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‘The Language of the Naked Facts’
Joseph Priestley on language and revealed religion

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DPhil Intellectual History

University of Sussex

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part, to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

University of Sussex

Elizabeth Sarah Kingston

‘The Language of the Naked Facts’

Joseph Priestley on language and revealed religion

Summary

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) is usually remembered for his experiments in natural philosophy and celebrated for his isolation of the gas we now call oxygen. However, Priestley had a wide range of interests and published extensively on education, history, politics, political philosophy, language, theology and religion. He dedicated his life to elucidating a coherent set of epistemological, metaphysical and theological principles which he believed explained the human mind, the natural world and the nature of God and revelation. Recent studies of Priestley have emphasised the difficulties that arise from isolating the various aspects of his thought and the fruitful outcome of uncovering the many connections between his diverse areas of study. With this in mind, the present dissertation aims to elucidate the relationship between two aspects of Priestley’s thought that have not previously been studied together. It examines his theory of language and argument alongside his work on theology and the evidences of revelation. Chapter One provides an overview of Priestley’s epistemology, focusing on his work on induction, judgment and assent. Chapter Two looks at Priestley’s analysis of the role of the passions in our assent to propositions and the progressive generation of the personality, while paying particular attention to the origins of figurative language. Chapter Three examines Priestley’s theory of language development including the relationship between figurative language and the extension of vocabulary and the close connection between language and culture. Chapter Four demonstrates that Priestley’s discussion of the evidences of revealed religion is structured around his theory of assent and judgment. It also explains how assent to revelation is essential for the generation and transcendence of the ‘self’. Chapter Five brings all the themes of the dissertation together in a discussion of Priestley’s rational theology and examines his analysis of figurative language in scripture.

Dedication

For my Grandparents

Acknowledgments

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A Note on References

References appear in footnotes at the end of each paragraph. In the first reference to the text the details of the publication are given in full and subsequent uses are abbreviated.

The abbreviation ‘Works’ followed by a volume number indicates Priestley’s texts found in J. T. Rutt (ed.), *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, (Bristol, 1999). Subsequent references give the volume number only.

Abbreviations

LLG: Joseph Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar*. Warrington: 1762.

LOC: Joseph Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*. London: 1777.

Introduction

Links in a Great Connected Chain

Joseph Priestley saw truth and beauty in simplicity. His work is testament to a fundamental need to identify regularity in the perceived chaos of existence and is evidence of a mind driven to classify the raw materials of experience. ‘The great business of philosophy’, he tells us, ‘is to reduce into classes the various appearances which nature presents to our view’. Priestley dedicated his life to elucidating a coherent set of epistemological, metaphysical and theological principles which he believed explained the human mind, the natural world, and the nature of God and revelation. Committed to the Newtonian methods of his era, Priestley rejected all conclusions based on speculation and insisted that his ideas were grounded only in reason and experience. According to Priestley the harmonious and interrelated principles that he identified were the inevitable result of careful observation and the formulation of propositions based on the induction of general laws from particular facts.

Nature presents to our view *particular effects*, in connexion with their *separate causes*, by which we are often puzzled, till philosophy steps in to our assistance, pointing out similarity in these effects, and the probability of such similar effects arising from the same cause.

For Priestley this process of induction is the very essence of reason: it is the method by which ‘we are obliged to proceed in our investigation of truth’. Priestley was attracted to the notion of pre-ordained uniformity in nature and envisaged an ordered universe governed by a set of simple laws, or chains of cause and effect, maintained by God. Immersed in limitless particularity and diversity of effects, the human mind is designed by a benevolent creator to comprehend overarching laws and identify common causes by a process of abstraction. Reason is a gift from God, it is the faculty that distinguishes us from animals and the means by which all ‘proper happiness’ and knowledge is attained. According to Priestley, a mind guided solely by reason will mechanically formulate universal propositions that reflect the objective order of external reality. Furthermore, Priestley believed his careful application of reason and his rigorous exclusion of passion, prejudice and irrationality from the process of logical

investigation had enabled him to access profound and universal truths. He devoted around two hundred publications to conveying these ideas in great depth and detail.¹

This commitment to reason and the inductive method tied together Priestley's impressively wide range of intellectual pursuits. He published extensively on theology and religion, natural philosophy, metaphysics, history, education, oratory, politics, and political philosophy, and he is appreciated today for what John McEvoy calls the 'synoptic unity' of his thought. The systematic and coherent nature of Priestley's mind allowed him to articulate a harmonious set of intellectual principles and explore the relationships between them with great clarity. A brief overview of his materialist, associationist and necessitarian outlook demonstrates the breadth of his philosophy.

i) Materialism. Priestley posited that matter, rather than being impenetrable and inert, is subject to internal forces such as attraction and compulsion. This enabled him to argue that the matter of the brain is sensitive to vibrations that are the basis of all thought and to deny the existence of an immaterial soul.

ii) Association of ideas. Priestley held that the vibrations that constitute thought are caused by external objects and he concluded that the mind has no innate ideas. Our ideas and mental states are acquired solely through sensory experience, and simple ideas are combined into complex ones by virtue of repeated conjunction or association.

iii) Philosophical necessity. A wholly material mind is subject to the same causal laws as the natural world, and therefore Priestley concluded that human actions are entirely determined.²

Despite expounding beliefs that many of his contemporaries associated with atheism and heresy, Priestley was a committed Christian who claimed that 'no kind of

¹ J. Priestley, *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense; Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Immutability of Truth; and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* (2nd ed., London, 1775), Works 3, pp.15-18 and p.25. J. Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, (London, 1777), p.42. Henceforth abbreviated to LOC. J. Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, First published in Three Volumes 1772-1774, to which is prefixed *An Essay on the Best Method of Communicating Religious Knowledge to the Members of Christian Societies*, Part I, (2nd ed., Birmingham, 1782), Works 2, p.xvi. J. McEvoy, "Electricity, Knowledge, and the Nature of Progress in Priestley's Thought", *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 12, (1979): 7-11.

² McEvoy, "Electricity, Knowledge", p.2. A good summary of Priestley's major ideas with particular attention paid to his materialism can be found in A. Tapper, "Joseph Priestley", *Dictionary of National Biography*, (2002), pp.307-323. Association and philosophical necessity are discussed in more detail below with reference to Priestley's texts. Priestley's materialism is outside the scope of this study.

knowledge, besides that of religion, deserves the name'. He insisted on the consonance of reason and revelation and was determined to demonstrate that his theological principles could withstand rational scrutiny. He thus championed a set of doctrines, labelled as 'Socinian', supposedly practiced by the first Christians and compatible with the 'plain sense' of scripture. He argued that the idea of a pre-existent, immaterial soul is a heathen doctrine integrated into Christianity and the cause of many irrational and paradoxical 'corruptions'. On this basis Priestley defended divine unity and denied the divinity of Christ. He regarded the death of Jesus as a sacrifice in the figurative sense only, and rejected the idea that his death diverted the wrath of God in order to justify fallen humanity. Jesus was not a divine mediator between God and Man; he was a saviour simply because his life was a demonstration of perfect moral duty and the truth of physical resurrection. God's grace is freely given, Adam incurred no infinite penalty, and no special redemption is required for his transgression. All men have the potential for perfection and no one is predestined to eternal torment. While the immoral will suffer in a future life, this will not be forever; there comes a time of universal salvation and bodily resurrection. In his quest for intellectual harmony Priestley stated that these religious and metaphysical beliefs formed a consonant whole. He regarded each of his central ideas as separately defensible as well as part of a comprehensive system.

The three doctrines of *materialism*, of that which is 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, and whoever shall duely consider their *connection*, and *dependence on one another*, will find no sufficient consistency in any general scheme of principles, that does not comprehend them all.³

Recent studies of Priestley have emphasised the difficulties that arise from isolating the various aspects of his thought, and the fruitful outcome of uncovering the many relationships between his diverse areas of study. As Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes

³ J. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part I, Works 2, p.xv. Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit to which is added 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*, (2nd ed., Birmingham, 1782), Works 3, p.220. See also J.Priestley, *A Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture Relating to The Power of Man to do the Will of God, Original Sin, Election and Reprobation, The Divinity of Christ, And Atonement for Sin by the Death of Christ*, (London, 1791), Works 2, pp.487-488 for a brief summary of 'Socinianism'. J. McEvoy and J.E. McGuire, "God and Nature: Priestley's Way of Rational Dissent", *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences*, (1975), pp.325-328. J. Dybikowski, "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion", in I. Rivers and D.L. Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, (Oxford, 2008), p.80.

comment in the latest collection of essays devoted to Priestley, the challenge of studying Priestley is not only that of encompassing his varied intellectual interests but also in comprehending the underlying philosophy that unifies his ideas. The present dissertation is meant as a new contribution to these efforts at understanding Priestley's works as 'links in a great connected chain'. It aims to elucidate the relationship between two aspects of Priestley's thought that have not previously been studied together. It examines Priestley's theory of language and argument alongside his work on theology and the evidences of revelation.⁴

Arranged chronologically around his early education and life-long vocation as a minister and tutor, Chapter One lays a foundation for the rest of the dissertation. It examines Priestley's approach to the inductive method of investigation, his theory of judgment and his definitions of 'truth' and 'assent'. Chapter Two looks at Priestley's analysis of the role of the passions in our assent to propositions and the progressive generation of the personality, while paying particular attention to the origins of figurative language. Chapter Three examines Priestley's theory of language development including the relationship between figurative language and the extension of vocabulary and the close connection between language and culture. Chapter Four demonstrates that Priestley's discussion of the evidences of revealed religion is structured around his theory of assent and judgment. It also explains how assent to revelation is essential for the generation and ultimate transcendence of the 'self'. Chapter Five brings the themes of the dissertation together in a discussion of Priestley's rational theology and his analysis of figurative language in scripture.

⁴ The quote used here and in the title of this Introduction is from J. Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated being an appendix to the Disquisitions relating to matter and spirit. To which is added an answer to the Letters on materialism, and on Hartley's Theory of the mind*, (London, 1777), Works 4, p.450. Rivers and Wykes, "Editors' Introduction", in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, p.2. McEvoy and McGuire's, "God and Nature", is a notable example of studies that attempt to comprehend diverse aspects of Priestley's thought. For an alternative view that highlights the supposedly incompatible nature of Priestley's ideas see V. Mudroch, "Joseph Priestley's Eclectic Epistemology", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 22, no. 1, (2005).

Chapter One

The Necessary Nature of Things

Priestley was born in Yorkshire in 1733 at Birstall Fieldhead, a village south-west of Leeds where his family had lived and worked for generations. His father, Jonas Priestley, was a wool-cloth dresser and his mother, Mary Swift, came from a farming family. Joseph was their first child but his siblings followed in such quick succession that he was sent first to live with his grandfather and then, after the death of his mother in 1739, to live with a childless aunt and uncle. Priestley attended several schools but after a bout of serious illness he continued his education at home. While he received some tuition from local dissenting ministers Priestley spent much of this formative period working alone and even learned a number of languages ‘without a master’. Priestley’s childhood was marked by upheaval while his early education granted him considerable intellectual liberty and independence of thought. To understand these early-years is a significant step towards understanding the idiosyncratic and controversial nature of Priestley’s mature philosophy and the seriousness and devotion with which he undertook the pursuit of truth.⁵

Priestley recalls reading John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* during his period of self-education and the influence of Locke’s work on the young Priestley was to be profound and lasting. Priestley frequently referred to ‘Mr. Locke’s Principles of the Human Mind’ in his later publications and viewed the Lockean system as a ‘solid foundation’ upon which to construct his own epistemological and metaphysical principles. Despite disagreeing with Locke on a number of key points Priestley stated that ‘his system appears to me, and others, to be the corner-stone of all just and rational knowledge’. He was later dismayed at attempts to overturn the system defended in the *Essay* and shocked that others could formulate sceptical conclusions from Lockean precepts. In view of Locke’s significant impact on Priestley, it is necessary to give a summary view of key Lockean doctrines as seen by the later thinker.⁶

⁵J. Priestley, *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley with an Introduction by Jack Lindsay*, (Bath, 1970), pp.69-72.

⁶ Priestley, *Autobiography*, p.72. Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.27. See R. E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley, A Study of His Life and Work from 1733-1773*, (Pennsylvania, 1997), pp.1-29, for a full discussion of Priestley’s early intellectual influences. While Priestley often works from Lockean principles, he does not always refer to Locke himself and assumes his audience to be previously

Part of the *Essay*'s appeal lay in the way that Locke stressed the vital role of independent investigation in the search after truth. Studying alone, Priestley may well have been influenced by the powerful rhetorical force with which Locke attacks those who dare to dictate opinions, as well as him who 'Tyrannizes over his own Mind' by submitting to them. Locke helped to demolish traditional syllogistic approaches to logical enquiry by advocating experimental and mathematical methods in opposition to so-called idle speculation and empty verbal disputation. He rejected the notion that truth can emerge from the examination of propositions accepted on authority. The maxims traditionally cited at the beginning of an argumentative discourse make it appear that truth issues from these maxims themselves rather than from the facts of experience. Instead Locke asked us to rely on reason and to trust in probabilities vigorously put to the test by a freely moving mind unconstrained by the artificial entanglements of the syllogism. Truth for Locke emerges from a natural process of enquiry and inference, a lesson that Priestley would not forget.⁷

'The outlines of Mr. Locke's system', writes Priestley, as part of a forceful defence of the thinker written in the 1770s:

...are that the mind perceives all things that are external to it by means of certain impressions, made upon the organs of sense; that those impressions are conveyed by the nerves to the brain, and from the brain to the mind, where they are called *sensations*, and when recollected, are called *ideas*; that by the attention which the mind, or sentient principle, gives to these sensations and ideas, observing their mutual reflections, &c. it acquires other ideas, which he calls *ideas of reflection*, and thereby becomes possessed of the materials of all its knowledge.

Locke wrote his *Essay* in order to discover the extent of our knowledge about the world in which we live from an analysis of the workings of the human mind. His work is therefore observational rather than speculative and Priestley adhered to this introspective method in much of his own epistemological work. Locke opens with an attack on those who advocate the existence of innate ideas or principles and argues instead that the materials of our understanding arise solely from experience. This experience is two-fold: simple ideas are generated by the attention we give to sensations

acquainted with Locke's work. Priestley disagreed with Locke over the process by which simple ideas become complex ones, on free-will and the nature of matter and mind.

