Happiness and Religion:
Joseph Priestley's Theological Utilitarianism

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Introduction

The paper mainly aims to elucidate Joseph Priestley's utilitarianism as the theological utilitarianism which differs from Jeremy Bentham's secular utilitarianism. According to Crimmins [1983], The theological utilitarianism means "that the religious aspect is clearly the trait that dominates utilitarian ethics in England before Bentham" (p.524) Though Crimmins does not refer to Priestley, I will demonstrate that Priestley also can be included in the line of the theological utilitarianism.

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) is known as the first to discover the nature of oxygen, together with a number of other core gases, the first to

identify carbon dioxide and invent soda water and carbonated drinks, and the first to demonstrate some of the basic processes of photosynthesis. Therefore, he is primarily regarded as a scientist today because he had revolutionized experimental chemistry. But he was far more multifaceted beyond a scientist. He was a productive writer, publishing many works on grammar, rhetoric, history and political and economic theory. He was a theologian, a philosopher, an educationalist, a historian as well as a scientist. He had published more than 200 books, pamphlets, sermons and essays before he passed away in 1804[1]. In this paper I will concentrate on the theological and philosophical aspects of his massive works.

Joseph Priestley's two features

Priestley is known as a Lockean Radical together with Richard Price (1723-1791). Lockean Radicals are generally construed as those who inherit many ideas from John Locke (1632-1704) and apply them to their own societies. According to Dickinson [1977], in the eighteenth century "radicals absorbed the political theories of John Locke, Algernon Sidney, James Tyrrell and other Whig propagandists of the late seventeenth century, but interpreted them in a straightforward, literal fashion." Locke's political and social thought are based on the theory of natural right, demonstrating that a government should be constructed by a contract among people and that people's property should be guaranteed as a reward for their labour

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[1] On more full studies about Priestley's career, see Rivers and Wykes (ed.)[2008].

(Dickinson[1977], p.198-9). In *Essay on First Principles* (1768), Priestley declares to succeed and develop Locke's political and social thought; "I had placed the foundation of those most valuable interests of mankind on a broader and firmer basis, in consequence of my availing myself of a more accurate and extensive system of morals and policy, than was adopted by Mr. Locke, and others who formerly wrote upon this subject." (Priestley [1768], p.3)

On the other hand, Priestley is also known as a person from whom Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) adopts the phrase 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' and its philosophy. However, Bentham himself later realizes that this phrase, in fact, was originally created and employed by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) or Cesane Bonesana Beccaria (1738-1794); as shown by "By an early pamphlet of Priestley's, the date of which has fled from me recollection, light was added to the warmth. In the phrase, 'the greatest happiness of the greatest member,' I then saw delineated, for the first time, a plain as well as a true standard for whatever is right or wrong, useful, useless, or mischievous in human conduct, whether in the field of morals or of politics[2]." (Bentham [1843], p.79) Without noticing Bentham's misunderstanding, some scholars claim that Priestley and William Paley (1743-1850) are predecessors of Bentham's utilitarianism. As Joseph A. Schumpeter (1883-1950), for example, states; "The essential of the utilitarian system had, …, been presented before in the *Principles of Morals and Political Philosophy* (1785) by William Paley, and some of them in the

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[2] Lately Bentham added; "Priestley was the First (unless it was Beccaria) who taught my lips to pronounce this search truth: -- That the greatest happiness of the greatest member is the foundation of morals and legislation"(p.142)

Essay on the First Principles of Government (1768) by Joseph Priestley."(Schumpeter [1954], p.131)[3]

As stated above, Priestley's political and social thought has two features, i.e. Locke's political and social thought (especially, the natural right theory [4]) and utilitarianism. Chuhei Sugiyama [1974] criticizes Priestley in that the theory of natural law or natural right coexists with utilitarianism pursuing social utility without providing valid and convincing explanations (p. 70). Also Isaac Kramnick [1990] says, "Priestley's liberalism, ..., had two dimensions.... He was committed to a natural rights liberalism on the one hand and to utilitarian liberalism on the other. Priestley was a bridge between two variants of liberalism." (p.96-97) In the earlier studies including Schumpeter, however, the difference between Bentham and Priestley is not fully made clear.

