

PRICE, RICHARD (1723-1791). Born at Tynton, Glamorganshire, and educated at dissenting academies, Richard Price became a Dissenting minister at twenty-one. After twelve years as a domestic chaplain, he preached primarily at Stoke Newington and Hackney. He married Sarah Blundell, an Anglican, in 1758; they had no children.

Price was an influential actuary, economist, and theologian as well as a moral philosopher and champion of the American and French Revolutions. His papers on “the Doctrine of Chances” (1764, 1765) won him a Fellowship of the Royal Society; his work on life expectancy helped modernize insurance practices. His *Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the National Debt* (1772) influenced William Pitt’s economic policies. His *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776) sold 60,000 copies within its first year, and probably encouraged America’s decision to declare independence. In *A Discourse On the Love of Our Country* (1789), Price also praised the French Revolution, moving Edmund Burke to reply in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

In *A Review of the Principle Questions and Difficulties in Morals* (1758, 2nd.ed 1769; 3rd ed. 1787), Price defends a rationalist view of ethics, influenced by Samuel Clarke, against criticisms by the empiricist moral sense theorists, especially Francis Hutcheson. They had argued that reason cannot give rise to moral ideas because all simple ideas are derived from sense and reflection. Price develops a Platonist theory of the understanding, derived from the *Theaetetus* and Ralph Cudworth, according to which “the faculty within us that discerns *truth*, and that compares all the objects of thought, and *judges* of them, is a spring of new ideas.” These ideas include solidity, inertia, substance, accident, duration, space, and power or causation. Price turns Hume’s argument on its head, claiming that since sensation can only reveal constant conjunction, our idea of power or causation must come from the understanding. Ideas therefore fall into two categories: those which denote only affections of the mind itself, including both sensory ideas and reflective ideas such as beauty; and those

which “denote something distinct from sensation; and imply real and independent existence and truth.”

Price examines three pairs of moral ideas to determine which category they belong to: right and wrong, beauty and deformity, and merit and demerit. His main concern is to show that right and wrong are ideas of the understanding. If actions were not right in themselves, our moral perceptions would be arbitrary. Furthermore, no action would really be obligatory, for “intrinsically right” and “obligatory” are the same. But once the thesis that simple ideas must originate in sense is defeated, the main obstacle to the view that right and wrong are “real characters of actions” is removed.

Emotions of approval and disapproval accompany moral perceptions: a right action appears beautiful and a wrong one deformed. But Price denies that these feelings can only be explained by an implanted moral sense. There is an intelligible connection between moral ideas and the attendant feelings: a rational being is *necessarily* pleased by a right action and displeased by a wrong one. Similarly, the ideas of happiness, truth, and honor necessarily move a rational being to desire them for himself and others. Yet because we are imperfectly rational, God has also provided us with “instinctive determinations,” including a moral sense, to strengthen our rational intuitions and affections.

Ideas of merit and demerit arise directly from those of right and wrong, for it is right that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished. But the moral motive is the perception of rightness or obligation itself, which moves us directly to action. This does not mean that benevolence is not a virtuous motive. Rational, as opposed to instinctive, benevolence “coincides with rectitude.” But Price opposes the reduction of all virtue to benevolence. The worship of God, due concern for oneself, gratitude, veracity, and justice are right in themselves.

Virtue requires freedom of the will, which Price defends in *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity* (1778), published correspondence with his friend Joseph Priestly. Priestly argues that freedom of the will requires action without a

motive and so without a cause. Price replies that freedom does not require action without a motive as long as the motive is not conceived as a mechanical or physical cause. The cause of free action, and the foundation of morality, is the self-determining agent.

Price's commitment to the value of the self-determining agent also motivated his enthusiasm for the American and French Revolutions. In the *Observations on Civil Liberty*, Price argues that every human being has a natural right to physical, moral, religious, and civil liberty. Civil liberty exists only in a society whose laws are made by the people themselves, directly or through elected representatives. Indeed, all forms of liberty are forms of self-government, for we only act as we like when the will rules the passions. Like Kant, to whom he is often and justly compared, Price celebrated the revolutions as harbingers of the ultimate triumph of liberty and justice on earth.

Works by Richard Price

Price, Richard. *The Works*, ed. with "Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Richard Price D.D. F. R. S.," by W. Morgan. 10 vols., London: 1815-1816.

Price, Richard. *The Correspondence of Richard Price*. Volume I: July 1748-March 1778. ed. W. Bernard Peach and D.O. Thomas. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press and Cardiff: University of Wales, 1983.

The most important ethical and political works available in recent editions are:

Price, Richard. *A Review of the Principle Questions and Difficulties in Morals*. 1st ed. London, 1758; 2nd ed. London, 1769; 3rd ed., as *A Review of the Principle Questions in Morals*, with an "Appendix containing additional notes and a Dissertation on the Being and Attributes of the Deity," London, 1787. This edition was reprinted with a critical introduction by D.D. Raphael. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.

Price, Richard, with Joseph Priestly. *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestly*. London: J. Johnson and T. Cadell, 1778. rpt. New York: Garland, 1978.

Price, Richard. *Political Writings*. Edited by D. O. Thomas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Price, Richard. *Richard Price and the Ethical Foundations of the American Revolution*. ed. with critical introduction, by Bernard Peach. This volume contains Price's major pamphlets on the America Revolution, including *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776); *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty and the War with America* (1777) ; and *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution and the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World* (1784). Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979.

Works about Richard Price

Åqvist, Lennart. *The Moral Philosophy of Richard Price*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1960.

Cone, Carl B. *Torchbearer of Freedom: The Influence of Richard Price on Eighteenth Century Thought*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1952.

Cua, A.S. *Reason and Virtue: A Study in the Ethics of Richard Price*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966.

Hudson, W.D. *Reason and Right: A Critical Examination of Richard Price's Moral Philosophy*. London: Macmillan, and San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Company, 1970.

Laboucheix, Henri. *Richard Price, Théoricien de la Révolution Américaine, Le Philosophe et le Sociologue, Le Pamphlétaire et L'Orateur*. Paris: Didier, 1970.

Thomas, D.O. *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977. Includes a complete list of Price's published works, information about where manuscripts of his papers and correspondence may be found, and an extensive bibliography.

Thomas, Roland. *Richard Price: Philosopher and Apostle of Liberty*. London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1924. Includes a list of the various editions of Price's

published works and a list, organized by subject matter, of works that were written in direct response to Price.

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