⁷J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, P. H. Nidditch (ed.), (Oxford, 1975), pp.xvii-xviii and p.698. W.S. Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric*, (Princeton, 1971), pp.259-261 and pp.282-291.

caused by external objects and also by observing the reflective activities of the mind as it combines, perceives and remembers ideas. Reflection is an original source of ideas and is often called a 'faculty' of the mind, but it requires ideas generated by sensations caused originally by external objects in order to supply the materials for its operations. Locke's 'way of ideas' is often referred to as atomistic because simple ideas may be regarded as resembling atoms that can be combined into more complex or compounded ideas. Simple ideas reflect the qualities of external objects, qualities that are discrete and unchanging and cannot be further simplified. While the mind is passive in its reception of simple ideas it is active in combining, relating and abstracting from these ideas to frame even the most obscure complex ideas including those of substance, identity and causality.⁸

In the final book of the *Essay* Locke turns from the generation of ideas to the limits of our knowledge.

Knowledge then seems to me nothing but the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas. In this alone it consists, where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess or believe, yet we always come short of Knowledge.

This restricted definition of knowledge requires that our perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas be either immediate or demonstrable. As Locke himself admitted, this entails that true knowledge is 'short and scanty' and we 'would be often utterly in the dark' if this were the only basis for our actions. Locke was made infamous by the scepticism that this conclusion seems to warrant and the way in which he implied we are ignorant of many things that earlier thinkers had taken as certain. However, Locke's goal was the opposite. He writes that God has granted us the faculty of judgment in order to supplement certain knowledge. In making judgments the mind may presume that ideas agree or disagree on the basis of arguments arising from evidence and may evaluate the likelihood of these arguments in terms of probability. Locke therefore replaced absolute certainty with an exploration of the practical reliability of probable knowledge and in doing so opened up logic to the new inductive methods associated

⁸ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.26-27. Locke, *Essay*, pp.119-121, pp.163-166. R. C. Allen, *David Hartley on Human Nature*, (Albany, 1999), pp.135-136. E.J. Lowe, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Locke on Human Understanding*, (London, 1995), pp.4-5 and pp.21-22. McEvoy and McGuire, "God and Nature", p.349.

with natural philosophy. As we will see in this Chapter, Priestley utilised and modified Locke's definition of knowledge and always championed the use of carefully assessed probabilities in ascertaining truth. In Chapter Three we will see how Priestley referred to Lockean notions regarding the abstraction and combination of ideas in relation to the development of language. As will become clear in Chapter Four, Locke's system also informed Priestley's examination of the grounds of assent to propositions and his analysis of the value of testimony as evidence for revelation.⁹

Daventry Academy

In 1752, at the age of 19, Priestley entered Daventry Academy. His dissenting views prevented him from subscribing to the Westminster Confession and therefore excluded him from the traditional universities. Priestley found intellectual freedom and stimulation at an establishment with young informal tutors and a liberal curriculum dedicated to the 'serious pursuit of truth'. He also mentions building 'warm friendships', fondly recalls being 'free from the cares and anxieties' of adulthood, and recounts the amusement that he and his friends found in speculation about their future life and appearance. It was during this exciting time of intellectual expansion that a reference in a lecture led Priestley to discover David Hartley's *Observations on Man*, a pivotal text that shaped much of his later work and with which we shall now become acquainted.¹⁰

Hartley's treatise became of such importance to Priestley that he later wrote of it as affording 'inexhaustible matter for curious speculation'. First published in 1749, the *Observations* is an intimate exploration of the mind that synthesises a comprehensive analysis of human nature with a compassionate Christian theology. Priestley appreciated Hartley's qualities of 'piety, benevolence, and rectitude of heart' and it was these, he said, that placed him above other philosophers of the time. However, perhaps the

⁹ Locke, *Essay*, p.525 and pp.651-657. J. W. Yolton, "Locke and the Seventeenth-Century Logic of Ideas", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16, (1955), p.431. M. Kuehn, "Knowledge and Belief", in K. Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, (Cambridge, 2006), p.393. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric*, pp.293-296.

¹⁰ Priestley could have studied at Cambridge but would have been prevented from graduating by his dissenting views. See Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.75-78. For discussions of the role and ethos of Daventry Academy see D. L. Wykes, "The Contribution of the Dissenting Academy to the emergence of Rational Dissent", in K. Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion, Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Cambridge, 1996), pp.99-139 and Schofield, *Enlightenment*, pp.31-62.

greatest appeal of the *Observations* was the profound simplicity of the system it proposes. Priestley often celebrated Hartley for hitting upon a single explanatory principle that encompasses ‘all the phenomena of thinking’. While the philosophical novice may think such an endeavour impossible, writes Priestley, Hartley’s system ‘wears the face of that *simplicity in causes*, and *variety in effects*, which we discover in every other part of nature’. For Priestley, Hartley’s work seemed to endorse the method of inducing general propositions from particular facts and to state with characteristic confidence that ‘it does not appear impossible, but, that, ultimately, one great comprehensive law shall be found to govern both the material and intellectual world’.¹¹

In the *Essay* Locke suggests that when two ideas are presented to the mind at the same time they become linked simply by virtue of their conjunction. This ‘association’ of ideas entails that a future appearance of one idea will inevitably induce the appearance of the other. As Priestley puts it, the law of association entails that ‘two sensations, or ideas, present to the mind at the same time, will afterwards recall each other’. This principle forms the basis for Hartley’s theory of the mind. Priestley points out that Locke used association to account only for ‘those sympathies and antipathies which he calls *unnatural*’ and recounted the kind of ‘madness’ that arises from the association of two ideas that have no real or natural conjunction. Locke appealed to the internal experience of reflection as a separate source of ideas and classified the mind according to various faculties, each of which is engaged in a different mental operation. For Priestley, Hartley’s great innovation was to reject Locke’s notion of internal reflection and posit the association of ideas as the comprehensive mechanism by which our mental conceptions, motor activities and personality are generated from the simple ideas of sensation. Conventional discussions of Hartley therefore regard him as having completed, or even perfected, Locke’s atomistic model by providing a streamlined account of the principle behind the formation of complex ideas from simple ones.¹²

¹¹ D. Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty and his Expectations*, (London, 1749). Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.10 and p.26. Priestley, *Disquisitions*, 3, p.92. J. Priestley, *Introductory Essays to Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of The Association of Ideas*, (2nd ed., London, 1790), Works 3, pp.184-185. V. Bevilacqua and R. Murphy, “Editors’ Introduction”, in J. Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, V. Bevilacqua and R. Murphy (eds.), (Carbondale, 1965), p.xxiii.

¹² Priestley’s exposition of Locke and Hartley can be found in Priestley, *Introductory Essays*, 3, pp.183-184 and in Priestley, *Examination*, 3. These in works are discussed in more detail below. J. Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, Containing An Examination of the Principal Doctrines of Natural Religion, and especially those contained in the Writings of Mr. Hume*, (2nd ed., Birmingham, 1787), Works 4, pp.401-402. Locke, *Essay*, pp.127-128 and pp.394-401. A good example of the

Richard Allen has recently argued that Hartley's project was considerably more radical than conventional interpretations allow. Hartley insisted that even the very simplest of our ideas of sensation, those that Locke saw as discrete and unchanging, are generated by association. For Hartley even the ideas of sensation are not 'monads', in fact they 'consist of parts both co-existent and successive'. Sensation does not passively produce a set of static ideas. Rather the generation of these simple perceptual categories such as 'white', 'cold' or 'wet', occurs gradually over time, as joint impressions from all the senses gradually allow us to construct a meaningful understanding of the external world. This circularity means that while it is true that complex instances of association require the existence of simple ideas, these ideas themselves can also be said to be generated by association. Priestley summarises this with when he explains the way in which a gradual associative process allows an infant to shape meaning from the chaotic mixture of sensations that bombard the mind.

When our minds are first exposed to the influence of external objects, all their parts and properties, and even accidental variable adjuncts, are presented to our view at the same time; so that the whole makes but one impression upon our organs of sense, and consequently upon the mind. By this means all the parts of the simultaneous impressions are so intimately associated together, that the idea of any one of them introduces the idea of all the rest. But as the necessary parts and properties will occur more often than the variable adjuncts, the ideas of these will not be so perfectly associated with the rest; and thus we shall be able to distinguish between those parts and properties that have been found separate, and those that have never been observed asunder.¹³

Priestley became a vocal advocate of Hartley's ideas and went on to use his theory in order to demonstrate that faculties such as the memory, the judgment, the passions and even muscular motion are all the outcome of compounds of ideas mechanically associated by repeated experience. Paying particular attention to complex ideas such as impenetrability, duration and moral obligation, Priestley acknowledged the difficulty in conceiving of how such highly complex ideas can ever have developed from the simple ideas of sensation. He compared this to the trouble we have believing *a priori* that white light is a mixture of the seven primary colours.¹⁴

conventional account of Hartley's system is to be found in McEvoy and McGuire, "God and Nature", pp.348-351.

¹³ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.15. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.145-153.

¹⁴ Priestley, *Introductory Essay*, 3, pp.183-196. Priestley and Hartley continued to use the word 'faculty' even when this meant only a particular mode of association.

Priestley's varied endeavours provided ample opportunity to explain the principle of association. In Chapter Two we will see how Priestley used association to account for the 'pleasures of the imagination'. We will also examine how he adopted Hartley's work on the associative transfer of ideas and emotions to elucidate the distinction between passionate and reasoned assent and to account for the mechanical generation of personality. In Chapter Three we will see how the development of language is an associative process and the way in which the association of ideas binds language and culture together. Chapter Four examines the ways in which association explains the mechanism of assent to revelation and also allows for the possibility of the transcendence of the 'self' and our limited individuality. Meanwhile, of relevance here, is Priestley's treatment of the associative basis of judgment and the means by which we gain an idea of 'truth' and thereby assent to propositions.

Priestley and Locke share a tendency to conflate psychological and logical relations. When the mind presumes the existence of an agreement or disagreement of ideas based on probability Locke calls this 'judgment' and appears to describe an introspective psychological activity. When the same faculty is exercised 'about Truth delivered in Words' it is 'commonly called *Assent* or *Dissent*', and Locke tells us that he will refer to both judgment and assent using the same terms. Priestley often refers to reasoning as the comparison of ideas but he is equally apt to use logical terms to describe this mental process. In his only extended discussion of the nature of judgment Priestley therefore simultaneously describes the associative process by which we generate ideas and knowledge and the logical process by which we may prove a proposition that consists of these ideas. Like Locke, Priestley distinguishes between intuitive knowledge and the probable knowledge we gain from the induction of particulars. Unlike Locke he does not differentiate these classifications on the basis of certainty, seems to esteem both equally, and refers to this process of comparison as 'judgment' or 'reasoning' regardless of the type of knowledge in question.¹⁵

Priestley talks about one 'class of truths' that he calls self-evident. Expressed in logical terms this means:

¹⁵ Locke, *Essay*, p.653. McEvoy and McGuire, "God and Nature", p.349.

Subject and predicate appear, upon comparison, to be in reality nothing more than different names for the same thing. To this class belong all *equations*, or propositions relating to number and quality...as *twice two is four*...

Priestley spends more time discussing a second class of truths, those that arise from the repeated association of two ideas so that their agreement, and our knowledge, may be said to be based on constant observation of their union. A process of association means that while our senses are constantly open to a stream of sensations, we gradually identify repeated conjunction of parts and properties. We associate milk and whiteness, gold and yellow. Consistent association of these qualities allow us to conclude that they are ‘necessarily united, though by some unknown bond of union, and that they will always go together’. We formulate universal propositions to express this necessary relationship, making one the subject and the other the predicate of the proposition. To reiterate in the language of logic, ‘this class of truths contains those in which there is an universal, and therefore a supposed necessary connexion between subject and predicate’.¹⁶

It is the ‘induction of particular facts’ that allows us to formulate universal propositions and it is the presentation of a sufficient number of these facts in an argument that allows us to prove this proposition. However, crucially, the universal proposition is not a static expression of the truth. Rather it generalises mechanically, by a process of association, from present to future, from many to all, and from same to similar. Once necessary conjunctions are established, the relationship between the ideas in question informs our predictions for the future and ‘the *expectation* of the same consequences from the same circumstances is necessarily generated in our mind’. This predictive quality of the universal proposition applies equally to analogous situations.

When the previous circumstances are precisely the same, we call the process of proof by the name of *induction*. But if they be not precisely the same, but only bear a considerable resemblance to the circumstances from which any particular appearance has been found to result, we call the argument *analogy*; and it is stronger in proportion to the degree of resemblance in the previous circumstances...If, therefore, the evidence of a proposition of this kind be weak, or doubtful, it can be strengthened only by finding more facts of the same, or of a similar nature.¹⁷

¹⁶Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.15-18 and p.125. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, p.349.

¹⁷ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.15-18. Mudroch, “Eclectic Epistemology”, pp.55-56.

Following his discussion of the two classes of truth, Priestley briefly considers the nature of assent. The associationist hypothesis suggests that our assent to a proposition is based on an association between the ideas in question and the idea of 'truth'. As Hartley puts it, assent arises from 'a close Association of the Ideas suggested by the Proposition, with the Idea, or internal Feeling, belonging to the Word Truth'. Priestley explains that the word 'truth' is 'the child of art, and not of nature'. Truth is the name we give to the mental process of observing the coincidence of ideas in a self-evident proposition or the conjunction of ideas in a universal proposition. Assent to inductive judgements is thus based on repeated experience. If on repeated occasions we see that 'milk is white', we associate 'truth' with the proposition formulated to express this constant conjunction. In a number of his texts on the evidences of revealed religion Priestley adds a third class of truths to the two outlined above. These truths are expressed as historical propositions and our evidence for them is based on the testimony of others. Priestley claimed that our assent to historical propositions also arises from association and, as such, our assent to all three classes of truth may be said to rest on the same foundation. Chapter Four of this dissertation examines his claim in detail, but what is significant here is the equal regard that Priestley gave to each type of judgement and the equal grounds on which they gain assent.¹⁸

Priestley and Hartley both follow the conventional Lockean threefold division of knowledge, judgement and testimony. Although Locke speaks of the readiness with which we grant assent to any type of truth, his restricted definition of 'knowledge' makes the threefold division a hierarchy where degrees of certainty decrease as we make judgements and rely on the word of others. Priestley and Hartley's associative explanation of the process by which we generate ideas and assent to propositions is more radical than Locke's. It has a tendency to level the hierarchy of knowledge by placing all truths on an equal footing because they are generated in the same way, by the mental combination of ideas. Association makes all truth fallible and, as Hartley explains in his discussion of assent, even our assent to mathematical truths may have a degree of uncertainty and error. To maintain the association of ideas as a universal principle of the human mind may be seen to open the way to doubt and scepticism. It is always strictly possible that our ideas and knowledge may be based on wrong

¹⁸ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.18. Hartley, *Observations*, Vol.I, p.324. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.237-246.

associations and we may all be misled by false inductions and specious analogies. Priestley was acutely aware that under the associative system nothing necessarily guarantees that our ideas correspond with the realities of the external world.¹⁹

Warrington Academy

Priestley spent three years at Daventry Academy before moving to Needham Market in Suffolk to work as a minister for a small congregation. It was not a happy time, his salary was small and his increasingly unorthodox religious beliefs meant he was not accepted into the community. Priestley also had a stammer, a ‘source of great distress’ that ‘had increased so much, as to make preaching very painful’. Alongside his duties as a minister Priestley embarked upon a teaching career giving lectures to adults on various branches of the sciences. It was this combination of educator and minister that kept Priestley employed throughout his life. In 1758 he moved to Nantwich in Cheshire to take on a congregation and establish a school, and this time his sermons were warmly accepted and his teaching was well-received. Three years later Priestley was offered the opportunity to teach languages and *belles lettres* at Warrington Academy. Here he experienced the kind of intellectual companionship that had characterised his time at Daventry and made a ‘very suitable and happy connexion’ with Mary Wilkinson, sister to the famous ironmasters. It was also at Warrington that Priestley did the bulk of his work on language, grammar, rhetoric and literary criticism and the lectures he produced at this time are studied in detail in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation. Priestley tells us that he had no particular fondness for the study of language, but he certainly applied himself with characteristic energy and his lectures are a fascinating resource.²⁰

During his time at Warrington Priestley composed and delivered *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*. It is unsurprising that a man whose professional life was devoted to the art of fluent communication and whose publications were polemical and argumentative would have much to say on the subject of persuasion and assent. It may have become commonplace to regard the art of rhetoric with some degree of suspicion and to pit the plain facts of logic against the clever verbal manipulation of the

¹⁹ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, pp.325-328, p.357 and p.363. Vilem Mudroch makes the same point about Hartley but claims Priestley did not consistently follow Hartley on assent and judgment in “Eclectic Epistemology”, p.57.

