

ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЙ СЕМИНАР СЕКТОРА ЭТИКИ

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«Материя и чувствительность: Хартли, Пристли и радикальная редукция морального чувства (или о том, как мораль стали воспринимать в качестве предмета переживаний) Matter and sensibility: Hartley, Priestley and the radical reduction of the moral sense (Or, how morality became a matter of feeling

Summary

This paper describes an important part of the background to the modern English-language focus on utilitarian argument in ethics. I do not once again describe the pleasure-pain theory of motivation and the utilitarian notion of the good, as the greatest happiness of the greatest number, the empirical theory of human nature and the normative principle of classical utilitarianism. Nor do I offer rational justification or criticism of utilitarian argument. My purposes are different. I show how, in eighteenth-century Britain, Christian faith in the providential design of the world led David Hartley and then Joseph Priestley to go beyond argument for the existence of a moral sense to view moral action as the expression of feelings analysable into associations of sensory experience. This step in turn supported two important shifts, which I call a radical reduction, in philosophical culture. By 'radical reduction', I mean the simplification of a complex phenomenon into simpler and supposedly fundamental elements. The step, first, established the basis for the calculus of judgment about right and wrong courses of action which informed utilitarian ethical, economic and social theory. This has been influential from the time of Jeremy Bentham to the present. Second, the step focused attention on the embodied character of human actions, linking moral feeling and bodily sensibility. This ensured a large public audience – a public culture – for ways of thought linking the notion of the good to the pleasures and pains of embodied people.

Many people, as different as Napoleon, Nietzsche and members of this section of ethics have mocked the British as a nation of shopkeepers for upholding cost-benefit calculus in their moral as in their economic transactions. I am not going to debate the rational foundations of ethical principles: I have nothing new to say. Rather, I want to enlarge understanding of the moral culture which has played, and still does play, so large a part in English-language philosophy, and which contributes to a stereotypical image of the British. I think the decisive period for the creation of a public culture of utilitarian argument was the second half of the eighteenth century. Moral philosophers developed the logic of the argument that morality is a matter of feeling with special clarity. The logic involved simplification – 'radical reduction'. Knowledge of this work may help assess the strengths and weaknesses of utility as a moral concept.

The moral theory I discuss developed in a framework of what Charles Taylor called 'providential Deism'. For Taylor, this development is a 'turning point' in the establishment of 'a secular age', his description of modern western culture. Deists separated the revealed from the

rational elements of Christian tradition, and, when they accepted that there has been revelation (for example, in the text of the Bible) demanded that revelation conform to reason. They held that God's purposes for his creation are built into the laws, knowable to reason, of the way nature, physical and human nature alike, work. They were confident – remarkably confident – that the natural law-like operations of the human mind and the natural forms of conduct or behaviour, will, overall, bring humanity closer to the divine ideal. It is a standard joke that Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and other exponents of historical providence believed that the essential plot of history is the story of how savage man became a Scotsman. I want to discuss the providentialism in the thought of two Englishmen, David Hartley and Joseph Priestley. Their writings were influential in Britain and, in Priestley's case, took radical political form, to the extent that an angry crowd, nationalist opponents of revolutionary events in France, burned his house. Priestley is of course best known as a natural philosopher, a pioneer experimenter on electricity and the chemistry of gases; but I shall not discuss this side of his activities. Hartley wrote one large book, *Observations on Man, His Frame, Duties and Expectations* (1749). Priestley, by contrast, was an ardent polemicist, writing and teaching on all manner of subjects, repeatedly in bitter argument with other religious and (natural and moral) philosophical men of letters. Both Hartley and Priestley believed that knowledge of human nature – the kind of knowledge pioneered by Locke – showed God's plan for the progressive achievement of human happiness. Both believed in the inevitability of the realisation of God's design. Hartley thought that people are necessarily led to pursue the highest pleasure, the pleasure which, he claimed, comes from the contemplation of God. Priestley had millennial expectations, that is, he believed that the coming of the Kingdom of God was imminent. (He thought the American and French revolutions confirmed this, and towards the end of his life he emigrated to Pennsylvania where he rationally analysed biblical prophecies and awaited the millennium.) In spite of the firmly religious frameworks of their ways of thought, modern interpreters, like Taylor, describe Hartley and Priestley as contributing historically to secular philosophy. This is because Hartley and Priestley influentially contributed to a theory of moral reasoning that made morality a consequence of material nature, not of spirit or of revelation.

