the other thinkers he cited. Further, he had an elaborate understanding of the nature of matter and how this was relevant to understanding humans in the process of necssity (that understanding was based on his use of Hartley and Boscovich to fully extend natural law to the thought process). Priestley came to this question with a significant number of assumptions. An elaboration of those

assumptions will shed some light on the implications to be drawn from his doctrine.

Implications That Can Be Drawn From Priestley's Doctrine of Necessity

Jacques Barzun has pointed out that the question of free will versus necessity (or determinism) is a question that can never fully be settled. He has written:

> The battle over free will is ancient and neither side can win, because satisfactory evidence on the subject can never be found. The definition of 'free' is itself a source of disagreement. Those who say that man acts for a reason and not from a cause are told that reasons too are foregone. The thorny notion of cause and effect divides even scientists, though most prefer determinism as more convenient to work with. This state of affairs leaves belief in free will as itself something to choose or reject.[3]

Clearly, an important factor in deciding which side of the question one chooses to support, defend, or accept, depends on what assumptions one brings to the debate. Joseph Priestley brought assumptions from two distinct areas of inquiry when he entered the debate.

One group of Priestley's assumptions came from his understanding of nature, or to be more precise, his understanding of the universe and the place of the human in the universe. Priestley was convinced that all was "mere

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[3] Jacques Barzun, A Stroll With William James (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 153.

matter," and as such, subject to natural laws. His understanding of the human thought process was included in this understanding, and he was able to suggest that this process could be explained in entirely physical terms - thus subjecting it to natural law also. Through his understanding of Hartley and of Boscovich, Priestly had taken a Newtonian mechanistic world-view into the human "mind." As Coleridge once observed, " . . .the law of association [of ideas] being that to the mind, which gravitation is to matter."[4]

The second important group of assumptions Priestley brought to the debate were his interpretations of revelation, both from tradition and from scripture. Priestley accepted scripture, but he did not interpret it literally. He tried to understand it rationally. He viewed what he understood as the original form of Christianity to be valuable, but he argued that the tradition was subject to many corruptions throughout history.[5] From his understanding of scripture and "uncorrupted" Christianity, he

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[4] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria in Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge ed. by Donald Stauffers, Modern Library Editions (New York: Random House, 1951), pp. 160 - 1.

[5] "His hope, of course, was that once pure original Christianity was brought to light, those who now reject it because they mistake its corruptions for its essence would be brought to give attention to the proper evidence for it. Believers would also find their faith strengthened."
Lloyd W. Chapin, Jr, "The Theology of Joseph Priestley: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Apologetics" (Th.D. dissertation: Union Theological Seminary, 1967), p. 186.

drew many conclusions. Among those conclusions are these: God created the world with a benevolent end in mind. God is omniscient. The concept of the "soul" is neither scriptural, nor is it a part of "original" Christianity.

Many of Priestley's assumptions were on the intellectual forefront of the eighteenth century. Taken together, they point toward the conclusion that Priestley reached - determinism. Yet Priestley brought other assumptions to the debate. He could not accept that all persons were tainted with original sin.[6] He wanted to assert that humans are not inherently depraved, but rather they must be held responsible for their own actions.[7] It is

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[6] "Before I went from home [probably before he was eighteen years old] I was very desirous of being admitted a communicant in the congregation on which I had always attended, and the old minister, as well as my Aunt, were as desirous of it as myself, but the elders of the Church, who had the government of it, refused me, because, when they interrogated me on the subject of the sin of Adam, I appeared not to be quite orthodox, not thinking that all the human race (supposing them not to have any sin of their own) were liable to the wrath of God, and the pains of hell for ever, on account of that sin only; for such was the question that was put to me. Some time before, having then no doubt of the truth of the doctrine, I well remember being much distressed that I could not feel a proper repentance for the sin of Adam; taking it for granted that without this it could not be forgiven me."

Joseph Priestley, Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795, Written by Himself: with a Continuation, to the Time of His Decease, by His Son, Joseph Priestley: and Observations on His Writings (Northumberland, Pa.: John Binns, 1806), pp. 10 - 11.