²⁰ Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.78-92.

rhetorician, but Priestley well knew the power of words and the persuasive impact of reasoned argument. He believed that a properly arranged discourse can bring much needed clarity to a discussion and was committed to obtaining assent through the power of reason. Priestley's rhetoric is not opposed to logic, it marshals and expounds ideas already obtained through a logical process and displays their full rational force. When this is done correctly, assent is assumed to follow mechanically from the perception of the truth of the proposition. Students at Daventry had been encouraged to debate freely, to examine a topic from every angle and settle on the truth independently. Priestley helped foster a similar atmosphere at Warrington, believing that truth emerges from unfettered debate and lively disputation. Contextual studies of Priestley's lectures emphasise the cultural exclusion of dissenters and the ways in which learned argument was their essential tool in the fight for political recognition and religious toleration. Priestley had never formally studied rhetoric, but he certainly appreciated its importance in practice.²¹

Priestley cites John Ward's *System of Oratory* as one of his sources, but Ward's work is a faithful exposition of classical theory and Priestley's *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* are notable for their immediate departure from tradition. Ward follows a classical structure; his text is suffused with erudite references and 'proper examples taken from the choicest parts of antiquity'. By contrast Priestley's straightforward discussion divides the process of rhetorical composition into four parts: recollection, method, style and elocution. Priestley ignores the traditional place of rhetorical invention and begins with the supposition that the materials for discourse have already been obtained. Oratory is an art that improves upon nature facilitating the natural faculty of speech. It consists only of a rules for the proper use of materials gained from other branches of study and observation. 'Recollection', then, directs our turn of thoughts and allows us to swiftly identify arguments when we are already well acquainted with the subject. 'Method' is the disposition of these ideas in a discourse, while 'style' allows us

²¹ Schofield, *Enlightenment*, pp.107-112. Peter France, "Rhetoric" in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp.496-499. A. L. George, "Grounds of Assent in Priestley's A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism", *Rhetorica- A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 16, (1998). T. P. Miller, "Where did College English Studies come from?", *Rhetoric Review*, 9, (1990) . See J. R Fruchtmann, "Joseph Priestley on Rhetoric and the Power of Political Discourse", *Eighteenth Century Life*, 7, (1982) for an example of the way Priestley used his theory of argument to good effect in political texts.

to choose ‘which manner of expression, will best adorn and recommend it’. Finally, ‘elocution’ gives assistance with delivery of a discourse.²²

Priestley published his lectures in 1777, having been ‘frequently urged’ to make them public, and he eventually did so in order to make Hartley’s principles widely known. According to Priestley it is his use of the association of ideas in order to explain the basis of effective narration and argument that marks him out as an innovator in the field. ‘It is probable that many of the observations will be peculiar to myself, because my general theory of human nature is very much so’. Priestley’s departure from the classical theory exemplified by Ward is therefore not only to be found in the simplified structure of his lectures but also in his insistence that the art of oratory be founded on the principles of human nature.

It is necessary...as far as *reasoning* is concerned, that a person be, in some sense, a *logician* before he be an orator; since it is by the rules of *logic* that we judge everything relating to *arguments*... more especially is it of consequence to every orator whose business is with *men*, to be well acquainted with human nature.

Priestley’s lectures are based on his understanding of the process by which we generate ideas and expand our comprehension of the world. To argue coherently and to elicit the assent of an audience is therefore to understand how we initially formulate knowledge and enquire after truth. For instance as part of Priestley’s discussion of narrative ‘method’ we are told to pay attention ‘to the strongest and most usual *associations of ideas*’ in order to compose a good narrative. A striking composition clearly exhibits the relationships between ideas, ‘since it is by means of their *mutual relations* that ideas introduce one another, and *cohere*, as it were, in the mind’. Narrative discourse thereby harnesses the process of association in order to lead the understanding from one idea to another and make a lasting impression on the mind. The *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* usefully demonstrate Priestley’s commitment to associationism and deepen our understanding of his theory of logical investigation, judgement and assent.²³

²² The publication of the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* may be seen in conjunction with Priestley’s edition on Hartley’s *Observations* published in 1775. They may also be considered as part of his duties as a tutor in Shelburne’s household- they were dedicated to Shelburne’s eldest son, Lord Viscount Fitzmaurice. Priestley, *LOC*, pp.iv-v and pp.2-5. J. Ward, *A System of Oratory, delivered in a course of lectures publicly read at Gresham College London: to which is prefixed an inaugural oration*, (London, 1759), p.15 and pp.29-30. Priestley omits his lectures on elocution from his published work.

²³ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.i-ii, p.3 and p.34-35. Bevilacqua and Murphy, in Priestley, *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, pp.xxi-xxv and pp.xxxi-xxxiii.

W. S. Howell in his work on eighteenth-century logic and rhetoric suggests Priestley's work must be seen as part of a new rhetorical tradition that is best interpreted as a response to the new scientific methods associated with Locke and Newton. Classical logic and rhetoric dealt with syllogistic enquiry and the deduction of truths from established maxims. Priestley and his contemporaries departed from this tradition; they based the art of persuasion on the principles of human nature and advocated methods of communication that mirrored scientific investigation. According to Howell, Priestley became the first rhetorician of his time to establish a new theory of rhetorical arrangement for the disposition of argumentative discourse. Priestley dispensed with the traditional system of *exordium, narration, division, proof, refutation and conclusion*, advocated by the likes of Ward and instead relied on the analytic and synthetic methods of enquiry familiar to all those who practised natural philosophy. Priestley's innovation was to extract these methods from their conventional use as investigatory procedures and insist on their strictly presentational role. Howell suggests that Priestley's discussion of rhetorical arrangement owes much of its philosophical groundwork to William Duncan's *Elements of Logick*. His evidence is strong; there are a number of instances of shared language, phraseology and illustration. However, while Howell emphasises the similarities between the work of Priestley and Duncan, a closer look at Priestley's definition of 'analysis' and 'synthesis' would suggest that more is to be gained from examining the differences between the two thinkers.²⁴

Duncan tells us that the pursuit of truth begins with a comprehensive survey of all that we know, followed by a dismantling of this knowledge into separate parts for careful examination.

Whereas at our first setting out we were acquainted only with some of the grand strokes and outlines, if I may so say of Truth, by thus pursuing her through several windings and recesses, gradually discover those more inward and finer touches, whence she derives all her strength, symmetry and beauty.

Only once this 'narrow scrutiny' has been achieved and we have 'unravelling any part of knowledge...to its first and original principles' can we then reverse the process, 'take the contrary way' and put the constituent parts back together again. Duncan illustrates these two processes, the resolution into parts and the systematic rebuilding of these

²⁴ Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric*, pp.5-6, pp.259-261, p.441 and p.640.

parts into a whole, using the example of a watch. Investigation requires taking a watch to pieces and separately scrutinising each of its parts in order to understand how they relate to one another. We can then recombine these elements until we again have a working mechanism. This is a mental process that can also be expressed in logical terms. Logical enquiry begins with a proposition which may then be resolved into the fundamental maxims it expresses. In order to do this we uncover relationships between ideas by identifying the intermediate or middle terms that relate subject and predicate: ‘tracing things backward in a continued series, until at length we arrive at some syllogism where the premises are first and self-evident’. Once such certainty has been established we can reverse the reasoning process: ‘we carry the train of our thoughts forward, until they lead us by a connected train of proofs to the very conclusion of the series’.²⁵

Duncan calls the search for truth ‘analysis’ or the ‘method of resolution’, as it involves the dismantling of the whole. An analytic argument places us in the position of an investigator and reveals to us the process by which he isolates and traces ideas in the pursuit of truth. The synthetic method is the literal reverse of the analytic. Although synthesis is not strictly used in the investigation of truth, it is the most useful way to arrange an argument as it allows us to demonstrate that truth emerges from first principles. It begins at the foundation and advances from these self-evident truths using deductions from them. The synthetic method may therefore be called the ‘method of communication’, as it allows for the ‘immediate perception of truth’. Of course, any method said to be based on reason and to beget certainty and assent was bound to appeal to Priestley. However, what is most remarkable about his discussion of rhetorical arrangement is that despite his borrowing from Duncan and regardless of their shared vocabulary, Priestley’s definition of the analytic and synthetic methods radically departs from Duncan’s work and turns his discussion on its head.²⁶

Priestley’s definition of analysis and synthesis is succinct. He gives no indication that his treatment of the terms is a departure from convention.

²⁵ W. Duncan, *The Elements of Logic*, In Four Books, (9th ed., London, 1800), pp.272-273. M. Moran, “Joseph Priestley, William Duncan and Analytic Arrangement in 18th-Century Scientific Writing”, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 4, (1984), p.208.

²⁶ Duncan, *Elements*, pp.276-278.

Logicians speak of two kinds of method in argumentative discourses, the *analytic* and *synthetic*; and the distribution is complete and accurate. For, in all science, we either proceed from particular observations to more general conclusions, which is *analysis*; or beginning with more general and comprehensive propositions, we descend to the particular propositions which are contained in them, which is *synthesis*.

Like Duncan, Priestley explains that analysis is the method by which ‘we are obliged to proceed in our investigation of the truth’ and synthesis is simply a convenient method of communication. However, with regard to the analytic method this division is all that the two men share. For Duncan investigation involves the unravelling of knowledge and the dismantling of our ideas into their first principles. For Priestley the pursuit of truth is based on the inductive process of formulating universal propositions from particular facts. ‘It is only by comparing a number of particular observations which are self-evident, that we perceive any analogy in effects, which leads us to apprehend an uniformity in their cause, in the knowledge of which all science consists’. In his search after truth Duncan takes apart a watch in order to examine each part, while Priestley examines a number of locks and tests a number of keys, ‘at last to produce that which will open them all’.²⁷

Priestley and Duncan both use mathematical models to illustrate the method of investigation but again their discussions share nothing but vocabulary. Duncan explains that in order to investigate truth we must have ‘an enlarged and comprehensive understanding, able to take in a great multitude of particulars’. Investigation begins with comprehension. Having taken a survey of our knowledge we can resolve it into its constituent parts. The easiest way to do this is to classify our ideas, narrow our focus and isolate particular things for examination. The algebraic method illustrates this process at work. Algebra allows us to identify unknown numbers by using a symbolic language to express complex numerical relationships. By this means we can isolate the separate parts of a mathematical problem, avoid confusion and never stretch our faculties too far. ‘The business of invention, as practised in algebra, depends entirely upon the art of abridging our thoughts, reducing the number of particulars taken under consideration at once to the fewest possible’.²⁸

²⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.42-43.

²⁸ Duncan, *Elements*, pp.278-293 and pp.305-313.

Priestley also approximates the analytic and algebraic methods but his emphasis is on the way in which the symbolic representation of unknown quantities mirrors the testing of hypotheses. Analysis involves the ‘slow and tedious’ examination of particular facts. No principles are taken for granted and hypotheses are proposed on the basis of analogy. Unknown principles operating in nature are gradually uncovered through a process of testing these hypotheses against every proposition already admitted, like testing a number of keys to identify the one that fits all the locks. The result is a universal explanatory principle that reflects a necessary relationship in nature. Investigation ends in comprehension.²⁹

We have already seen that Priestley’s discussion of narrative discourse rests explicitly on associative foundations. A comparison of Priestley and Duncan reveals that Priestley’s discussion of argumentative discourse is equally informed by his Hartleyan principles. Priestley’s definition of analysis is revealing, as it expresses with simplicity the process that he identified as the source of all our knowledge. The Lockean way of ideas envisages a mind continually engaged in abstraction and able to cope with an increasing complexity. From simple beginnings the most complex ideas may gradually be constructed. In the same way, the mind formed by association is a mind with a limitless capacity for comprehension of the natural world. Human knowledge advances because we connect or associate ideas and as we build these associations our breadth of knowledge expands. New discoveries consist in the anticipation and then the perception of previously associated ideas in new circumstances. It is the analogy between two sets of circumstances that mechanically generates this anticipation. When Priestley uses the term hypothesis, he refers to the likely conjunction of previously associated ideas arising in a situation analogous to that in which the conjunction was first observed. It is on the basis of hypotheses, constructed through analogy, that human knowledge expands in comprehension, moves from the known to the unknown and from the particular to the universal. This is the process that Priestley calls analysis, and in this sense both Priestley and Hartley sometimes use the terms analogy and association interchangeably.³⁰

²⁹ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.43-44.