In what fellows I will show that Priestley's utilitarianism differs from that of Bentham. It is extremely important to recognize that Bentham rejects the theological ethics Priestley adheres to. Utilitarianism is divided into two types, theological and secular, depending on whether or not there are religious elements. Priestley's utilitarianism is referred to as theological utilitarianism, whereas Bentham's is viewed as secular utilitarianism. Crimmins notes, 'there was a distinctive thread of utilitarian ethics which is religious in character and can be set apart from the more diffuse

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[3] According to Nagai [2001], both Myrdal, Karl Gunnar (1898-1987) and Schumpeter "fully recognize Bentham severely criticizes the thought of natural law, but they believe utilitarianism evolves from the thought of natural law." (p.52-53)

[4] Tapper [1996], however, says; "Priestley was not a natural-rights theorist, at least not adefender of natural rights." (p. 272) As will show later, I take a contrary position on Tapper's proposal.

development of the secular version of the doctrine.' (Crimmins [1983], p.524)

Bentham's secular utilitarianism

As I mentioned above, Bentham mistakenly assumes that the phrase "the greatest happiness of the greatest member" was written in Priestley's *Essays*. Priestley, in fact, uses the expression similar to but different from "the greatest happiness of the greatest member"; "[T]he good and happiness of members, that is the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined." (Priestley [1768], p.14)

However, Bentham's concept of happiness greatly differs from that of Priestley. We have to pay careful attention to the difference. It is because the concept of happiness is important in the history of utilitarianism. Mulgan notes "perhaps the most important question dividing utilitarians is the definition of happiness or "well-being" or "utility" or "whatever makes life worth living." (Mulgan [2007], p.3)

Bentham published *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals And Legislation* in1789, in which Bentham's view of happiness is well expressed well. Bentham regards happiness as "benefit, advantage, pleasure, good" and unhappiness as "the happening of mischief, pain, evil" and states "if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual." However, "The interest of the community" is "the sum of the

interests of the several members who compose it [community]" because "[t]he community is a fictitious *body.*" (Bentham [1789], ch.1 §2-3) Therefore Bentham thinks happiness is achieved by each individual.

Bentham, as known well, also defines happiness as the maximum of pleasures or the minimum of pains; "thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains." (Bentham [1789], ch.1 §5) According to Bentham, happiness is measured by comparing pleasures with pains.

However, if people leave "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" to individual and selfish conduct, it will happen only by chance. So Bentham claims that the role of a legislator is extremely important and states "the happiness of the individuals, of whom a community is composed, that is their pleasures and their security, is the end and the sole end which the legislator ought to have in view" (Bentham [1789], ch.3 §1) Bentham also thinks that "the object of" the principle of utility or the theory of greatest happiness "is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law." (Bentham [1789], ch.1 §1) People can accomplish "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" by making artificial laws (especially penal laws) and thus creating a harmonious society.

Bentham's utilitarianism does not have religious elements at all. Legislators must not be dependent on religion. Bentham severely blames the Established Church being connected with state for causing ethical corruptions and decadence and obstructing progress and reform. It is also impossible for Bentham to defend natural religion that supposes the

6

existence of God. Bentham does not believe that God exists.

Bentham regards happiness as secular and replaces religious principles with secular ones. The purpose of Bentham's utilitarianism is to calculate pleasures and pains and work out moral order in this world[5].

Priestley's theological utilitarianism

What is theological utilitarianism? The term theological utilitarianism can be defined as follows. The idea of theological utilitarianism ultimately pursues 'perfection,' that is, to approximate the position of God. Theological utilitarianism is based on the idea that happiness can be achieved by following natural law and the command of God, and it believe that human beings are one of the creatures created by God. However, human beings cannot exist independently separated from society. Accordingly, human beings are regarded as the existence designed by God and led by the light of nature in order to achieve 'perfection' in society. Natural law is looked upon as a necessary canon for maintaining social order. In other words, when human beings follow natural law led by God, they can obtain happiness in this world.

Theological utilitarianism, underlying the concepts held by the eighteenth century thinkers, suggests that human conduct to promote happiness is good while the opposite conduct is evil. It refers to the idea that the happiness-promoting conduct per se is to follow the providence and

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[5] Also see Crimmins [1990].

will of God and thereby obtaining a lot of happiness.   That is, theological utilitarianism stems from the idea where happiness is closely connected with religious belief.   One of the key issues in theological utilitarianism is how to achieve "the greatest happiness of the greatest member."   The most important characteristics of theological utilitarianism is that happiness should be viewed not only from the standpoint of this world but also from the standpoint of the next world.