The two men were linked by ideas and also because, in 1775, Priestley published an abridged edition of Hartley's *Observations of Man*. To this he gave the title, *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principles of the Association of Ideas*. Hartley's original book was large and wordy, unattractive to read, and Priestly thought it would have more influence if made more accessible. Priestly thought Hartley of decisive importance. Indeed, he described Hartley's book as 'without exception, the most valuable production of the mind of man' (quoted Harris, 156). This will now raise eyebrows. What Priestley found so important in Hartley was already, in principle, to be found in Locke, but Hartley substantially enlarged on two dimensions. First, he described systematically the supposed manner in which sensations, including the sensations or feelings of pleasure and pain, become linked and result in the motivation of actions. Using social metaphor, he called the links that form between mental elements 'associations'. Given the regular, or law-like, association of particular sensations with feelings of pleasure and pain, it appeared possible to have knowledge of the causes of conduct, and indeed to predict conduct. Secondly, Hartley held that the links between sensory experience and the feelings of pleasure and pain lead people to work for their own happiness. As a matter of fact, according to God's design, Hartley argued, the greatest happiness comes from contemplating the nature of God and acting according to his commands, and hence people are necessarily led toward the realisation of goodness. 'Since God is the source of all good and consequently ... associated with all our Pleasures, it seems to follow ... that the idea of

God ... must, at last, take place of, and absorb all other ideas' (Observations, I, 114). He spelt out the mechanism of providence in human nature. According to Hartley, both the association of ideas and our response to them, leading to goodness, 'results from the Frame of our Natures' (Observations, I, viii). Showing this, in his terms, he treated natural and moral philosophy as a unified field.

When Priestly republished Hartley's book, and shortened it to make it more appealing to readers, he cut two substantial dimensions. The first dimension he cut some neuroscientists now sometimes celebrate as pioneering knowledge of mental events as functions of nervous processes. Hartley proposed an account of nervous vibrations in parallel with mental events. He took the notion that the nerves are conductors of fine vibrations from speculative queries (Queries 12-16) Newton had added to his book on Opticks, where Newton had suggested the existence of subtle fluids. Priestley cut out all this out of Hartley, as a distraction from the main arguments about association. Besides, Priestley had his own theory of matter which made Hartley's speculation unnecessary. The second dimension Priestley cut described the almost mystical, religious pleasures to be had from human thought and conduct moving ever closer to God. Cutting this, Priestly made Hartley's account of conduct in pursuit of what is good appear much more secular than it was.

The pleasure-pain theory of motivation, presented by Hobbes and Locke and elaborated by Hartley (among other writers, like Mandeville), was the intellectual foundation of British utilitarianism in moral, economic, social and political thought. This is well known at least since the book of the French historian, Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (in French, 1928). Hartley's association psychology (though Hartley never referred to 'psychology') was formalised by Bentham's disciple, James Mill, and then influentially re-interpreted by Mill's son, John Stuart Mill and his followers in the nineteenth century. Jeremy Bentham, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, and then numerous later economic and social scientists and philosophers, judged it possible to assign pleasures and pains numerical measures and thus effect a calculus for the assessment of actions for the individual and common good. Hartley's account of the association of ideas and feelings is thus the historic root of belief that moral action is calculable.

Both Hartley and Priestley were uncompromising necessitarians. Priestly engaged in polemics on this issue, especially in opposition to the writers of the Scottish 'common-sense' school. Hartley and Priestley held what analytic philosophers would now recognise as a type of compatibilist position: freedom is freedom from restraint not the exercise of an independent faculty called free will; all actions are motivated, and free actions are those in which the whole person is able to take part in the determination of which motives to support. Combined with providentialist faith, that is, belief in God's design of human nature to pursue divine purposes, necessitarianism was a super-optimistic philosophy. Created nature guarantees moral order. For Priestley, this had radical democratic implications. Whereas, as Priestley understood it, the British state invested moral power in the special institution of the Anglican Church, he located moral power in universally distributed human nature. Priestley went further, and he stated that there was a link between conservative conceptions of morality and dualistic metaphysics, separating spirit and matter, and monistic metaphysics, identifying spirit and matter. Let me provide a little bit more of the detail of this as it links up with the study I have in progress on the sense of movement.