³⁰ McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.395-404. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.246-253. R. Marsh, “The Second Part of Hartley’s System”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20, (1959), pp.266-267. Duncan’s text is curious. In his final book he elucidates the principles of the inductive method in a way that Priestley

Priestley's central concern in his *Lectures on Oratory* is to show that while the mind spontaneously engages in the associative construction of knowledge, this mechanism may be harnessed in the communication of knowledge in order to gain assent. A persuasive argument narrates the process of investigation to other people and in doing so guarantees their assent by engaging their reason and leading them to make new judgments. 'It is as if the persons we are instructing did themselves make all the observations, and, after trying every hypothesis, find that none would answer except that which we point out to them'. In this manner, starting only from those principles universally allowed, 'we may lead others insensibly, and without shocking their prejudices, to the right conclusion'. When you construct a good argument the judgment of the audience is moved to coincide with your point of view; you label the same associations with the term 'truth' and these associations are guaranteed to be accurate as they arise from reason alone. It is clear that Priestley held that judgment based on reason is the only proper grounds for assent. However, we shall soon see in Chapter Two that he was also aware that assent may be generated with recourse to the passions, and such assent bypasses reason altogether. Judgment may be the proper grounds for assent, but it is far from the only means by which we formulate an understanding of the world around us.³¹

Alongside his discussion of analysis Priestley examines the benefits of the synthetic method. 'It is easier to shew how one general principle comprehends the particulars comprised under it, than to trace all those particulars to one that comprehends them all'. It is easier to demonstrate that a certain key fits multiple locks than guide an onlooker through the process of trial and error that led to the discovery. Just as he aligns analysis and algebra, Priestley also compares synthesis to geometry or 'the method of proposition and demonstration'. A synthetic or geometric demonstration begins with accurate axioms that cannot be disputed. When these are laid down correctly a foundation is built on which the demonstration can proceed. The principal proposition can then be stated with accuracy, resolved into its proper parts, and the relationship between the ideas can be proved with recourse to intermediate terms or lemmas. With the final appeal always to self-evidence, a synthetic discourse is either founded on truth

probably found appealing, but his discussion of 'analysis' demonstrates a commitment to the syllogism and the deductive method of his predecessors

³¹ Priestley, *LOC*, p.43.

or contains within it the means of its own confutation. The propositions demonstrated from universal maxims ‘by the simple rules of reasoning, must be next to self-evident, and carry the strongest possible conviction alone with them’. Despite their different approaches to the analytic method, both Priestley and Duncan believed that truth is most usefully communicated when it can be seen to arise from self-evident principles.³²

If Priestley and Duncan recognise that the communication of truth is most effective when founded on self-evidence, they share a related concern with accurate definition in order to ensure that speaker and listener affix the same ideas to the same terms. As Priestley puts it:

In a great number of metaphysical, moral, and religious controversies, the disputants appeal to the definition of *terms*; and could these be agreed upon, the controversies would be at an end. The unhappiness is, that, in things of an abstruse nature, few persons affix precisely the same ideas to the same terms: from whence it often happens that they fancy they differ, when in reality, they are agreed, and all the dispute is, at the bottom, about *words*, and not about *things*.

Priestley asks us to begin a synthetic demonstration with definitions of the ideas in question to help establish ‘uncontroverted principles’ and to free us from ‘confusion and embarrassment’. Duncan goes into more detail, explaining that we can only ensure a stable and universal definition if we resolve our complex ideas into the simple ideas from which they are compounded. Simple ideas themselves arise from universal categories of sensory experience and are therefore in ‘no danger of being mistaken or confounded’. Both discussions recall Locke’s discussion of the process of definition as an analysis of complex ideas into their simple components. Duncan and Priestley also share Locke’s confidence that this method of definition means that, in Locke’s words, ‘Morality is capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematics’. Locke tells us that as moral terms are the names of mixed modes, the process of definition acts as a demonstration of our ideas of, for example, ‘goodness’ and ‘evil’. For Locke mathematical and moral truths are nearly identical in nature. When both can be shown

³² Priestley, *LOC*, pp.43-48. Moran in, “Priestley, Duncan”, discusses Priestley on analysis but makes no distinction between the two men’s theories and does not acknowledge the important role of the synthetic demonstration in Priestley’s discussion of rhetorical arrangement. Priestley and Duncan’s shared mathematical language is the basis for Howell’s comparison.

to rest on incontestable or self-evident propositions, then the same levels of certainty can be obtained in both fields.³³

Locke does not explain the demonstration of moral truths using a mathematical model and does not provide examples. However, Duncan's *Logic* may be seen as extending Locke's work. Like Locke, Duncan uses a threefold definition of knowledge. He talks of *scientific* knowledge which arises from the bare contemplation of abstract ideas, of *natural* knowledge which arises from the evidence of our senses and of *historical* knowledge which is based on testimony. Like Locke, Duncan also speaks of degrees of certainty relating to these classes of truths and admits that it is possible that our senses may be disordered and that other people may have reason to deceive us. However, he also tells us that all types of knowledge and all classes of truths may be demonstrated using the synthetic method. His motivation is to defend our knowledge against scepticism and to illustrate the folly of dismissing all truths on the mere chance that some may be shown to be false. Strictly speaking synthetic demonstrations are only possible in relation to knowledge that arises from the comparison of ideas. However, while this alone may be called *science*, the scientific or synthetic method may be put to good use in demonstrating other types of knowledge, and where it is applied, 'it necessarily begets science and certainty'. In these cases the data of experience or testimony are taken as foundational truths and the demonstration proceeds as though it rested on the self-evident truths of intuition. Duncan calls it 'remarkable' that even truths initially established by induction and analogy and therefore never more than probable, may still be established as 'postulata'. 'We can upon this foundation build strict and mathematical demonstrations, and thereby introduce *scientific* reasoning into natural knowledge'.³⁴

Duncan's argument would surely have appealed to Priestley. His promise that the certainty of the synthetic method may be usefully applied to all classes of truths is an attractive antidote to concerns that arise from the fallibilism inherent in the associative model of the mind. Like Duncan, Priestley explains that the geometric method of proposition and demonstration 'may be adapted or imitated with advantage, by writers

³³ Priestley, *LOC*, p.11 and p.46. Duncan, *Elements*, pp.346-351. Locke, *Essay*, pp.516-517. R. Harris and J. T. Taylor, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought*, Vol. I, (London, 1997), pp.134-135.

³⁴ Duncan, *Elements*, pp.331-332, pp.363-364.

in general'. Even more radically than Duncan, Priestley treats the ideas of mathematics, morality and theology as essentially identical due to their basis in the association of ideas. 'Truth whether geometrical, metaphysical, moral, or theological, is of the same nature, and the evidence of it is perceived in the same manner by the same human minds'. Each of these classes of abstract ideas has its own self-evident truths from which a synthetic demonstration may proceed in order to ascertain high levels of certainty and assent usually associated only with geometry. 'Whatever we propose to demonstrate, the last appeal lies to *self-evident truths*; in moral subjects, to consciousness of internal feelings; and in matters of revelation, to the plain sense of scripture'. Furthermore, Priestley extends Duncan's conclusions still further when he advocates the same method for questions involving probabilities. A demonstration may involve a number of arguments, he says, 'each of which may add something to probability, (which in its own nature admits of degrees,) till the united strength of them all be sufficient to determine the assent'. Priestley speaks of the 'humble distance' at which the moralist and divine follow the mathematician. However, he is confident that the synthetic method allows for truths to be expounded and tested against a standard of reason. It may therefore be called 'the very *touchstone* of truth'.³⁵

Priestley's starting point in the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* is not the analytic and synthetic methods of arrangement but the means by which we may furnish the mind with the ideas in a discourse. Priestley tells us that the investigation of truth is the business of the logician. However, the art of rhetorical recollection may assist us in finding arguments and illustrations arising from previous study. The tool that Priestley proposes for this purpose of artificial recollection is the 'general topic, or head of discourse'. Topics function by supplying the middle term or intermediate idea that links the subject and predicate in a proposition. Endeavouring to prove that *a good man is a wise man*, we make use of a middle term held in common by both ideas in the proposition. In this case 'making use of the means of happiness' applies equally to goodness and to wisdom. Priestley lists a number of topics that may be used to furnish proof for general propositions, such as *adjuncts*, *antecedents*, *consequents* and *examples*. Topical invention is a technique associated with classical logic and evidently has a close relationship with the kind of syllogistic reasoning that Priestley ignored in

³⁵ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.45-50.

his discussion of rhetorical arrangement. Howell speaks of the ambiguity with which new rhetoricians dealt with topics and the tendency to restrict their use to that of recollection rather than invention. He talks of Priestley's 'unenthusiastic view of the function of topics' and classes Priestley along with the classicist Ward as a 'reluctant modern advocate' of an outdated system.³⁶

What Howell does not consider is that Priestley rejuvenated topical theory by providing it with an associative rationale. Priestley uses association to explain the function of the topic. 'What is *recollection* but the introduction of one idea into the mind by means of another with which it is was previously associated?' Topics therefore harness association for mechanical recall, prompting the mind to identify previously associated ideas in the search for a common middle term. In fact, says Priestley, all recollection may be described in the same way. 'It is impossible to conceive in what other manner *voluntary effort* to invent, or recollect, can be directed'. It is impossible to recollect or invent material unless we in our minds run through heads of discourse furnished by experience. Although Priestley does not make it explicit, topics have a clear relationship to the synthetic and analytic methods of arrangement. A synthetic demonstration requires that the intermediate ideas of a proposition be identified. However, the proposition in question rarely arises from deduction or syllogistic enquiry but from the analytic method of induction. Therefore the synthetic method requires us to think back over the process of investigation, identifying the associations and analogies established by the mind as it gradually comprehends natural principles. Priestley tells us that over time a person practised in the art of composition becomes particularly skilled at this art of associative recollection. Like all associative processes this manner of recollection becomes habitual or 'secondary automatic', and the required materials are thus readily identified.³⁷

Priestley's work on topical recollection is notable for his introduction of an associationism to an ancient theory. His discussion is also useful as an illustration of the close relationship Priestley identified between language and reason. We have already seen that Priestley frequently swapped between psychological and logical terms when

³⁶ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.4-24. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric*, pp.637-638.

³⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.22-25. Bevilacqua and Murphy, in Priestley, *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, p.xxxi.

describing the mechanism of judgement and assent. Here he does something similar: topical theory becomes nothing more than a verbal description of an underlying mental process of recollection, in the same way that the analytic and synthetic methods of presentation mirror the process of logical investigation. The mental or associative acts of judgment and recollection seem to be held by Priestley as mirroring but distinct from their verbal expression. If Priestley is not explicit about this in his *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, he leaves us in little doubt elsewhere. In his *Examination...of the Principles of Common Sense* Priestley writes:

Since propositions and reasoning are mental operations, and, in fact, nothing more than cases of the *association of ideas*, everything necessary to the process may take place in the mind of a child, or an idiot, or of a brute animal, and produce the proper affections and actions, in proportion to the extent of their intellectual powers.

A dog is afraid of fire for the same reason that we are: a dog makes the same judgments as we do. The only difference is that the dog cannot express this associative judgment ‘in the form of regular syllogisms and conclusions’. Judgments arise internally, passively and unreflectively from the conjunction of two ideas; their verbal expression is distinct from and secondary to the process. ‘*Words* are of great *use* in the business of thinking, but are not necessary to it’. Priestley’s statement seems unequivocal. McEvoy and McGuire in their often-cited article on Priestley’s metaphysics take it as his final word on the matter. However, we may contrast their conclusions with Robert Schofield’s comment that ‘Priestley assumes that the act of thinking is a linguistic activity’ and add into the mix Hartley’s bold statement, ‘we think in words’. In Chapters Two and Three we will examine Priestley’s ambiguity concerning the role of words in the processes of reasoning, thinking and feeling and in the progressive generation of the personality. In Chapter Five we will see that while Priestley saw the ancient language of the scriptures as clouding and obscuring their truth, he also acknowledged the close relationship between biblical language and the mind, culture and habits of its authors. At times Priestley seems committed to a Lockean model of words as signs of separate ideas but there is much that troubles this straightforward conclusion.³⁸

³⁸ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.15-19. Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.305. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.355-357. Schofield, *Enlightenment*, pp.105-106.

Calne

Priestley left Warrington in 1767, in part because he had a baby daughter and could not maintain a growing family on wages of 'bare subsistence'. He moved to Leeds where he preached to a 'liberal, friendly, and harmonious congregation' at the Mill Hill Chapel, had two sons, and continued the experiments on electricity and air for which he is now remembered. He also continued to publish on a number of topics including theology, education and political philosophy and was part of a sophisticated community of well-educated middle class dissenters. Priestley's intellectual horizons expanded again when, in 1773, he and his family moved to Calne, in Wiltshire, to the estate of Lord Shelburne. Priestley was engaged as Shelburne's companion, a varied and ill-defined role that saw him acting as political ally and librarian, accompanying Shelburne on his travels and supervising his children's education. However, Priestley was unimpressed by Shelburne's upper-class life of leisure and warns us in his *Memoirs* of the unhappiness in store for those who have neither employment nor 'motive for a constant exertion of the faculties'. Priestley ensured that he had plenty with which to occupy his mind and his position gave him ample time to consolidate his political, metaphysical and theological beliefs. During the 1770s Priestley published a string of five texts, a 'metaphysical pentad', which defined his associative model of the mind, his materialism and his doctrine of philosophical necessity.³⁹

Priestley's *Examination of...The Principles of Common Sense* was the first of these five publications. It is an infamously harsh rejection of the 'common sense' philosophy of Thomas Reid, and a damning report on the conclusions drawn from Reid's system by James Beattie and James Oswald. Reid began his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* by speaking of a widely accepted hypothesis for which he could find no evidence.

The hypothesis I mean is, That nothing is perceived but what is in the mind which perceives it: That we do not really perceive things that are external, but only certain images and pictures of them imprinted upon the mind, which are called *impressions* and *ideas*.