[7] "In his doctrine of Philosophical Necessity he meant to deny the possibility of arbitrary caprice or of chance decisions: we act always by motive. This viewpoint, required by his general philosophical position, had for him the added value in that he saw it as the opposite of Calvinism with its Predestination. Calvinism, attributing

the presence of these assumptions which gives Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity its special character of soft determinism.

Priestley is often claimed by Unitarians to be in the liberal religious tradition.[8] Yet despite this claim, there is usually little mention made of his determinism. The failure of his doctrine to have a significant and long-lasting influence can certainly be understood when the cases of some specific individuals are examined. In those cases, it is often a matter of a difference in basic assumptions which has prevented Priestley's successors from accepting his doctrine. For example, James Martineau, the intellectual and religious leader for so many nineteenth century English Unitarians, held a fundamentally different concept of God from that of Priestley. Martineau could not accept a doctrine which held as a premise a God whom he saw as "the ultimate happiness maker." Another example of a difference of assumptions can be seen in the response of New

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everything to God's Will, made human efforts to change things impious or futile; Philosophical Necessity urged men to change circumstances so that they themselves might be formed in more perfect ways. That was how he saw it all; but in fact one aspect of his position lays as little stress on effort as did Calvinism, and encouraged submission to the motions of a universe in 'all things, even to their minutest circumstances'. . . 'always for the best of purposes'." (from the editor's introduction)

Joseph Priestley, Autobiography of Joseph Priestley: Memoirs Written by Himself; and An Account of Further Discoveries in Air ed. with intro. by Jack Lindsay (Teaneck, N. J.; Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p. 40.

8 See Chapter IV, above.

England Arminians, James Dana and Samuel West, to a doctrine of necessity. Whereas Jonathan Edwards, their opponent (as well as Joseph Priestley) held motives to be necessary and internal to humans, Dana and West both declared that motives were external inducements. Dana and West held an assumption about the nature of the human being which was different from that held by necessarians such as Edwards and Priestley.

As a religious liberal, Joseph Priestley is still often thought of in the context of Unitarianism. But just as his doctrine of necessity failed to convince important individuals (for the reasons cited above) it also failed to have a significant effect on the larger movement of Unitarianism. For that failure to be understood, Priestley's continuing relevance to that larger context must also be understood.

If little mention is made in the Unitarian tradition of Priestley's determinism (a doctrine he held to be of the highest importance), and little evidence exists of his doctrine ever having any significant influence, then why has he consistently been held in high regard by that tradition?

If one tries to examine Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity in any detail, one will also encounter three fundamental religious principles of Joseph Priestley. These principles have echoes in contemporary Unitarian Universalism, and they help to establish Priestley in the Unitarian liberal religious tradition.

The first among these three underlies Priestley's practice of subjecting the most important religious ideas to public debate in the hope that such a debate would be undertaken in a spirit of "candour." In this kind of debate, Priestley and his opponent would subject each other's beliefs to rational criticism in a fair and friendly manner. Any beliefs could be subject to such criticism.

Behind this is Priestley's principle of free inquiry. He held this principle in such high regard that he could write:

> But should free inquiry lead to the destruction of christianity itself, it ought not on that account to be discontinued. For we can only wish for the prevalence of christianity on the supposition of its being true; and if it fall before the influence of free inquiry, it can only do so in consequence of its not being true.[9]

Priestley was writing about his recognition of the importance of the search for truth combined with an appreciation for the lack of finality in the "truths" already discovered. What he expressed through the concept of "free inquiry" is not unlike the concept that twentieth century liberal theologian Henry Nelson Wieman was expressing when he wrote:

> Truth may be sought long before it becomes knowledge. And even "when it becomes knowledge," the knowledge is only an

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[9] Joseph Priestley, The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion (Birmingham: Printed by M. Swinney for J. Johnson, 1785), p. 23.

> approximation to the truth. Truth pure and perfect is an endless quest. For some it has been the passion of a lifetime.[10]

Priestley's principle of free inquiry also has an analogue in the often used contemporary phrase: "the free and disciplined search for truth."

