



Joseph Priestley: materialism and the science of the mind. Foundations, controversies, reception

Charles T. Wolfe, Falk Wunderlich

► To cite this version:

Charles T. Wolfe, Falk Wunderlich. Joseph Priestley: materialism and the science of the mind. Foundations, controversies, reception. Intellectual History Review, 2020, 30 (1), pp.1-5. 10.1080/17496977.2020.1690356 . halshs-04242763

HAL Id: halshs-04242763

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04242763>

Submitted on 22 Oct 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Joseph Priestley: Materialism and the science of the mind – Foundations, Controversies, Reception

Introduction

Charles T. Wolfe (Venice), Falk Wunderlich (Halle)

(Introduction to the special issue of *Intellectual History Review* we coedited, 2019

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2020.1690356>)

This special issue deals with key aspects of the philosophy of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Priestley is known to the general public primarily for his discovery of oxygen, and he is mostly acknowledged within the history of science, and more broadly as a prominent Unitarian theologian. His main occupation and education was indeed that of a theologian and a minister. Much less attention has been devoted to Priestley's distinctly *philosophical* writings, most of which came out during the 1770s while he was working for Lord Shelburne (William Petty, 1737-1805) between 1772 and 1780.¹ This is striking since he elaborated and defended an ambitious materialist and determinist philosophy during this period that was based on an equally elaborate theory of matter. The papers presented in this special issue are intended to contribute to a more detailed understanding of Priestley's philosophy itself, and its impact.

In spite of its thematic breadth and contemporary influence also on the Continent, Priestley's philosophy and his materialism in particular are mostly treated in survey works or in otherwise summary texts. For instance, a recent volume covering Priestley's accomplishments in general includes just one contribution out of seven dealing with his metaphysics.² Similarly, older scholarship tends to give broad overviews.³ There are a few notable exceptions: Yolton devotes a chapter to Priestley's materialism in particular, Tapper to the development of his materialism; Harris discusses Priestley's determinism in detail, Garret and Tapper his engagement with common sense philosophy, and Mudroch his views on causality.⁴ Also, Sakkas discusses Priestley within the context of Jonathan Israel's

¹ Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley*, 141-143.

² Dybikowski, "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion".

³ Hiebert, "The Integration of Revealed Religion and Scientific Materialism in the Thought of Joseph Priestley"; Schofield, "Joseph Priestley: Theology, Physics, and Metaphysics"; Schwartz and McEvoy (eds), *Motion Toward Perfection*.

⁴ Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, 107-126; Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 167-178; Garrett, "In Defense of Elephants: Priestley on Reid on how to be a Newtonian of the Mind"; Mudroch, "Joseph Priestley's Eclectic

conception of Radical Enlightenment, and McEvoy and Eshet deal with philosophical issues in relation to Priestley's scientific work.⁵ The most detailed treatment of Priestley's philosophy available is part of the unfortunately unpublished dissertation by Mills.⁶ There is furthermore no modern edition of Priestley's works except for a few political writings.⁷ Similarly, the field of early modern materialism has undergone something of a renaissance in recent Anglophone scholarship,⁸ but despite the singular way in which Priestley proclaims his materialism – almost alone in the English-speaking world, and in ways quite different from those of La Mettrie or d'Holbach (or Hobbes who did not use the term) – he is also quite absent therein.

The dimension of Priestley's philosophical project is forcefully expressed on the final pages of the *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*, arguably his most important work in philosophy, where he summarizes it as follows:

“In short, it is my persuasion, that the three doctrines of *materialism*, of that which is commonly called *Socinianism*, and of philosophical *necessity*, are equally parts of *one system*, being equally founded on just observations of nature, and fair deductions from the scriptures” (*Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 356)

Thus Priestley aims at establishing a philosophical “system“ that entails three interrelated aspects, materialism, Socinianism and determinism, and has two equal but quite different sources, observation of nature and the Holy Scriptures. Materialism, to name one example of their interrelation, also serves as a foundation of Socinianism: denying the doctrine of trinity and the pre-existence of Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Socinian teachings, and along these lines Priestley argues that materialism “is conclusive against the doctrine of *a soul*, and consequently against the whole system of pre-existence” (*History of early opinions*, 85), i.e. the pre-existence of Christ. If Jesus Christ is a human being, and human beings do not have a soul distinct from the body, it is difficult to see in which way he would have pre-existed.

Epistemology”; Tapper, “The Beginnings of Priestley's Materialism”, “Reid and Priestley on Method and the Mind”; see also Durner, “‘Immateriality of Matter’. Theorien der Materie bei Priestley, Kant und Schopenhauer”.