Reid refers to the Lockean system on which Priestley's associationist theory of judgement and assent is founded and the reason for Priestley's hostility quickly

³⁹ Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.92-99 and p.114. 'Metaphysical pentad' is Schofield's term in *Enlightened*, p.43.

becomes clear. As far as Reid was concerned the Lockean model tells of a mind that is essentially passive and fragmented. Thinking involves the awareness of ideas, as if the mind simply watches a procession of atomised ideas and perceives relations between them as they file past. For Reid any system that says it is our ideas of things, rather than the things themselves, that are the immediate objects of perception is open to sceptical attack. His common sense theory is a response to attempts to undermine our certainty in the existence of an external reality. For instance, on this basis Berkeley had argued that as we are aware only of our ideas, we cannot assume an external world exists. Hume had also tackled this problem and posited a theory of impressions that holds that there are no necessary connections between our ideas except those that result from mental associations. Reid accepted the scepticism of Hume and Berkeley as valid conclusions drawn from Lockean premises. ‘The rational issue of this system is scepticism, with regard to anything excepting the existence of our ideas’. If we accept Locke’s hypothesis we also have to accept that we are locked in a world of our own ideas, with no guarantee that they tell us anything about reality. ‘Upon this hypothesis, the whole universe about me, bodies and spirits, sun, moon, stars and earth, friends and relations, all things without exception, which I imagined to have permanent existence...vanish at once’.⁴⁰

Priestley narrates Reid’s story in the preface to the *Examination*. ‘Finding that all systems concerning the human understanding...were built upon this hypothesis, he was resolved to inquire into the subject anew’. Reid’s project was to construct a system that was immune to the sceptical pitfalls of idealism by rejecting Locke’s original premises and arguing that our sensations make us directly aware of real objects. Reid said that far from passively watching ideas, the mind actively perceives objects. It makes no sense to talk of the ‘objects’ of perception and ‘acts’ of the mind. The objects of perception exist only in the external world and our mental response to them is direct and active. Sensations are caused by external objects: they do not resemble objects but they do suggest their actual qualities, acting as ‘natural signs’ of those qualities. Without any prior experience we know immediately that sensations signify something about the external world: sensation therefore includes judgment and belief. We cannot explain

⁴⁰ T. Reid, *An Inquiry into The Human Mind On the Principles of Common Sense*, (Edinburgh, 1764), pp.vii-viii and pp.369-373. Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.12. Tapper, “Joseph Priestley”, p.316. Dybikowski in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, p.87. J. Haldane, “Introduction”, in J. Haldane and S. Read (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid, A Collection of Essays*, (Oxford, 2003), pp.1-4.

how it happens, but we can conclude that it is an innate effect of our constitution. We are made in such a way as to have certain conceptions when we encounter certain natural signs. These are accompanied by a conviction of the accuracy of this conception and do not arise from education, experience or habit. These conceptions are inbuilt principles that are part of universal human nature, invariably compelling and always gaining immediate assent. They may also be called ‘self-evident’ because by their very nature their refutation would be a contradiction.⁴¹

Priestley’s answer to Reid tells us much about his epistemological assumptions and illuminates his definitions of ‘reason’ and ‘truth’. Reid’s discussion begins with the notion that we can be certain that what we apprehend is reality. On this basis that he rejects Locke’s premises rather than concede any ground to scepticism. Priestley has a radically different starting point. He says that we can never be certain of the existence of external objects. While Reid pleads for certainty, Priestley argues that probability is enough. In a Lockean tone he states, ‘the Divine Being leaves us to be governed by a kind of faith far inferior to mathematical certainty in things of infinitely more consequence’. Priestley argues that we are not born with a certain belief in the external world and nor do we ever directly apprehend reality. ‘It is not true that we necessarily believe the existence of external objects, *as distinct from our ideas of them*’. A child lives in a world of sensations arising in the mind from the stimulation of the nerves by external objects. He lives in the present moment, grasping at those objects that give him pleasure and recoiling from those that cause him pain, ‘without having any ideas as that of *mind* at all, or hardly of *self*’. It is only gradually that a child develops an awareness of the objects of perception and understands that these objects are not external to him but are the ideas of his own mind. He realises that the most likely explanation for the presence of these ideas is the existence of an external world that has caused them. The contrary sceptical conclusion is not impossible, but it is absurd and unlikely.

Originally, we have no knowledge of any such thing as *ideas*, any more than we have of the images of objects on the retina; and the moment we have attained the knowledge of ideas, the external world is nothing more than an *hypothesis*, to account for those ideas.⁴²

⁴¹ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.12. K. Winkler, “Perception and Ideas, Judgement”, in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, p.271. Lowe, *Locke*, p.148. Haldane, in Haldane and Read (eds.), *Thomas Reid*, p.3.

⁴² Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.19-47. Tapper, “Joseph Priestley”, p.316. Dybikowski in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, p.88

Priestley establishes that we first perceive ideas and then attempt to account for their existence. He goes on to present an alternative explanation for Reid's common sense principles. As we have already seen Priestley was devoted to a method of investigation that identifies overarching explanatory principles from particular instances. The natural philosopher is engaged in a process of '*simplifying* all appearances and all causes'. Reid had thus made the ultimate methodological mistake. He had dismissed a simple, universal hypothesis and replaced it with an unnecessarily complicated system of '*independent, arbitrary, instinctive principles*'. Reid had found no evidence for the Lockean hypothesis. Priestley however, insisted that its 'agreeable simplicity' is evidence enough.

It is sufficient evidence for this hypothesis, that it exhibits *particular appearances*, as arising from *general laws*, which is agreeable to the analogy of every thing else that we observe. It is recommended by the same *simplicity* that recommends every other philosophical theory, and needs no other evidence whatever.

Priestley's task in the *Examination* is therefore to rehabilitate the Lockean model of the mind by introducing us to Hartley's associationism. His aim is to popularise the association of ideas in order to 'divert' attention from Reid's 'incoherent scheme'. As far as Priestley is concerned, Reid's so-called instinctive principles are 'nothing more than so many different cases of the old and well-known principle of *association of ideas*'.⁴³

Although Priestley disagreed with Reid and found his notions of human nature 'the very reverse of those which I had learned from Mr. Locke and Dr. Hartley', he initially gave little thought to the matter. He tells us that he did not even finish Reid's book as it seemed merely amusing sophistry. However, upon reading Oswald's *Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*, Priestley realised the seriousness of a scheme that seemed to him to overturn the fundamental principles of '*truth and reason*'. Priestley did not write his *Examination* merely to defend associationism; it is also a defence of reason and religion. Reid used common sense to account for certain belief in external reality, the uniformity of the natural world and the existence of causal relationships, as well as the necessary truths of logic, mathematics and morality. Priestley did not initially consider his theory threatening as it seemed only 'a new method of explaining

⁴³ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.6 and pp.23-33. Tapper, "Method and Mind", pp.98-101.

the manner in which we give our assent to self-evident propositions; and, provided the propositions were really self-evident, it signified nothing in practice by what means we evince them to be so'. However, our political and religious beliefs are not self-evident, and when Oswald and Beattie used common sense to account for beliefs in these fields Priestley became alarmed. As far as Priestley was concerned, our political and religious convictions arise from judgements and are based on reason. In these cases common sense encroaches on the realm of associative judgements, 'superseding reasoning wherever it comes'. Priestley's model of the mind explains the origins of our knowledge, while common sense 'explains nothing'. 'Dr. Reid meets with a particular sentiment, or persuasion, and not being able to explain the origin of it, without more ado he ascribes it to a *particular original instinct*'. For Priestley this is dangerous ground and denies the use of reason. Reid postulates the existence of ideas without even trying to explain them, 'thus avowed ignorance is to pass for real knowledge'.⁴⁴

In order understand Priestley's hostile reaction to Reid we need again to consider the inherently fallible nature of the associationist hypothesis. Priestley said that objects and ideas stand in relation to one another as cause and effect. For Priestley 'reasoning' is not a mental activity that is fundamentally different from all other mental processes. It is the name given to the association or conjunction of ideas in the mind caused by external objects. The associationist doctrine allows only for this passive combination and comparison of ideas. Judgements are mechanical, the mind is presented with ideas generated by sensations caused by the external world and these inevitably result in the comparison of ideas. As Priestley puts it in his reply to the *Letters on Materialism*, when our ideas are caused by external objects 'it is impossible but that we must judge of all things as they appear to us'. However, as Priestley knew, the most troubling aspect of this theory is that ideas are not always caused by external objects at all. As we will see in Chapter Two, ideas can exist entirely in the imagination and bear no resemblance, literal or figurative, to external reality. Moreover, our judgments, or comparisons of ideas, generate further ideas that may also exist entirely in the imagination and have no basis in the external world.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.3-5, pp.11-13, p.27 and p.138. Reid, *Inquiry*, pp.343-349, pp.587-593 and p.603.

⁴⁵ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.35-38. Priestley, *Philosophical Necessity*, 4, pp.127-128. Reid, *Inquiry*, p.108 and p.147. Tapper, "Joseph Priestley", p.316. Dybikowski, in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph*

Priestley claimed that Reid, Beattie and Oswald had superseded ‘reasoning’ and we are now in a better position to understand what he meant. For Priestley there is a crucial difference between our judgments based on ‘reasoning’ and other conjunctions of ideas, but this is not a difference in the mechanical process of association. Proper judgments are defined as those that reflect the external order of reality. Judgments are the result of reasoning and are caused by objects in the real world. False conjunctions of ideas also have a cause: they are the result of prejudice, idiosyncratic experiences and intense emotional states. This polarisation of reason and prejudice was an essential part of Priestley’s epistemology. We shall see in Chapter Two and Chapter Four that it played a crucial role in his understanding of the generation and transcendence of the personality and in his work on assent to revelation. In a number of texts Priestley outlines the absolute dichotomy between reason and prejudice. For instance in his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* Priestley talks of prejudices that ‘arise from what are commonly called *false views of things*, or improper associations of ideas, which in the extreme become *delirium* or *madness*’. He reiterates this point in the *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*.

There are causes of assent to propositions wholly independent of any proper *evidence* presented to the mind itself; so that we may be led to presume that there is sufficient evidence, though we do not ourselves perceive it. We are more especially in danger of being misled by specious *analogies*, and superficial but fixed *maxims* grounded on such analogies.⁴⁶

Reid said that our belief in the validity of conclusions from induction is the effect of instinct and not of reason. Experience alone is ‘as blind as a mole’. As far as Priestley was concerned Reid had replaced reason with ‘some invisible power’ when explaining the origin of our judgments. In turn this meant he had robbed us of the ability to distinguish between judgments that are caused by external objects and those caused by prejudice. He had robbed us of our ‘reason’. When truth depends on the ‘necessary nature of things’, it is ‘*absolute, unchangeable and everlasting*’; when truth has a relationship with reality, it is objective. In his antidote to scepticism Reid had made our knowledge of reality entirely relative, and when Beattie applied this to religious truths

Priestley, p.88. This is not to say that Priestley believed in innate ideas: all ideas arise from sensation but some false combinations exist only in the imagination and do not reflect external reality.

⁴⁶ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.70-72. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, p.327. Priestley, *Observations on the Increase in Infidelity, To Which are Added Animadversions on the Writings of Several Modern Unbelievers and Especially The Ruins of M. Volney*, (3rd ed., Philadelphia, 1797), Works 17, p.14. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.360-361.

Priestley was incensed. Beattie made truth depend on ‘some unaccountable *instinctive persuasions*, depending upon the arbitrary constitution of our nature, which makes all truth to be a thing that is *relative* to ourselves only, and consequently to be infinitely vague and precarious’. If truth is relative and depends on our constitutions it means we have no means of judging the truth of a proposition at all. What is true to one person is false to another and neither can debate meaningfully about the necessary nature of reality. Common sense therefore closes down free discussion and encourages a person to ‘pronounce decisively upon every question according to his present feeling, and persuasion’. This has profound political and theological consequences; it inhibits the liberal pursuit of truth in an open and free environment and stifles the perfection of society.⁴⁷

Birmingham

Priestley’s life in Calne was never as successful as either party had hoped. Priestley recalls perceiving ‘evident marks of dissatisfaction’ from Shelburne and the men parted company in 1780. Priestley took his family to Birmingham where he became senior minister of the New Meeting, a large and wealthy congregation. Priestley describes his settlement in Birmingham as ‘the happiest event in my life’. He found intellectual companionship from the Lunar Society and was part of a thriving dissenting community. Describing his time in Birmingham, he takes the opportunity in his *Memoirs* to reflect on the blessings of his religious and liberal education, his ‘good constitution of body’, to which he owed much ‘cheerfulness of temper’ and the eventually beneficial outcome of his younger, unhappier, days. Priestley also refers to himself as ‘well formed for public controversy’ and untroubled by strictures on his writings. This was fortunate. In 1782 Priestley published his infamous *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, a book that was banned from the public library, the subject of violent denunciation and so ‘rudely attacked’ that he was compelled to publish numerous subsequent texts in its defence.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.57-59, and pp.70-72. Reid, *Inquiry*, p.493. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.357-363. Ann L. George, “Grounds of Assent”, pp.99-103. Dybikowski, in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, p.89.

⁴⁸ Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.115-124. For Priestley and the Lunar Society see J. Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future, 1730-1810*, (London, 2002).

The *Corruptions* was not Priestley's first controversial theological text: his increasingly unorthodox views had been the subject of many previous publications. Priestley was brought up a Calvinist, but, while he shared his family's religiosity and remained a committed believer all his life, he was profoundly affected by early theological doubts. 'Having read many books of *experiences*', the young Priestley believed that it was essential to have a '*new birth*'. Such an experience was said to be essential to salvation, an emotional and spiritual awakening 'produced by the immediate agency of God'. In candid terms Priestley describes the 'horror' and 'distress of mind' he felt on being unable to satisfy himself that he had such an experience, and his feeling that 'God had forsaken me'. Fortunately, as he matured, Priestley was able to explore a rational theology and gradually gave up the Calvinism of his boyhood. At Daventry he rejected predestination and adopted the Arian doctrine that denies the equal divinity of God and Christ and instead regards Jesus as a unique divine creation. At Leeds Priestley had become a Socinian and now held the absolute humanity of Christ as a central tenet of his belief. In reaction to the Calvinist emphasis on religious emotional 'experience', Priestley's mature theology therefore rejected the mysterious, irrational and ineffable and instead formulated a set of religious principles that would supposedly withstand the severest rational scrutiny.⁴⁹

Priestley's rational approach to scripture was part of an idiosyncratic exegetic method that will be discussed in the final Chapter of this dissertation. Priestley's advocacy of reason as the standard by which we must always test our beliefs also extended to his discussions on the evidences of revelation, and this will be covered in Chapter Four. Priestley's adherence to the investigative method of inducing general laws from particular facts and expanding knowledge by way of analogy is equally apparent in his work on natural religion. Turning to his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* published during his time in Birmingham, we can piece together a picture of the kind of universe in which Priestley believed he lived as well as enriching our understanding of some of his central philosophical assumptions.

Priestley's natural religion is not a strict synthetic demonstration; it does not begin with established propositions and he does not believe we can prove God's existence *a priori*.

⁴⁹ Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.71-73. For the development of Priestley's Arianism and Socinianism see Schofield, *Enlightenment*, chapters I, II and VII.