A second religious principle of Joseph Priestley was his understanding of human sinfulness and responsibility. As has already been stated, Priestley could not accept a notion of original sin or human depravity. He wanted to affirm the responsibility of humans in making choices.[11] He wanted to affirm that humans are not inherently depraved, but are capable of much good. Conrad Wright has demonstrated[12] that this view lay at the foundation of Unitarianism in America. That the idea still has importance in a Unitarian context is demonstrated by this extract from the writings of a twentieth century Unitarian minister, Phillip Hewett. The extract that follows is from a section of a book in which he is dealing with questions of "what Unitarians believe:"

> Closely allied to [an] affirmation of life is a hopeful belief in the potentialities of human nature. This can be

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[10] Henry Nelson Wieman, The Source of Human Good (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 196.

[11] It was this very principle which Priestley was trying to keep in a balance with his other assumptions - those based on revelation and those coming from his materialist understanding of humanity.

[12] Conrad Wright, The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966; reprint ed., Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976)

> contrasted with the outlook of those forms of religion that lay heavy stress upon the depths of depravity to which human nature can sink - an outlook illustrated classically in the words of the Westminster Confession: 'we are utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil'. No very exacting survey of the current world scene is called for to verify the plausibility of such a pessimistic view. It seems to be validated by a glance at the headlines in any newspaper, and it requires more of an effort of thought to remind oneself that dramatic examples of evil behaviour are precisely the stuff of which headlines are made. Decent behaviour seems less spectacular, and is less often reported. Can it be that this is because we instinctively expect such behaviour, and therefore feel it unnecessary to call attention to it? We would hardly do that if we believed wholeheartedly in human depravity.[13]

Related to the foregoing is Priestley's third religious principle. Joseph Priestley denied a duality of mind and spirit. He denied this both from the perspective of nature ("humans are only matter") and from the perspective of revelation ("'soul' is an unscriptural concept and a corruption of Christianity"). Thus he was denying that humans are "pure spirit" held in an evil, material body. He was not concerned about escaping human nature, or abandoning it as an evil, but he was affirming its value. This kind of affirmation has long been an element of liberal religion. John White Chadwick, writing in 1894, expressed it in these terms:

> Many before Channing had asserted the dignity of human nature, notably one William

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[13] Phillip Hewett, The Unitarian Way (Toronto: Canadian Unitarian Council, 1985), p. 85 - 6.

> Shakspere [sic], in a passage which I need not quote, beginning, "What a piece of work is man!" But it was reserved for Channing to assert this dignity with such amplitude and consistency as had not been known before. . .
>
> The dignity of human nature! No other doctrine has been so central to our faith and work as this. It enters into all our other doctrines, leavening the lumpishness of what was dullest once, raising the meanest to some better height, compelling new interpretations, broader and truer than the old.[14]

The three religious principles of Joseph Priestley outlined above, clearly place him in a liberal religious, Unitarian tradition. Yet he held a determinist point of view, and the evidence does not indicate that such a point of view has ever had a significant positive influence on Unitarianism. Priestley was trying to balance his assumptions. He was trying to hold to all of them without admitting to contradictions within his system. His assumptions about the materiality of humans, his assumptions from his interpretation of revelation, and his "Arminian" assumptions (or principles) came together in his doctrine of philosophical necessity. These assumptions together formed his soft determinism.

If Barzun is correct and the "battle" between free will and determinism can never really be won by either side, then to a certain extent, the side one chooses can depend on the weight one gives to the various assumptions one brings to the debate. Why did Joseph Priestley, a religious liberal,

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[14] John White Chadwick, Old and New Unitarian Belief (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1894), p. 40 - 1.

try to balance his assumptions in a doctrine of soft determinism, whereas many other religious liberals have been inclined away from determinism and toward freedom? Certainly one reason must be that many religious liberals have placed great weight on the assumption that humans are not inherently evil and are thus responsible for the choices they make. There is a functional value for religious liberals in granting weight to this assumption. It means that human action can have actual meaning. The alternative, as Richard Price pointed out, was that "there can be no moral capacities." This is a charge made of Priestley's system to which he could not adequately respond. For as Jack Lindsay has indicated, Priestley's system was not entirely consistent - he did seem to be making contradictory statements.[15]

Priestley tried harmonizing, or balancing his assumptions in a soft determinism. As a religious liberal, he surely must have given great weight to his Arminian assumptions. The additional element in the equation which made the reasons for supporting a kind of determinism more compelling, and thus forcing Priestley into constructing his balance between determinism and responsibility, was the effect a necessarian viewpoint actually had on his life.