⁵ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 13; Sakkas, “Joseph Priestley on metaphysics and politics: Jonathan Israel's ‘Radical Enlightenment’ reconsidered”; McEvoy, “Gases, God and the balance of nature: a commentary on Priestley (1772) ‘Observations on different kinds of air’ ”; Eshet, “Rereading Priestley: Science at the Intersection of Theology and Politics”.

⁶ Mills, “Joseph Priestley and the Intellectual Culture of Rational Dissent, 1752-1796”, 64-216.

⁷ The almost contemporary edition by John Towill Rutt (*Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Dr. Priestley*, 25 vols, London 1817-1831) had no successor, with the only exception of a few political works (Priestley, *Political Writings*).

⁸ Wolfe, “Materialism,” and *Materialism. A Historico-Philosophical Introduction*; Wunderlich, ed., *Varieties of early modern materialism*.

Priestley's more narrowly philosophical writings can be grouped into four sets. (1) *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind* (in particular the "Introductory Essays" Priestley added, vii-xlvi) and the *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit* are the chief works for his materialism, including his views on the brain, on association psychology and on the theory of matter. (2) *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind* is Priestley's discussion of Scottish common sense philosophy, partly in relation to association psychology. (3) Priestley elaborated a compatibilist theory of freedom in *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity* and published several works in defense of this doctrine (and also his materialism), *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity*, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer, in Defence of the Illustrations of Philosophical Necessity*, *A Second Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer*, and *A Letter to Jacob Bryant Esq. in Defence of Philosophical Necessity*. (4) At the intersection to his more specifically theological writings, Priestley defends religion, in particular the argument from design, against other philosophers such as David Hume and Baron d'Holbach in a series of books, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1780-1795) and *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*. There are several works elaborating on Socinian/Unitarian themes, such as the *Institutes of natural and revealed religion*, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* and *An History of early opinions concerning Jesus Christ*.

The papers included in this special issue cover the three aspects of Priestley's philosophical "system", i.e. Socinianism, materialism and determinism, as well as his discussion of competing philosophical views and the reception of his philosophy. Sascha Salatowsky, in "Unitarian Materialism. Christoph Stegmann, Joseph Priestley, and their Concepts of Matter and Soul," examines the affinities between Priestley's materialism and that of the Socinian Christoph Stegmann (in relation to whom Leibniz spoke of a specifically Socinian kind of philosophy). Charles T. Wolfe, in "From the logic of ideas to active-matter materialism: Priestley's Lockean problem and early neurophilosophy," deals with the empiricist basis of Priestley's materialism and its complex relation to Locke's epistemology including in the way it integrates a 'cerebral' dimension which Locke sought to avoid. Falk Wunderlich, in "Priestley on materialism and the essence of God," addresses the different views Priestley addresses concerning whether we are altogether ignorant of the essence of God or whether God might be material in spite of our ignorance of real essences. Alan Tapper, in "Joseph Priestley and the Argument from Design," deals with Priestley's defense of the argument from design against David Hume, Matthew Turner and Erasmus Darwin. Sebastiano Gino, in "Scottish Common Sense, Association of Ideas and Free Will," addresses

the version of determinism Priestley proposed and defended against Thomas Reid's libertarianism. Pascal Taranto, in "Joseph Priestley as an Heir of Newton," examines Priestley's accommodation of Isaac Newton's methodological "rules of philosophizing." The papers by Paola Rumore ("Priestley in Germany") and Udo Thiel ("Priestley and Kant on Materialism") are both devoted to the reception of Priestley's materialism in contemporary German philosophy, affirmatively by German materialists (Rumore) and critically by Kant (Thiel), which proves to be highly influential but has not been studied so far.

We hope that this special issue on Priestley's materialism (in and out of context) contributes to stimulate discussion of Priestley, a major figure in different disciplines who might deserve more philosophical consideration, as well as of issues raised by Priestley and in his wake, such as the relation between materialism and Christianity, the materialist appropriation of empiricism, and of course broader, transversal themes like Socinianism, compatibilism and Newtonianism. We are also grateful to Stephen Gaukroger for his interest in this project, and to the staff of *Intellectual History Review* and Taylor & Francis, particularly Julie Weston, for their timely and efficient support.

Bibliography

- Durner, Manfred. "'Immateriality of Matter'. Theorien der Materie bei Priestley, Kant und Schopenhauer." *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 103 (1996), 294-322.
- Dybikowski James. "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion." In Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (eds). *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, 80-112. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Eshet, Dan. "Rereading Priestley: Science at the Intersection of Theology and Politics." *History of Science* 39 (2001), 127-159.
- Garrett, Aaron. "In Defense of Elephants: Priestley on Reid on how to be a Newtonian of the Mind." *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 2(2) (2004), 137-153.
- Harris, James. "Joseph Priestley and 'the proper doctrine of philosophical necessity'." *Enlightenment and Dissent* 20 (2001), 23-44.
- Harris, James. *Of Liberty and Necessity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hiebert, Erwin N. "The Integration of Revealed Religion and Scientific Materialism in the Thought of Joseph Priestley." In Erwin N. Hiebert, Aaron J. Ihde and Robert E. Schofield eds.