Rather he begins in the analytic mode, examining the facts of experience and ‘present appearances’ and leading us to some general and, supposedly highly probable, conclusions about the nature of God. Priestley’s central discussion uses the traditional argument from design but casts it in his usual language of induction and analogy and states, on this basis, that our assent should be as certain as that associated with mathematical demonstration. Experience teaches us that no object can exist without a cause; repeated associations lead us to believe that there are no exceptions to this rule. This in itself is ‘irresistible evidence’ for the existence of a creator. Experience also illustrates that the creator of any object must be capable of comprehending what he has produced. Just as a man is distinct from, and superior to, the chair he has made, arguing from analogy, we may state that so, too, is the first cause of the universe capable of comprehending the whole of creation. This speaks of a infinite intelligence which holds the entire universe in his view. As this creator is benevolent we can infer that the universe is designed to promote the happiness of God’s creatures and moves progressively closer to perfection as seeming evil resolves into ultimate good. For Priestley God ‘could not but have acted from all eternity’. God caused the universe but he had no voluntary choice in the matter: he did not create as an act of will but rather by his very nature necessitated the existence of the universe. All things arise necessarily from this first act. All things in the universe are linked in a chain of cause and effect stretching back to God and continually maintained by him.⁵⁰

Priestley’s work on natural religion should be read in conjunction with his *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, published during his time at Calne. Priestley had given up the idea of philosophical free-will while at Daventry and from then on maintained that God causally determined every event in the universe. He was compelled to defend his view as part of his ‘metaphysical pentad’ of the 1770s, because his materialist and mechanistic model of the mind entailed that the human will is governed by the same unvarying causal laws as all other natural phenomena. Priestley’s central argument is straightforward and compelling.

What I contend for is, that, with the same state of mind (the same strength of any particular passion, for example) and the same views of things (as any particular

⁵⁰ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, pp.328-357. Dybikowski, in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, pp.105-106. McEvoy and McGuire chart Priestley’s changing opinions on the nature of the relationship between God and his creation in “God and Nature”, pp.326-337.

object appearing equally desirable) he [man] would always make the same choice, and come to the same determination...In other words I maintain, that there is some *fixed law of nature respecting the will*, as well as the other powers of the mind, and everything else in the constitution of nature.

Whether one considers natural events or mental phenomena, the same rule applies, namely, that the same circumstances always result in the same effects. As this is invariable, we may conclude ‘that there must be a *sufficient reason* in the nature of things, why it should be produced in these circumstances’. Human actions and natural bodies are equally subject to causal determination and effects are united to their causes by a principle operating in the universal. Perhaps because of this emphasis on the determined nature of God’s creation, Priestley often describes the analytic method of investigation as the identification of general causes from particular effects and, as we have seen in his discussion of associationism, he applies this method to human actions as well as observations in natural philosophy. Led by analogy we generate hypotheses that establish an invariable relationship between appearances and their circumstances. As we abstract and construct general propositions to express these relationships, we identify or extract the common cause from a multitude of particular effects. To investigate truth is therefore to comprehend God’s causally determined universe to an ever increasing breadth.⁵¹

Priestley’s universe is ordered and stable, governed by unchanging causal laws. Causally related events are bound together by a divine principle that necessitates their relationship. In Chapter Four we will consider the nature of Priestley’s disagreement with Hume. For the present it is enough to say that Priestley’s belief in the divine order of the universe meant that he had confidence that our mental associations conjoin ideas necessarily linked in the external world; they are a psychological phenomenon caused by a corresponding natural conjunction. When we formulate universal propositions, they express the ‘necessary nature of things’. Priestley’s natural religion is based on induction and analogy, but there is a circular argument at work here: Priestley’s

⁵¹ Priestley, *Philosophical Necessity*, 3, pp.461-463. J. Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity. The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy*, (Oxford, 2005), pp.167-178. Dybikowski, in Rivers and Wykes (eds.) *Joseph Priestley*, pp.91-99. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.395-396. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.246-253 for more on association and hypothesis. Although necessity is an implication of mechanism Priestley says he first adopted it having read Anthony Collins and later republished this work. See A. Collins, *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty, republished with a Preface by Joseph Priestley*, (Birmingham, 1790).

inductive method only functions in the kind of unvarying universe envisaged in *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* and in *Philosophical Necessity*. As Locke put it, ‘wary Reasoning from Analogy leads us often into the discovery of Truth’, because in all parts of creation ‘there is a gradual connexion of one with another, without any discernable gaps’. Only the assumption of pre-ordained uniformity allows our past inference or associations to be accepted as valid criteria for the prediction of future events. As Priestley would have read in Hartley, ‘the analogous Nature of all Things about us are a great Assistance in decyphering their Properties, Powers, Laws, &c...all Things become Comments on each other in endless Reciprocation’. Reasoning by analogy is only useful when we conceive of a universe of endless resemblances, steady causal relations and unvarying principles.⁵²

Priestley’s necessitated universe is also a benevolent place, designed to facilitate our happiness and virtue. In *Philosophical Necessity* he tells us that ‘we are links in a great connected chain, parts of an immense whole’ and our unhappiness and suffering arise from our limited view of this causal chain. However, from this particular view we may ‘collect evidence enough that the whole system (in which, we are, at the same time, both *instruments* and *objects*) is under an unerring direction, and that the final result will be most glorious and happy’. Priestley envisaged a situation in which investigation in natural philosophy, as it works to comprehend an increasing breadth of experience through the inductive formulation of general propositions, brings us closer to happiness and virtue. As all things are linked forever in a chain of cause and effect, God has designed our associative minds so that we may gradually comprehend more and more links in this chain. This in turn elevates and perfects human nature. ‘The greatest and noblest use of philosophical speculation is the discipline of the heart and the opportunity it affords of inculcating benevolent and pious sentiments’. This is not only the realm of the natural philosopher; the comprehension of God’s causal universe is a duty that we all share and also an inevitable outcome of having an associative mind that increasingly abstracts from experience. As we shall see in Chapter Two and Chapter Four, the

⁵² Locke, *Essay*, pp.666-667. Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.343. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.234-236. Tapper, “Joseph Priestley”, pp.316-319. J.J. Hoecker, “Joseph Priestley and the Reification of Religion”, *The Price-Priestley Newsletter*, 2, (1978), pp.58-59. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.396-400. Hoecker points out that the idea of pre-ordained uniformity comes ultimately from Newton and in this broad sense Priestley’s metaphysics are not entirely idiosyncratic. Hoecker also argues that Priestley’s belief in the unchanging laws of God is an assumption that he did not, and could not, prove through experience and induction.

eventual outcome of this process is the transcendence of all that is idiosyncratic and unique in our characters and the ultimate annihilation of the ‘self’.⁵³

Pennsylvania

Priestley’s controversial combination of materialist and determinist metaphysics, anti-Trinitarian theology and radical political liberalism had alarming consequences. While in Birmingham, he faced increasing pressure from the conservative Anglican community, and in 1791 his house and belongings were destroyed in a ‘Church and King’ riot. Following these upheavals, Priestley moved to Hackney where he succeeded Richard Price at the Gravel Pit Meeting. Priestley faced continuing pressure and the fear of further riots while he lived in London, and in 1794 emigrated to Northumberland in Pennsylvania. Here he at last found himself living under a political regime that satisfied him and apparently ‘witnessed the gradual spread of his religious opinions’. However, in the decade that followed, Mary Priestley and their son Harry both died, and Priestley’s health slowly deteriorated. Having been a preacher and tutor for many years, Priestley found it increasingly difficult to communicate because he suffered from a ‘stoppage’ in his throat that left him periodically mute. Curiously, Priestley’s son Joseph recalls that Priestley ‘never felt more pleasantly in his whole life than during the time he was unable to speak’. Un-silenced in print, Priestley continued to write until the day of his death on the 6th of February 1804. That evening, although ill and weak, Priestley made final changes to a collection of pamphlets. When these were complete he turned to his son and said, ‘that is right; I have now done’. He died just hours later.⁵⁴

⁵³ Priestley, *Philosophical Necessity*, 3, p.450. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.337-348. Hoecker, “Reification”, p.45.

⁵⁴ Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.128-139. The account of Priestley’s death is written by his son.

Chapter Two

Entering Upon a New World

I Introduction

In Chapter One we examined Priestley's theory of judgment and his defence of reason as the only proper basis for assent. Mirroring the associationist process by which we generate universal propositions from particular facts, the analytic and synthetic methods of arrangement are recommended as watertight methods of persuasion. As long as the mind is free from prejudice, the passive perception of the agreement or association between two ideas will mechanically generate assent. 'Every demonstration is built upon self-evident truths. If a person thoroughly understand the process as he goes along, no objection will ever occur'. We perceive only mental conjunctions between ideas, but, as these are generated by sensations from external objects, we can safely conclude that they tell us something about the nature of reality. Priestley thus polarises reason and prejudice. A mind that uses reason to compare ideas and make judgments can be said to have knowledge of the necessary relationships between events and objects in the external world. The prejudiced mind bypasses reason, or is led by false analogies to associate ideas whose referents have no corresponding relationship in reality. Given this emphasis on reason as the only means by which we secure knowledge and gain assent, what happens in the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* during Priestley's consideration of 'style' as the third province of the orator is remarkable. Priestley introduces an entirely new purpose for the art of oratory which he has deliberately kept back from his readers during his discussion of 'recollection' and 'method'. That purpose is to please, and it is the pleasures of the passions, the judgment and the imagination that Priestley then proceeds to examine in depth.

The contrast is stark and revealing. While the *Lectures on Oratory* present an earnest and sober introduction to the power of reasoned discourse, the *Lectures on Criticism* sweep us into the rich and imaginative world of literary criticism. Finely rendered characters and intricate descriptions from the pages of Shakespeare, Pope, Swift and Voltaire accompany us through Priestley's subtle delineation of the psychological impact of literary tropes and figures. The lectures go far beyond Priestley's stated aim

of providing his students with tips on the manner and style of oratorical delivery. A vast array of poetry, literature, history and philosophy provide the evidence for a detailed investigation into the principles at work behind those literary pleasures that have a powerful hold over the mind. The gross pleasures of the passions and the delicate pleasures of the imagination emerge as founded on a complex web of related and compounded ideas, associations so powerful and consuming that they engage the mind entirely. 'As the mind conforms itself to the ideas which engage its attention', writes Priestley, 'it hath no other method of judging of itself but from its situation, the perception of a new train of ideas is like entering upon a new world, and enjoying a new being, and new mode of existence.'⁵⁵

In a striking echo of this sentiment Priestley also described reading Hartley's *Observations* as 'entering upon a new world'. His words indicate the depth of his commitment to the doctrine of the association of ideas as an explanatory model of the mind, and his *Lectures on Criticism* are his most extended and original demonstration of Hartley's principles at work. Priestley tells us his lectures were composed in order to publicise associationism, to 'explain the striking effects of excellencies in composition, upon the genuine principles of human nature'. Priestley's work on the pleasure we receive from fine literature, poetry and drama also borrows extensively from Lord Kames' *Elements of Criticism* and Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste*. His insistence that our response to language is best understood as part of a psychological study aligns Priestley's with these thinkers and places him within an emerging tradition that explained the principles of taste and literary criticism with reference to human nature. However, while Priestley's reliance on Kames and Gerard has led some to call his lectures a 'patchwork of debts and amendments', Priestley's work should not be dismissed as unoriginal. He rejected the theory that pleasurable sensations can be 'referred to so many distinct *reflex*, or internal senses' and in doing so rejected the epistemological assumptions of both Kames and Gerard. He also insisted that traditional literary terms were limited in their use. While a primary source of pleasure can be identified, the efficacy of all tropes and figures is ultimately referred to the association of ideas and this unifying principle cuts across all other classifications. To read his

⁵⁵ Priestley, *LOC*, p.120 and p.147. Priestley's discussion of rhetorical 'recollection' and 'method' is conventionally called the *Lectures on Oratory* and his work on 'style' the *Lectures on Criticism* although they appear together in one volume.

lectures solely as evidence for his skill in synthesising the work of others is therefore to ignore the significant consequences of writing literary theory in an entirely associationist mode.⁵⁶

Chapter One was concerned with the judgments we make concerning the necessary nature of external realities and emphasised Priestley's confidence that the association of ideas grants us reliable access to such truths. By polarising reason and prejudice, Priestley aligned reason with that which is shared and universal and prejudice with personal whim and error. By contrast this chapter takes a look at the associationist theory at its most fallible and examines the associationist generation of our most subjective dispositions and pursuits. Priestley accused Reid, Beattie and Oswald of a dangerous relativism and said that common sense theories rob us of our ability to reason and to attain truth, by founding assent on mere 'feeling'. However, there is nothing about the associationist hypothesis that guarantees that our mental conjunctions express relationships between objects in the real world, and the association between a proposition and the word 'truth' can also be grounded on emotion. In the first part of the chapter we will examine the ways in which powerful passions create belief in fictional scenes that have no basis in reality and how some 'forms of address' can gain assent merely on the basis of their previous association with truth. Far from having a straightforward ornamental role, many of the literary figures that engage the passions generate belief and assent by bypassing reason altogether. In these cases delusion and error may abound and there is little basis on which our associations may be said to resemble external realities.

In the second part of the chapter we will examine the nature and implications of an aesthetic theory based entirely on the association of ideas. Our tastes are the outcome of an accumulation of our experiences, circumstances and education. The pleasures of the imagination are based on complex clusters of associated ideas that swell with 'a secret retrospect' of individual associations and personal recollections. Our response to words and to verbal descriptions of scenes is therefore a highly individual experience.

Hartley's associationist theory suggests that our individual personalities arise from

⁵⁶ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.10. Priestley, *LOC*, p.i, pp.72-3, p.130 and p.202. Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, In Three Volumes, (Edinburgh, 1762). A. Gerard, *An Essay on Taste*, (London, 1759). Priestley's work is called a 'patchwork of debts' by Bevilacqua and Murphy, in Priestley, *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, (1975), pp.xlv-xlvi.

patterns and accumulations of desires and aversions. The generation of a unique 'self' arises from what we have learnt to love and to hate and is based on repeated experiences of pleasure and pain. The association of ideas can therefore be used to explain the origins of our unique personalities and to account for the wide variation in taste that exists between people. However, as we will see, Priestley was not a 'relativist'. He asserted the dichotomy between reason and prejudice in order to overcome the fallibilities of the associationist model. Reason overcomes mistaken instances of assent while experience tames the passions and tempers our belief in fictional beings. Meanwhile, our differing desires and aversions are not all equally valid, and as society increases in perfection some will be discarded or overturned. Over time, cumulative experience will harmonise our tastes and a universal standard will emerge.

The third part of this chapter examines the ways in which Priestley departs from traditional definitions of figurative language. Although he writes of the ornamental nature of figures such as metaphor, simile and personification, Priestley's work challenges the idea that such expressions are inherently deceptive or even that they are merely superficial stylistic devices superadded to a literal base. Instead Priestley insists on the natural and functional nature of figurative language. He collapses his own distinction between rational and ornamental discourse by emphasising the role of figures as the natural and proper language of the passions. Alongside this he also locates the origin of all figures in the fundamental human pleasure in comparing objects and drawing analogies. The association of ideas on the basis of their perceived resemblance lies at the heart of Priestley's discussion of figuration. Therefore, it is argued here, his discussion may be better understood when read in parallel with his associationist exposition of the analytic method. Finally, we will see that Priestley's work on figurative language calls into question his own assumption that words act as labels of pre-existing ideas. The *Lectures on Criticism* cloud the seemingly straightforward idea-word link that Priestley insists upon in his *Examination* and mark a significant departure from the atomistic model of language.