In a critique entitled "The Doctrine of Man in Liberal Theology", John Hayward has written:

> The Unitarian church historian Sidney

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[15] See note 7, above.

> Mead observes that even the Christian sources of religious liberalism are to be sought at the humanist end of the religious spectrum, in Erasmus rather than the classic reformers, in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and in Romanticism and Transcendentalism in the nineteenth century. "The common element in this tradition," he says, "is the emphasis on man - his initiative and responsibility in the determination of his destiny - his 'destiny' usually being conceived as fulfillment somehow in history"[16]

Hayward continues:

> . . . the liberal, being preoccupied with the active serach for remedies, is at a loss in the face of irremediable tragedy. His whole inclination is to solve problems rather than bear them, to do rather than be. He is not spiritually disciplined to derive benefit, wisdom, even healing from situations in which there is precisely nothing to be done save to endure. He entertains the hope that there is always something to be done, that no tragedy has ultimate force . . . The tragic event, if it is viewed at all, is viewed negatively, not as the opportunity for some redemptive opening of heart and mind, but as a dreadful hiatus to be ignored in theory and to be transcended, as soon as possible, by remedial action. One suspects that this doctrine of man depends for its meaning and efficacy on faith in an unfailing human power to avoid or transcend every potentially tragic event by conscious planning and action.[17]

That critique could not be applied to the "doctrine of man" maintained by Joseph Priestley. Necessity not only provided for Priestley the feeling of "being at one" with

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16 John Hayward, "The Doctrine of Man in Liberal Theology" in:
James Luther Adams and Seward Hiltner, eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), pp. 131 - 2

17 Ibid., p. 134.

"the will of God," but it provided a real way for him to understand and make use of tragedy and suffering. Necessity contained for him a doctrine of evil and a theodicy. The efficacy of this doctrine has been provided by his own testimony. Despite personal tribulations, Priestley seems to have been able to take comfort in believing "the hand of God is in everything." Philosphical necessity was not only the result of a rational argument, but it served Joseph Priestley in his life as well.

Finally, there are three reasons why an understanding of Joseph Priestley's doctrine of philosophical necessity is important for religious liberals today.

First of all, the question of determinism versus free will may be an old question, and it is possible that it is a question that can never fully be resolved. Yet also, it is a question that has not gone away. Whether for metaphysical, functional, or pragmatic reason, people often take one side or the other. It is generally (although not always) part of the liberal religious tradition to be inclined toward freedom. Priestley shows, however, that it is possible for someone who can legitimately be considered a religious liberal to hold a determinist point of view. Understanding Priestley's reasons for choosing a kind of determinism (and the attempt he made to harmonize it with an Arminian concept of humanity), also points toward why religious liberals have tended toward favoring free will. That can be found in the emphasis given to human responsibility for human actions.

Secondly, Priestley's example can serve as a reminder that the Unitarian tradition has not always provided a adequate theological understanding of suffering and evil. Priestley's response to evil may not be satisfactory for contemporary liberals, but he did construct what was, for him, an efficacious response. Clearly then, this is not a closed issue. Priestley can serve to remind religious liberals of work that yet needs to be done.

Third, an understanding of Priestley's doctrine of necessity and the public manner in which he developed and explored it is also important for contemporary religious liberals. If abstract phrases such as "free inquiry" or "free and disciplined search for truth" are to have a concrete meaning, that meaning could easily be found in the example of "candour" Priestley demonstrated. "Candour" is the reification of the truth Price alluded to when he wrote:

> [It is] a truth, which, could it be stamped on every human mind, would exterminate all bigotry and persecution; I mean the truth, that worth of character, and true integrity, and consequently God's acceptance, are not necessarily connected with any particular set of opinions.[18]

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[18] Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, The Theological and Miscellaneous Works, &c. of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S. &c., ed. J. T. Rutt, vol. 4: A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence Between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley, to Which are Added, by Dr. Priestley, an Introduction (Hackney, England: George Smallfield, n.d.), p. 17.

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