Priestley defines "social principles" as "a disposition to love, and to do kind offices to our fellow-creatures." (Priestley [1772-1774], p.43) The social principles lead people to two principles of conduct; "one of which is obedience to the will of God, and the other a regard to own real happiness." (Ibid, p.25) But people must not pursue happiness selfishly and ignore happiness of others, because the purpose of God creating mankind is to make them happy. God "must, consequently, prefer the happiness of the whole to that of any individuals, it cannot be his pleasure, that we should consult our own interest, at the expense of that of others. Considering ourselves, therefore, not as separate individuals, but as members of society." (Ibid, p.26-27) Priestley thinks that two principles of conduct cannot clash and thus can achieve social happiness since they are created by God.

Priestley recognizes the universe to be a harmonious structure managed by the benevolent providence of God. The structure has moral order created by God. According to him, therefore, this world is ruled by the natural and mechanical moral laws. These laws are created by benevolent God to promote the happiness of all creatures. People have to employ reason

to recognize the laws, whereby they can get close to the state of happiness. Priestley asserts "a greater happiness can exist in a greater number, than in a smaller." (Ibid, p.18) Thus, Priestley's concept of happiness itself rests on religious elements which Bentham gives up.

Priestley clearly distinguishes happiness in this world from happiness in the future. According to him, the greatest happiness in this world is to pursue charity and the love of God. That is, Priestley defines it as the supreme practice of benevolence. Priestley identifies happiness with "the most solid and lasting happiness" (Priestley [1787], p.121) or "a state of the most complete happiness." (Ibid, p.134-135) "This doctrine abounds with the noblest practical uses, and points out directly the great rule of life and source of happiness." (Ibid, p.140)

In Priestley's thought, happiness that people can obtain in the future is 1) the condition of rest released from hardship, 2) the unlimited and absolute happiness without hunger and thirst, and 3) the condition of glory celebrated by God. Priestley's understanding of happiness comes from the Bible. Only the person who obtains the rewards for virtue through right conduct can go to Heaven and enjoy happiness in the future. On the other hand, a person who has done foul deeds is punished and sent to Hell. Therefore, she or he is not entitled to enjoy happiness. Priestley also understands that virtue arising from right conduct not only leads to happiness in this world but also carries over in the future. Happiness in this world can be seen by reason and observation whereas happiness in the future can be recognized from the Bible. That is, people can recognize happiness by exercising reason given by God and understanding natural

law and thus can approach the condition of happiness. Differentiating happiness in this world from happiness in the future, Priestley is able to consider how people enjoy happiness in this world while he is foreseeing happiness in the future.

Priestley does not touch upon the problem of inequality caused by people's liberal conduct. He, indeed, admits the system of rank. (ex. Priestley[1772-1774], p.18) Associating happiness in this world with inequalities, Priestley's idea gradually inclines to the theory which justifies the enjoyment of wealth accumulated by manufactures.

The difference between Priestley's utilitarian system and that of Bentham is similar to the difference between Hutcheson's utilitarianism and that of Bentham. I would like to examine the Hutcheson's idea of natural feeling led by the divine providence. Hutcheson has utilitarian principles as a base of his thought. He thinks it is not only right and but also our duties to pursue happiness, whereby we are able to be blessed by God and promote common good. The characteristics of virtue, i.e. the benevolent feeling, in Hutcheson's thought is approved by God. Hutcheson notes in *System of Moral Philosophy*; "In other animal-kinds each one has instincts toward its proper action, and has the highest enjoyment in following them, even with toil and some pain. Can we suppose mankind void of such principles?" (Hutcheson [1755], p.58)

Hutcheson's answer, of course, is that such principles apply to human beings. Human beings have "a natural and immediate determination to approve certain affections, and actions consequent upon them; or a natural sense of immediate excellence in them." (*ibid.*) The

"natural sense" promotes social goods and approves beneficial behavior for society. According to Hutcheson, the natural law is identified through such behaviors. "Precepts of the law of nature… are deemed immutable and eternal, because some rules, or rather the dispositions which give origin to them, and in which they are founded, must always tend to the general good, and the contrary to the general detriment, in such a system of creatures as we are." (*Ibid*, 273)

Thus, Hutcheson's utilitarianism is quite similar to that of Priestley. Their utilitarianism presupposes the existence of moral order provided by God though Bentham gives it up. In other words, they construct social order while keeping religious elements.