II

Passion and Belief

‘We have hitherto examined what we may call the bones, muscles, and nerves of a composition; we now come to the covering, the colour, the complexion, and graceful attitude of it’. Priestley assures us that the bare materials of a well-arranged argument will impress all those who think it important enough to engage their attention. A strong argument will generate assent on this basis alone. However, some minds will wander and the importance of an argument is not enough to keep everyone interested. Thus the rhetorician must consider the ‘style’ of a composition, the art of ornamenting a discourse and thereby engaging the attention ‘by the grace and harmony of the style, the turn of thought, or the striking or pleasing manner in which the sentiments are introduced and expressed’. The literary devices that move the passions and please the imagination are merely ornamental; they maintain attention long enough for the judgment to perceive the validity of the argument. Priestley is careful to keep these two ends of oratory distinct and to emphasise their essential difference. He stands out among his contemporaries for this polarisation between judgment and ornament, and between reason and passion. For instance, in his classically inspired *System of Oratory*, John Ward states that despite the ‘strong bias’ that emotion gives to our minds, an argument will rarely stand or fall on the basis of evidence alone. ‘The majority of mankind will neither be convinced by reason, nor moved by the authority of the speaker; the only way to put them into action, is to engage their passions’. This, he tells us, is the greatest skill of the orator. The following discussion examines why Priestley alone was so keen to keep the ends of rhetoric distinct and why this has important implications.⁵⁷

Priestley’s work on the stylistic ornaments used to adorn a discourse opens with three lectures on the impact of strong emotions on the mind. His focus is on the ways in which the passions may be raised ‘in proportion to the *vividness* of our ideas of those objects and circumstances which contribute to excite them’. Priestley owes a great debt to Kames, who, in his *Elements of Criticism*, posits his theory of ‘ideal presence’ in order to explain the way in which vivid fictional representation induces a powerful and compelling passionate response. External objects generate pleasures and pains, argues

⁵⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.71-72. Ward, *System of Oratory*, pp.155-157. Bevilacqua and Murphy, in Priestley, *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, (1975), p.xxxix and pp.xxxvii-xxxviii. George, “Grounds of Assent”, pp.94-95 and pp.103-107. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric*, p.642.

Kames, our reaction to these sensations are called ‘emotions’ and a corresponding desire to pursue pleasure and flee from pain is a ‘passion’. When we perceive external objects we know that they exist and our passions are raised accordingly. Memory can be equally vivid and will present scenes of such detail and accuracy that they are perceived to exist in the present moment. ‘In a complete idea of memory there is no past or future’. Crucially, vivid fictional representations are perceived in the same way as reality and memory. They completely occupy the mind and produce a conviction of present existence. Whether ‘fable or reality’ a vivid scene presented to the mind excludes the possibility for reflection and creates a consciousness of being actually present. The reader is placed directly within the scene of action and fully believes that they are there. For Kames this ‘ideal presence’ is ‘the means by which our passions are moved’ and is the foundation for the ‘extensive influence which language hath over the heart’.⁵⁸

Like Kames, Hartley’s associationist theory also holds that we are fundamentally orientated in order to pursue the sensation of pleasure and avoid the sensation of pain. This basic physical interaction with the world generates all our intellectual ideas. The associationist mechanism transfers affections generated by bodily events onto the recollection or anticipation of them and thus sensate experiences become intellectual ideas. In Hartley’s example a child is burnt by a fire or cut by a knife. Later this physical pain becomes an intellectual idea associated with the circumstances in which the burn or cut took place.

The Appearance of the Fire, or of a Knife, especially in Circumstances like those in which the Child was burnt or cut, will raise up in the Child’s nervous System painful Vibrations of the same kind with, but less in Degree than, those which the actual Burn or Wound occasioned.

Our passions exist in the mind as a response to pleasure and pain; we gradually learn to love what we pursue and abhor that which gives us pain; the injured child may hate the fire or knife and love the nurse who tended his wounds. Other moral theories suggested that our dispositions towards love and hate are innate: once we have judged something to be good we annex pleasure to it and once we have used reason to identify something as bad we come to hate it. Priestley and Hartley both mention John Gay’s associationist

⁵⁸ Kames, *Elements*, Vol. I, p.47, pp.104-114 and p.121-122.

moral treatise in which he suggested that the *love of happiness* is an original and implanted principle and that all our moral affections ‘are finally resolved into reason pointing out private happiness’. However, Hartley’s theory reverses this mechanism; pleasure produces love and pain hatred. This process is not based on reason or judgment and does not require a voluntary effort. It is the inevitable result of interaction with the external world and accumulated associations.⁵⁹

Following Hartley, Priestley refers to the passions as ‘blind and mechanical principles’. The passions prompt swift action and bypass the reasoning process. ‘The genuine and proper use of the passions undoubtedly is to rouse men to just and vigorous action upon every emergency, without the slow intervention of reason’. The mechanical generation of the passions entails that whenever the mind is presented with ‘suitable circumstances’ in which a passionate response is required, ‘it cannot fail to be excited, and to rise to its usual height’. Like Kames, Priestley holds that it makes little difference whether these circumstances are presented to us in reality, as a memory, or as part of a work of fiction. Scenes of ideal distress raise intense emotions, it is useless to remind ourselves that such works are merely fictional, ‘if we read and form an *idea* of the scenes there exhibited, we must *feel* in spite of ourselves’.⁶⁰

Priestley pays particular attention to literary techniques that may be harnessed in order to heighten and intensify the ideal presence of any scene. He recommends the use of the present tense, particularly in those cases where ‘a preceding lively and animated description hath already...transported the reader into the scene of action’. For example, the present tense narration of the *Iliad* pulls a reader directly to the scene: ‘Victors and vanquish’d *join* promiscuous cries, Triumphant shouts and dying groans *arise*’. A composition should introduce as many sensible images and particular details as possible. The art is to present a vivid scene that would excite powerful passions in reality and construct a ‘perfect copy of human life’. As reality consists entirely in particulars, ‘to these ideas alone are the strongest sensations and emotions annexed’.

⁵⁹ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.143. John Gay outlines his system in his ‘Preliminary Dissertation’ to the English translation of William King’s *Essay on the Origin of Evil* (1731). Priestley quotes him in the *Introductory Essays*, 3, pp.183-184. Hartley acknowledges that Gay’s treatise first made him consider the power of association in his preface to, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.v. This is outlined with clarity by Allen, *Hartley*, pp.265-273. See also Marsh, ‘Hartley’s System’, p.271 and Haven, ‘Coleridge’, p.482. Unlike Kames, Priestley uses the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘passion’ interchangeably.

⁶⁰ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.80-81.

Like Shakespeare, we are to imitate the rich particularity of reality if we are to command the passions. The meeting of Hector and Andromache, the passionate scenes of King Lear: these are pictures of human life. Our compositions must abound with circumstances of time, place and person in order to excite 'precise and determinate ideas'. We must avoid comprehensive and abstract terms, for the imaginative exertion required in reducing these into a vivid and real scene prevents the 'temporary illusion' of ideal presence. We could say that Priestley advocates a kind of reverse analytic method. After all, philosophers, 'perpetually employed in reducing particular to general propositions', seldom succeed in poetry.⁶¹

Unlike Kames, Priestley explains the impact of ideal presence using the association of ideas. In doing so he also outlines an important associationist principle at work in our response to language, namely the 'transferring of passions from one object to another'. The vivid ideas generated by a fictional representation excite strong emotions. This is of little surprise when we note that they are also generated by vivid realities.

Vivid ideas and strong emotions, therefore, having been, through life, associated with *reality*, it is easy to imagine that, upon the perception of the proper feelings, the associated ideas of reality will likewise recur, and adhere to it as usual...while the impressions remain vivid, and no certain marks of fiction appear, the idea of reality will occur; that is the mind will find itself strongly inclined to believe the scene to be real.

Hartley posited that intellectual ideas, originally generated from physical sensations and later recalled in the mind, form associative clusters or compounds of ideas linked due to their resemblance. The emotion felt in a particular context may easily be transferred upon similar situations as these clusters expand to take in analogous ideas. As Richard Allen puts it in his study of Hartley, 'emotion is a fluid like electricity or water; it jumps or flows from one experience, memory, word, or cluster of words to another'. Hartley calls this jump 'transference' and explains that emotion flows whenever two ideas are conjoined or associated. Priestley puts Hartley's theory to good work in his discussion of ideal presence. Real experiences sometimes provoke strong emotional responses. When fictional scenes resemble reality they prompt the same response: the emotion jumps from a real scene to a fictional one. However, emotional transference flows in

⁶¹ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.79-88.

any direction. As emotion and reality are strongly associated, the experience of an emotion can also prompt a belief in the reality of a fictional scene.⁶²

When Kames explored ideal presence, it was as a literary device used in composition to raise or move the passions. Priestley differs from Kames by instigating a shift in the use of vivid representation and emphasises the use of strong passions to produce belief in a fictional world. With his orator's aim of argument and persuasion, belief is bound up with assent. Hartley said that 'vividness of ideas tends to unite the subject and predicate of propositions sooner and closer', and Priestley talked of 'our proneness to verify strong sensations'. The admission that literary techniques, such as ideal presence, can raise passions strong enough to create a complete conviction of truth seriously undermines Priestley's emphasis on the exclusively ornamental role of rhetorical style. It collapses his neat distinction between arguments that generate assent based on reason and ornamental language used purely to please. This will become more apparent as we turn to examine his two lectures on the 'forms of address adapted to gain belief'.⁶³

Priestley borrowed from Ward's orthodox examination of the devices of persuasion. Ward enumerated a number of classically named figures such as 'prolepsis': the method of forestalling an adversary by answering possible objections, and 'anacoinosis': the process of deliberating with one's audience. Priestley's characteristically simplified approach eliminates these classical terms and outlines similar techniques accompanied by their associationist explanations. Priestley works through a number of 'marks of truth' explaining the various ways they can be used to gain assent. For example, we are inclined to believe someone if they appear to speak in earnest.

Ideas of *strong persuasion* and of *truth* being, on this account, so intimately associated together, the one will introduce the other, so that whatever manner of address tends to demonstrate that the advocate for any opinion is really convinced of it himself, tends to propagate that conviction.

Forms of speech which indicate that a speaker is earnest, impartial and informed act to persuade an audience of the veracity of an argument because of their association with truth. Other such marks of truth include appeals to the judgment of others, 'for no

⁶² Priestley, *LOC*, p.89. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.266-267.

⁶³ Priestley, *LOC*, p.91. Priestley quotes Hartley in, *Infidelity*, 17, p.23. George, "Grounds of Assent", p.104 also makes this point.

person would seriously make such an appeal, who did not believe his cause to be so clear that all the world, if they considered it, would not concur with him', and also include exclamations, refutations, concessions to adversaries and speaking extempore. To these Priestley adds other marks of truth such as having a perfect knowledge of the subject, giving an appearance of modesty, implying there is more that could be said, displaying a willingness to believe that one could be wrong, and presenting a calm rational appearance.⁶⁴

In an illuminating passage Priestley explains that the compelling emotional response we have to fictional scenes may be explained in terms of the idealist hypothesis.

Since the mind perceives, and is conscious of nothing, but the ideas that are present to it, it must, as it were, *conform* itself to them; and even the idea it hath of its own extent, (if we may use that expression) must enlarge or contract with its field of view. By this means also, a person, for the time, enters into, adopts, and is actuated by, the sentiments that are presented to his mind... This takes place so instantaneously and mechanically that no person whatever hath reflection, and presence of mind enough, to be upon his guard against some of the most useless and ridiculous effects of it?

Ideal presence is not merely a pleasing ornament. Good literature consumes the imagination; it merges fiction and reality and even excludes the possibility that careful reflection can be used to discern the difference. Those forms of address adapted to the judgment inhabit an equally murky space between truth and deception. Priestley advises that 'every art of persuasion founded on nature, and really tending to engage belief, must consist of such forms of address as natural to a person who is himself strongly convinced of the truth'. While it is possible that he intends here to describe the countenance of a respectable reasoning orator, the possibility occurs that he is describing how such appearances can be deployed to persuade an audience without recourse to reason. The methods Priestley recommends, while being natural manifestations of well-reasoned argument, can be detached from their originals and cloak any persuasive discourse. In doing so they are no longer simply ornaments naturally suited to a well-reasoned address but rather become the means of persuasion in themselves. It seems far from clear how these profound effects are supposed to be kept

⁶⁴ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.108-124. Ward, *System of Oratory*, p.72. Bevilacqua and Murphy in Priestley, *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, (1975), pp.xlii-xliii.

distinct from arguments based on reason and it is even less clear that these effects are secondary or ornamental to such appeals.⁶⁵

Kames suggested that ‘passion hath an irregular influence upon our opinions and belief’. Many of the opinions we hold dear are actually ‘so slight and wavering, as readily to be susceptible of a bias from passion and prejudice’. Like Hartley he held that a passion can be so powerful that it can jump from one object to another. An agreeable object makes everything connected with it equally pleasing and by the same token the bearer of bad tidings becomes an object of aversion. He also observed that the passions can merge and run into each other, ‘for the mind heated by any passion, is, in that state, more susceptible of a new impression in a similar tone’. Priestley closely followed Kames and devoted considerable time to the delusions arising from mistaken instances of emotional transfer. For example, the association of strong emotions with reality furnishes the mind with pretences that justify the excesses of love, gratitude, anger, revenge and envy. Shakespeare’s Cassius, full of envy, dwells on Caesar’s every weakness when he recounts their swim across the Tiber, and the eye of a captivated lover will always see more charms than first excited the passion. Meanwhile strong passions can be transferred onto indifferent objects. King Richard resented his own horse after it had been stolen, Othello lashed out at Iago when he hinted at Desdemona’s infidelity, and the author of the Psalms envied the swallows their nests.

Nothing like any of these instances could ever have occurred, nor could any passion ever have been expressed, or gratified, in so absurd a manner, if the mind had not been under a *temporary illusion*, during which it actually conceived those things, which were no moral agents, to be the proper agents of passion.⁶⁶

Priestley’s work on the power of emotional transference between associated ideas conflates his carefully juxtaposed ends of rhetoric. It demonstrates that belief and assent may be generated in situations that bypass reason entirely and that furthermore, in such circumstances, the mind is left vulnerable to error. Priestley underscores the inherent fallibility of associationism. Our mental conjunctions do not always reflect external realities. When we experience a repeated association we will inevitably and mechanically come to term it ‘truth’. As our emotions jump from one idea to another they weld together whole clusters of ideas that would never normally be associated. The

⁶⁵ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.108-109 and pp.126-127.