Joseph Priestley. Scientist, Metaphysician, and Theologian, 27-61. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press 1980.

Israel, Jonathan I. *Democratic Enlightenment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Kingston, Elizabeth. "Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)." In James Fieser and Bradley Dowden eds. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/priestly/> (retrieved 02.11.2019).

McEvoy, John G. "Gases, God and the balance of nature: a commentary on Priestley (1772) 'Observations on different kinds of air'." *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society A* 373(2039) (2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4360083/> (retrieved 02.11.2019).

Mills, Simon. "Joseph Priestley and the Intellectual Culture of Rational Dissent, 1752-1796." PhD diss. Queen Mary, University of London, 2009.

Mudroch, Vilem. "Joseph Priestley's Eclectic Epistemology." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22(1) (2005), 49-71.

Priestley, Joseph. *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind*. 2nd ed., London: Johnson, 1774.

Priestley, Joseph. *Institutes of natural and revealed religion*. 2 vols. London: Johnson, 1772-1774.

Priestley, Joseph. *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind on the Principle of the Association of Ideas, with Essays relating to the Subject of It*. London: Johnson, 1775.

Priestley, Joseph. *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*. London: Johnson, 1777.

Priestley, Joseph. *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated; Being an Appendix to the Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*. London: Johnson, 1777.

Priestley, Joseph. *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley*. London: Johnson and Cadell, 1778.

Priestley, Joseph. *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Palmer, in Defence of the Illustrations of Philosophical Necessity*. Bath: for Johnson, 1779.

Priestley, Joseph. *A Second Letter to The Rev. Mr. John Palmer, in Defence of the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*. London: for Johnson, 1780.

Priestley, Joseph. *A Letter to Jacob Bryant Esq. in Defence of Philosophical Necessity*. London: for Johnson, 1780.

Priestley, Joseph. *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. 2 vols. Birmingham: for Johnson, 1782.

Priestley, Joseph. *An History of early opinions concerning Jesus Christ, compiled from original writers; proving that the Christian church was at first Unitarian*. Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1786.

Priestley, Joseph. *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever. Part I. Containing an Examination of the principal Objections to the Doctrines of Natural Religion, and especially those contained in the Writings of Mr. Hume*. 2nd edn, Birmingham: for Johnson, 1787.

Priestley, Joseph. *Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, in Answer to Mr. William Hammon*. 2nd ed., Birmingham: for Johnson, 1787.

Priestley, Joseph. *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever. Part II. Containing a State of the Evidence of Revealed Religion*. Birmingham: for Johnson, 1787.

Priestley, Joseph. *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever. Part III. Containing an Answer to Mr. Paine's Age of Reason*. 2nd ed., Philadelphia: Dobson, 1795.

Priestley, Joseph. *Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Dr. Priestley*. John Towill Rutt ed., 25 vols. Hackney: Smallfield, 1817-1831.

Priestley, Joseph. *Political Writings*. Peter Miller ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Sakkas, Evangelos. "Joseph Priestley on metaphysics and politics: Jonathan Israel's 'Radical Enlightenment' reconsidered." *History of European Ideas* 45(1) (2019), 104-116.

Schofield, Robert E. "Joseph Priestley, the Theory of Oxidation and the Nature of Matter." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25(2) (1964), 285-294.

Schofield, Robert E. "Joseph Priestley: Theology, Physics, and Metaphysics." *Enlightenment and Dissent* 2 (1983), 69-82

Schofield, Robert E. *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1733 to 1773*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Schofield, Robert E. "Monism, Unitarianism and Phlogiston in Joseph Priestley's Natural Philosophy." *Enlightenment and Dissent* 19 (2000), 78-90.

Schofield, Robert E. *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004.

Schwartz, A. Truman and John G. McEvoy (eds). *Motion Toward Perfection: The Achievement of Joseph Priestley*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1990.

Tapper, Alan. "The Beginnings of Priestley's Materialism." *Enlightenment and Dissent* 1(1) (1982), 73-81.

Tapper, Alan. "Reid and Priestley on Method and the Mind." In John Haldane and Stephen Read eds, *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, 98-112.

Wolfe, Charles T. "Materialism," in *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Aaron V. Garrett, 90-117. London: Routledge, 2014.

Wolfe, Charles T. *Materialism. A Historico-Philosophical Introduction*. Dordrecht et al.: Springer, 2016.

Wunderlich, Falk, ed.. *Varieties of early modern materialism*. Special issue of *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (24, no. 5) (2016)

Yolton John. *Thinking Matter. Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.