Priestley and Hartley

Such Priestley's theological ideas are based on David Hartley's(1705-1757) associationism in *Observations on Man*. According to Hartley, ideas and attitudes are formed in human mind through the process of association. We tend to know more complicated ideas and feelings in our own life by combining senses. Through the progress of human nature, "we move by a natural progress via imagination, ambition, and self-interest up to the supreme pleasures of sympathy, 'theopathy' (the love of God), and the moral sense." (Allen [1999], p.8. ch.8 and 9, Canovan, p.441) Hartley remarks "some degree of spirituality is the necessary consequence of passing through life" (Hartley, p.82), which implies "our ultimate happiness appears to be

of a spiritual not corporeal nature." (Hartley, p.84) Hartley insists that happiness is achieved by spiritual pleasure.

Priestley learns from Hartley "each individual human being finds his greatest happiness in a condition of moral and intellectual health that is prescribed by nature and God." (Canovan [1984], p.443) Priestley emphasizes the importance of the subjective and autonomic conduct by adding the belief that human beings as a whole are advancing towards happier and perfect condition. (ex. Priestley[1791], p466) Priestley, modifying Hartley's ideas, completes his utilitarianism. Priestley regards knowledge as a motor to advance towards happier and perfect condition. Concerning knowledge and education, Priestley says "a man … who has been tolerably well educated, in an improved Christian country, is a being possessed of much greater power, to be, and to make happy, than a person of the same age, in the same, or any other country, some centuries ago," and goes on, "knowledge, as Lord Bacon observes, being power, the human powers will, in fact, be increased." Thereby human beings can dominate "nature, including both its materials, and its laws," and "men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable." As a result, according to Priestley, "whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal, beyond what our imaginations can now conceive." (Priestley [1768], p.8-9) To sum up, in Priestley's thought, the ultimate happiness is "perfection." Each individual human being exercises his or her ability given by God, thereby he or she can get to the condition of "perfection."

The ends of Government

Considering what has been mentioned above, how does Priestley use his theological utilitarianism in his politics? According to Canovan, Priestley, in his *Essay on the First Principles of Government,* employs his utilitarian criteria at "three different levels," that is, "the ends of government," "efficiency and liberty," and "expediency.[6]" The passages below are usually quoted as what Priestley's thought is summarized. Priestley writes; "It must necessarily be understood…whether it be expressed or not, that all people live in society for their mutual advantage; so that the good and happiness of the member, that is, the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined…

This own it is rather matter of surprise to me, that this great object of all government should have been so little insisted on by our great writers who have treated of this subject, and that more use hath not been made of it. In treating of particular regulations in states, this principle necessarily obtruded itself; all arguments in favour of any law being always drawn from a consideration of its tendency to promote the public good; and yet it has often escaped the notice of writers in discoursing on the first principles of society, and the subject of civil and religious liberty.

This one general idea, properly pursued, throws the greatest light

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[6] Hole[1989] also supports Canovan's interpretation(p.71-72).

upon the whole system of policy, morals, and, I may add, theology too. To a mind not warped by theological and metaphysical subtitles, the Divine Being appears to be actuated by no other views than the noblest we can conceive, the happiness of his creatures."(Priestley [1768], p.14) Of three levels Canovan refers, I would like to pay attention only to "the ends of government" underlying all his politics.

According to Priestley, the government is a means to achieve perfection of an individual, "The great instrument in the hand of divine providence, of this progress of the species toward perfection, is society, and consequently government" (Priestley [1768], p. 8) and its purpose is to promote "good and happiness" of the members of the community. The "good and happiness" is provided by God and is gained by confidence in harmonious natural order. "[T]he greatest good of the members of a community" means the greatest good of each individual member of the community and thus the individual perfection is the highest happiness.