Hartley's analysis of mind into sensations, understood as fundamental units of analysis, followed Locke. Hartley allowed that nervous vibrations originating from light falling on the eye might have more strength than vibrations originating in organs of touch, but he nevertheless argued that touch is the more fundamental sense. It is, he wrote, the experience of pressure, caused by

resistance to touch, which gives rise to knowledge of the essential properties of matter, its vis inertia and extended, ponderable and impenetrable qualities. Sight, Hartley judged, is not so reliable a source of knowledge. Like Dr Johnson, who famously refuted Berkeley's idealism by kicking a stone, Hartley attributed knowledge of reality to touch: 'we call the Touch the Reality, Light the Representative' (Observations, I, 138). Subsequently, Priestley too emphasised that 'resistance' is that 'on which alone our opinion concerning the solidity or impenetrability of matter is founded' (Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, 4).

Priestley was an avowed materialist – in the service of rational Christian faith, as he understood it. His view of matter, however, was distinctive. We know material reality, he and others accepted, because its apparently impenetrable and ponderable qualities (weight) cause it to resist our actions. But Priestley then went on to say that all that we know of resistance is that it is a power, a repulsive force. As, he argued, following Newton's Rules of Philosophizing, we should not multiply causes, we should accept that matter is a power, not solid stuff as commonly understood. Familiar with Roger Joseph Boscovich's theory of natural philosophy (first published in 1758), Priestley represented matter as centres of attractive and repulsive forces, not impenetrable solid substance. Thus, Priestley's 'materialism' presupposed an ontology of 'active powers' rather than of 'dead' matter. This allowed him to treat human reason and feeling as forms taken by the active powers of matter: there is no distinct mind or soul. In Priestley's hands, this was a Christian vision; indeed, he envisaged the final fulfilment of God's purposes, the coming of the Kingdom of God, as involving the resurrection of the whole, bodily person.

Priestley elaborated these arguments in his *Disquisitions Concerning Matter and Spirit* (1777), published shortly after his edition of Hartley. He provided a survey of philosophical writers across the ages, rejected all forms of soul-body dualism and emphasised the material constitution of human nature. He intended to purify Christian belief through reason, not criticise it. As a Unitarian, he believed in the unity of God; Christ, he held, was wholly human, though central to God's design or providence, a model for humanity to follow. He tirelessly reasoned with the opponents of these views. He combated 'common-sense' philosophers, like Thomas Reid and James Beattie, who attributed innate knowledge of moral good to individuals, and he combated theorists of the moral sense, like Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, who attributed moral actions to a faculty or instinct, not to particular pleasures and pains. The participants on all sides of these debates in Britain – with the very noteworthy exception of Hume – were in some sense Christian. But, as Charles Taylor has argued, we can fairly see in Hartley's and Priestley's arguments a transition to describing human nature in material terms, and this opened the way to the kind of radical political materialism upheld by some supporters of the American and French revolutions and which became much more widespread in the nineteenth century. Political radicals, similarly to Priestley, found in human nature the guarantee of human progress, but they detached this guarantee from its Christian (and also Stoic) roots.

Briefly, I note that one of Priestley's associates was the doctor and poet, Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather. Like Priestley, Erasmus Darwin was a member of the politically radical and industrially innovative circle known as the Lunar Society of Birmingham. This circle held informal discussions between the mid-1770s and the early 1790s. Erasmus Darwin also adopted a kind of providentialist materialism. In his case, he built a physiological account of human nature, like animal nature, out of 'sensitive' fibres, which, Darwin argued, through responsiveness to conditions, shape organic form and knowledge alike. His poetry didactically 'associated' moral and rational truths with pleasure in diction and imagery; that is, he sought to teach by associating

knowledge with sensuous pleasure. This leads me to say something about the British culture of 'sensibility'. This culture made moral argument understanding good and bad in terms of pleasures and pains very attractive to many readers.