Priestley considers perfection, i.e. the highest happiness to be led by natural law and protected by natural right. Natural right is a necessary right to achieve individual happiness, and is a nonaggressive right that rational people forming society never abandoned when they established a government by social contract. When Priestley misunderstands that Edmund Burke (1729-97) denies social contract theory while presupposing convention as a condition to establish government, Priestley writes; "But what does this convention respect, beside the secure enjoyment of such advantages, or rights, as have been usually termed natural, as life, liberty, and property, which men had from nature, without societies or artificial

combinations of men? Men cannot, surely, be said to give up their natural rights by entering into a compact for the better securing of them. And if they make a wife compact, they will never wholly exclude themselves from all share in the administration of their government, or some controul over it. For without this their stipulated rights would be very insecure." (Priestley [1789], p.167)

Priestley's theological utilitarianism has a framework of natural law and the greatest happiness means perfection of each individual forming society. The requirement for guaranteeing perfection is natural right at the time of entering into social contract. Government, therefore, is responsible for the highest happiness, i.e. perfection, and its legitimacy is based on whether or not each individual can achieve perfection.

A typical example of the way in which his utilitarianism and contract theory are connected is found in the discussion on the right of resistance. According to Priestley, it is almost equal to the condition of political slave that voting rights are not given to people and only a small member of people are in authority and the condition like this causes a fatal effect. It is because the condition is contrary to conduct principles as clarified by the following statement. "Virtue and right conduct consist in those affections and actions which terminate in the public good; justice and veracity, for instance, having nothing intrinsically excellent in them, separate from their relation to the happiness of mankind; and the whole system of right to power, property, and everything else in society, must be regulated by the same consideration: the decisive question, when any of these subjects are examined, being, what is it that the good of the

community requires?" (Priestley [1768], p.12)

Who judges "what is it that the good of the community requires?" It is judged by "public servants" elected by people. If they rank with high position or they are "called kings, senators, or nobles" enjoying "privileges or prerogative," they are ultimately "public servants." These classes have no power to promote their own benefits at the sacrifice of people. Thus, if "public servants" abuse their power against people's will, people can exercise the right of resistance. Priestley declares; "if the abuses of government should, at any time, be great and manifest; if the servants of the people, forgetting their masters, and their master's interest, should pursue a separate one of their own; if, instead of considering that they are made for the people, they should consider the people as made for them; if the oppressions and violations of rights should be great, fragrant, and universally resented; if the tyrannical [sic.] governors should have no friends but a few sycophants, who had long preyed upon the vitals of their follow citizens, and who might be expected to desert a government, whenever their interests should be detached from it: if, in consequence of these circumstances, it should become manifest, that the risqué, which would be run in attempting a revolution would be trifling, and the evils which might be apprehended from it, were far less than these which were actually suffered, and which were daily increasing; in the name of God, I ask, what principles are those, which ought to restrain an injured and insulted people from asserting their natural rights, and from changing, or even punishing their governors, that is their servants, who had abused their trust; or from altering the whole form of their government, if it appeared to

16

be of a structure so liable to abuse?" (Priestley [1768], p.18-19)

In Priestley's political and social thought, to promote people's happiness is the primary issue; to erect a legal government is merely secondary. Priestley also writes; "To whomsoever the society delegates its power, it is delegated to them for the more easy management of public affairs, and in order to make the more effectual provision for the happiness of the whole. Whoever enjoys property, or riches in the state, enjoys them for the good state, as well as for himself; and whenever those powers, riches, or rights of any kind, are abused, to the injury of the whole, that awful and ultimate tribunal, in which every citizen hath an equal voice, may demand the resignation of them." (Priestley [1768], p.26)

Thus, Priestley regards government as a means to attain each individual "perfection." "Government being the great instrument of this progress of the human species towards this glorious state." If government cannot make its purpose come true, people can overthrow such a government, and have a right to establish such government as can attain each individual happiness.

Conclusion

What follows are the conclusions of this paper: (1) Priestley's "theological utilitarianism" should be clearly distinguished from Bentham's secular utilitarianism. It is because Priestley incorporates notions of natural laws, natural rights and a social contract with theological viewpoints which

Bentham never tries to adopt. (2) Priestley thinks "the greatest happiness" can be achieved by following the harmonious natural order, whereas Bentham thinks it can be measured by maximizing pleasures and minimizing pains in quantity. Ultimately, Priestley's moral order is created by God's good will while Bentham's is nothing but a product of human contingent behaviors.

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