It was the US literary scholar Northrop Frye who introduced the expression 'the age of sensibility' to describe the literature and poetry of polite society in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. He fitted this age, in literary terms, between 'the Augustan Age' and 'the Romantic Age'. The description characterises novels and poems which made the plot or imagery turn upon the feelings, the passional subjectivity, of individuals. The feelings were understood to be embodied, a kind of bodily sensibility to pleasures and pains in all their rich colours and qualities. (By contrast, Romantic writers treated passion as an active, creative force of spirit.) The argument derived from literary scholars is that at the time Hartley and Priestley were writing, imaginative literature was also making materially embodied feeling the motivating factor, or driving force, in social relations. Importantly, literature provided resources which the public could draw on in understanding embodied feeling as the source of good and bad actions. The literature of sensibility, like philosophical writings, described pleasures and pains as the natural motivating forces in human nature, and it also made moral judgment a matter of balancing the pleasures and pains of different motives. A morally admirable person was a person who, by strength of character, was able to conduct herself or himself in a way which took full account of the long-term consequences, for pain and pleasure, of acting according what polite society, or religious belief, accepted virtue to be. Literature did not reason about the different positions of Hartley, Priestley and the moral sense theorists. But it did encourage recognition of the embodied nature of pleasures and pains and utilitarian assessment of their consequences.

I give one impressive example. This is Samuel Richardson's novel, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, published in 1747-8, and which became a European-wide sensation (note this use of the word 'sensation'!). You will not have read the novel, I guess, because it is longer in length than *War and Peace*. It is written entirely in epistolary form. It is astonishingly gripping because of the way the author plays on the conflict between the heroine's natural virtue of character and the conditions of her life – the material greed of her family and the sensual desire of the man who ruthlessly pursues her. She is placed under severe contradictory demands, so much so that the only outcome that preserves her purity is her death. She is, naturally, also beautiful, and it is taken for granted that outward form reflects inward quality – that virtue is embodied. The heroine's – Clarissa's – feelings constantly vibrate and palpitate, tremble responsively to what is going on, and so do the reader's. All the evidence points to the fact that readers shared these vibrations, and novel and audience thereby together shaped a culture of sensibility. As a result, moral action appeared to be a question of embodied feeling.

It is relevant to point out that eighteenth-century English medical, scientific and literary writers increasingly presented the language of sensibility as a language of the nerves. Just as Hartley presented a systematic account of events in the soul, or mind, occurring in parallel with nervous vibrations, literary writers developed a rich language to describe feeling as nervous events. They represented feeling, including moral feeling, as embodied in nerves, and language developed to characterise that embodiment. Thus, writers began to refer to a nervous disposition, a fit of nerves, delicate nerves, and so on, re-describing judgements about character as descriptions of supposed states of bodily nerves. There was a shift, notably evident in medical writings, away from Hippocratic theory and reference to the balance of humours to reference to the state of nerves. There was a shift, as historians of medicine say, from fluidist to solidist theories of health and

illness. In British literature, this is especially visible in the writings of successive professors in the influential Edinburgh medical school. In this context, for instance, William Cullen introduced the term 'neurosis'.

I conclude. I have not re-described the pleasure-pain theory of motivation and the utilitarian notion of the good, as the greatest happiness of the greatest number, for which it provided the empirical foundation. Nor, certainly, have I offered rational justification or criticism of such a theory. My purposes are different. I have shown how, in Britain, faith in the providential design of the world led Hartley and then Priestley to go beyond the argument for a moral sense to a view of moral action as the expression of feelings analysable into associations of sensory experience. This step then supported two important shifts in philosophical culture. First, it established the basis for the calculus of judgment about right courses of action which informed utilitarian ethical, economic and social theory. Second, it focused attention on the embodied character of human actions, linking moral feeling and sensibility. This ensured a large public audience – a public culture – for linking the notion of the good to pleasures and pains. Morality became a matter of feeling.

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