⁶⁶ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.92- 97. Kames, *Elements*, Vol. I, pp.77-80, pp.92-93 and pp.183-184.

passions link subject and predicate without any recourse to reason and associate ideas that have no relationship in the external world. Ideal presence creates a false reality that is so vivid it seems entirely real; marks of candour in a speaker can be enough to attain complete conviction even when prompted by falsehood and artifice. When reason and passion are not carefully distinguished, the fallibilism of associative assent can collapse into relativism. Priestley objected to the common-sense philosophy of Reid, Beattie and Oswald because, to Priestley, it seemed based on mere feeling. When the ends of oratory are not distinct, when passion is no longer subordinate to reason and either can function as the core of a persuasive appeal, then the associationist theory of assent is open to the very same accusation. No wonder Priestley ring-fenced and demoted these literary devices to an ornamental role.⁶⁷

Later commentators have not been immune to the so-called relativist or sceptical consequences of the associationist hypothesis. Barbara Bowen Oberg explains that truth, for Hartley, was ‘an internal feeling’. It is ‘mere association’ that makes the word truth appropriate to a proposition. For Oberg this means that ‘coincidence becomes the criterion of truth, and truth has lost its ontological and absolute reality. It has become synonymous with the internal feelings and universally experienced associations of a majority of mankind’. She says that Hartley ‘seemed to reject absolute truth’. However, neither Hartley nor Priestley deserves to be called a relativist or a sceptic. Priestley was confident that our associations reflect external realities; we can test our ideas against experience and reject those found to arise from prejudice alone. His discussion of the passions and the delusions that may result from emotional transference is therefore best read as an acknowledgment of the fallible nature of association. His relegation of appeals to the passions to an ornamental role should in turn be regarded as an endorsement of rational argument that enriches our understanding of his life-long polarisation of reason and prejudice.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, p.92 and pp.98-107. Other commentators have addressed this problem. In their edition of Priestley’s *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, Bevilacqua and Murphy suggest that Priestley distinguishes between the persuasive and the ornamental ends of rhetoric because of his reliance on faculty psychology. Ann L. George considers a contextual explanation. While Priestley was keen to keep the ends of rhetoric distinct in principle, because of his insistence on the value of rational argument, this distinction collapsed in practice. His primary motivation was to provide a generation of dissenters with means by which to win political and religious arguments. See Bevilacqua and Murphy, in Priestley, *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, pp.xxxviii-xxxix and George, “Grounds of Assent”, pp.103-107.

⁶⁸ Barbara Bowen Oberg, “David Hartley and the Association of Ideas”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37, (1976), pp.450-451.

In a candid passage in the *Examination* Priestley explains his fear of the dark.

It was my misfortune to have the idea of darkness, and the ideas of invisible malignant spirits and apparitions very closely connected in my infancy; and to this day, notwithstanding I believe nothing of those invisible powers, and consequently of their connexion with darkness, or any thing else, I cannot be perfectly easy in every kind of situation in the dark.

Priestley explains his fear in associationist language; it is the false conjunction between darkness and evil spirits that creates his fear and this association has no basis in reality. However, just as association is the cause of his problem, so is it the remedy. 'I am sensible I gain ground upon this prejudice continually'. His fear is not innate and it can be reversed by counter-associations based on repeated experience of reality. Happiness depends on the regulation of the passions. Fortunately this regulation is also the inevitable consequence of ageing and experience. Discretion is required when giving fiction to the young. Lacking knowledge and experience, they have not yet built up a fund of associations that counteracts the vivid representations presented to them. These ideas have a stronger connection with 'truth' than any idea of falsehood attending to the impossibility of the fairies, genies, heathen gods and necromancers described. 'In reading them, therefore, there is nothing to prevent the object from being conceived as *ideally present*, and their unexperienced passions are excited mechanically'. In the sobriety of later life such tales acquire ideas of falsehood and impossibility. 'In consequence of a thousand associations, all representations of things not founded on *nature* and *truth* will grow less and less interesting'. Belief and assent generated by the passions may be disordered and liable to error, but as our personalities bend towards perfection we build up ideas and opinions based on external realities and replace the fantasies of youth with the wisdom of age, with reason and with knowledge.⁶⁹

III A Question of Taste

The *Lectures on Criticism* examine the strong passions of the human mind roused by the powers of oratory, and also those finer feelings which constitute the pleasures of the imagination. According to Priestley it is an 'exquisite feeling of the finer sensations' that 'may be said to constitute a *fine* taste'. Like Kames and Gerard, Priestley's

⁶⁹ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.50-51. Priestley, *LOC* pp.83-84 and pp.90-91.

discussion of literary tropes and figures includes a theoretical analysis of the nature of taste. It is likely that, ever the empiricist, Priestley's starting point was the observed variation in taste. Throughout his discussion Priestley emphasises that taste varies between nations, between individuals, and even within the same individuals at different times of their lives. He pays careful attention to the ways in which unique experiences, education and even our physical constitution impact on the pleasure with which we respond to the arts. Furthermore, he notes that, given this diversity, we cannot easily identify what constitutes a standard of fine taste. What is deemed fine taste in the East 'should not be deemed equally good in Europe; even what is admired in *France*, should not always meet with the same approbation in *England*'.⁷⁰

Like Priestley Kames acknowledged that tastes in the fine arts can be 'various' and 'wavering'. However, Kames stated that, in general, a uniformity of taste prevails. Most people speak of a good and a bad, or a right and a wrong, taste. They have an internal and invariable conviction that there is a common standard of taste to which we should all adhere. This tendency is universal and what is universal must have a foundation in nature. Man is framed to believe in a common standard of taste and trusts that it is perfect. 'The conviction of a common standard being made a part of our nature, we intuitively conceive a taste to be right or good if conformable to the common standard, and wrong or bad if disconformable'. It is from this common sense that a standard of taste is established. Nature is consistent and universal, and it is by nature we are formed to relish the fine arts and by nature we are formed with a standard of taste by which to furnish the objects of these arts. Therefore we are able justly to condemn tastes that swerve from this standard, and 'a wonderful uniformity is preserved among the emotions and feelings of different individuals; the same object making upon every person the same impression'.⁷¹

According to Kames, there is less difference in taste than is commonly imagined. While this is due to internal principles of our nature, it is also because 'nature hath marked all her works with indelible characters of high or low, plain or elegant, strong or weak'. A combination of external and internal factors contributes to a consistent standard of good taste. Alexander Gerard, in expounding his theory of taste, said something similar.

⁷⁰ Priestley, *LOC*, p.73 and p.134.

⁷¹ Kames, *Elements*, Vol. III, pp.356-373.

‘There are qualities in things, determinate and stable, independent of humour or caprice, that are fit to operate on mental principles common to all men, and, by operating on them, are naturally productive of the sentiments of taste in all its forms’. Gerard’s discussion of taste is an attempt to explain the ways in which certain qualities such as novelty and harmony are qualities in things that produce sentiments of taste. They impact on the internal senses, the passions and the judgment. Like Kames, Gerard emphasised the uniformity of taste, a uniformity that stems from our internal constitution and in part from the qualities of objects themselves.⁷²

The *Lectures on Criticism* attempt to explain diversity rather than account for uniformity. Priestley departs from internal sense theories and from the idea that beauty or deformity inheres in external objects themselves. He initiates this departure by stating that taste is acquired ‘to a very great degree’. We are not born with a taste for anything; all our likes and dislikes develop over time. Many tastes, such as a love of flowers, gardening or architecture, ‘are hardly ever acquired early in life’. Good taste is generated through a gradual process and is based on repeated exposure to the objects of art. Priestley explains that a person who had never attempted a sketch is unlikely to have ‘a high relish’ for painting. Over time a person who views many pictures will develop a relish for the art. ‘The same may be said with respect to music, poetry, and all the other fine arts’. While the tastes we acquire vary considerably, the underlying process of acquisition remains the same. This process is, of course, associationist.

All emotions excited by works of genius consist of such ideas and sensations as are capable of being associated with the perception of such works, nothing can be requisite to the acquisition of taste, but exposing the mind to a situation in which those associated ideas will be frequently presented to it.⁷³

Priestley reminds us, in the *Introductory Essays* to his edition of Hartley’s *Observations*, that all intellectual pleasures and pains as well as the passions, memory, imagination and reason are based on association.

Nothing is requisite to make any man whatever he is, but a sentient principle, with this single property (which however admits of great variety), and the influence of such circumstances as he has actually been exposed to.

⁷² Kames, *Elements*, Vol. III, p.372. Gerard, *Taste*, p.77.

⁷³ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.73-75.

The association of ideas governs every individual's mind but from this unifying principle stems considerable diversity. The whole self emerges as a complex structure of ideas, feelings, memories and dispositions, from the ongoing association or conjunction of ideas. While this passive and mechanical process is universal, the ideas and relations produced depend on the actual experiences of the individual. As we have already seen, Hartley explains that it is the associationist transfer of emotions that generates all our desires and aversions. As creatures who fundamentally seek pleasure and avoid pain, we rapidly learn to hate those circumstances that cause us pain and to love those that give us pleasure. In Hartley's theory, taste is so much more than a passing desire or proclivity. Our individual desires towards, and aversions from, people, objects, places and things all depend upon the pleasure or pain that we have learnt to associate with them. They become compounds of the sum total of all our previous experiences. What we love and what we hate are based entirely on these experiences, and form our unique characters and dispositions. Therefore, while Priestley's discussion is based on our response to fine art, underlying his aesthetic theory is a broader notion of taste that places our intellectual pleasures and pains at the centre of the story of the self.⁷⁴

As Richard Allen points out Hartley's theory also holds that we are verbal beings. Our use of language and our response to words play a key role in the progressive generation of the personality. 'We think in Words [,] both the Impressions and Recurrences of Ideas will be attended with Words'. Thus emotional transference occurs not only between associated experiences, circumstances or memories but also between words, figurative phrases and propositions. Physical pain, remembered as emotional pain, is transferred to the words used to describe it. 'By degrees these miniature Pains will be transferred upon the Words, and other Symbols, which denote these and such-like Objects and Circumstances'. Conversely the words used to describe a place or event may trigger particular passions and desires. 'When a Person relates a past Fact, the Ideas do in some Cases suggest the Words, whilst in others the Words suggest the Ideas'. The particular words we use and the precise ideas we come to associate with them are conditioned by our experiences and are as unique as our individual personalities.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Priestley, *Introductory Essays*, 3, p.184. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.266-273. In Hartley's theory our desires and aversions are mainly moral in nature.

⁷⁵ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.376 and p.143. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.270-279.

Like Hartley, Priestley held that ideas and feelings are heaped upon words and that these words, in turn, trigger complex compounds of associated ideas. As he puts it in his *Introductory Essays*.

So exquisite is the structure of our minds, that a whole group of ideas shall so perfectly coalesce into one, as to appear but a simple idea; and single words may be so connected with such groups, as to excite them with the same certainty and distinctness, as if they had been originally simple sensations.

Our response to language impacts on the passions, the judgment and the imagination. The reason why words are so powerful is because of the complex associations they come to symbolise and the way in which they initiate strings of ideas and emotions in the mind. When Orpheus lost his lover to the underworld he repeated her name in his despair. ‘*Eurydice*, the woods; *Eurydice*, the floods.’ Even when such repetition can throw a sentence ‘into disorder’, we are incapable, in our passion, of speaking in any other way. Strong sensations become associated with particular words, and ‘single words present to the mind entire scenes with all their moving circumstances’. When the name of a well-known person is used figuratively, when for instance someone is called a Nero or a second Isaac Newton, a number of associations rise up in our minds and these are transferred to the object of our attention. Again, one word stands for a number of ideas. ‘There is a kind of accumulation of meaning in these expressions, by means of long, extensive and repeated associations of ideas’.⁷⁶

The pleasures of the imagination consist in complex and refined webs of associations.

In a situation so exposed as ours to joint impressions, from a variety of independent objects, our sensations cannot fail to be so commixed and combined together, that it must be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to resolve any one of them into all their separate, component parts.

Although they originate in simple physical sensations, our intellectual ideas are highly compounded, and, furthermore, these complexes often involve layers of personal associations taken from our unique experiences. In turn these change the way in which we respond to language. Particular words not only paint entire scenes, but these scenes involve our childhood memories and myriad secondary associations arising from

⁷⁶ Priestley, *Introductory Essays*, 3, p.190. Priestley, *LOC*, p.102 and p.233.

previous experiences. Priestley asks us to consider the contemplation of a country landscape or the description of a rural scene in a book of romance. Any person who spends time in the country connects with rural scenes a number of ‘separately indistinguishable’ pleasures that swell the single complex sensation of enjoyment. Our external senses may enjoy sweet smells and fine colours; we may also associate healthfulness, innocence and the usefulness of husbandry with rustic landscapes and appreciate the novelty, beauty and grandeur of the natural world. All pleasures merge into one complex sensation and this recurs whenever the scene is later presented to the mind. Compounded ideas of this kind may also transfer to similar scenes, fictional or real, associated by means of a common property, and these new visions raise the same feeling of pleasure. Clusters of associated pleasures often arise from the remembrance of circumstances in which we were particularly happy, and this accounts for ‘the tumultuous pleasurable sensation we feel upon the view of the place where we passed our infancy, the school where we were educated’. Priestley speaks of a ‘kind of secret retrospect to preceding ideas and states of mind’ when we perceive sublime objects or descriptions. Our response to the sublime is conditioned by the accumulation of previous experiences. So too does the humour of an improper contrast affect persons, depending on the ‘previous state of their minds’ and their individual associations.⁷⁷

When Priestley composed his memoirs, he included some observations on his physical and mental temperament. He ascribed his ‘even cheerfulness of temper’ to a ‘good constitution of body’ and his poor memory to a ‘mental constitution more favourable to new impressions’. The *Lectures on Criticism* demonstrate a similar tendency to ascribe differences in taste to a variation in mental sensibility.

Since men’s minds are endued with very different degrees of sensibility, some persons will be affected in a stronger, and some in a weaker manner, when their sensations are of the same kind. For the same reasons, likewise, the same person is liable to be affected in a very different manner by the same objects, in different parts of his life, and in different situations and dispositions.

Priestley states that his work identifies properties ‘in our frame which lay the mind open to its influences’. Our material minds vary due to differences of a physical nature. Laughter occurs more frequently in persons of ‘an irritable constitution’, for example. A

⁷⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.129-133, p.151 and p.214.

relish for personification ‘depends upon the liveliness of the imagination, which is extremely various in different persons, and indeed very variable in the same person’. Meanwhile, the ‘vulgar’, whose minds are not used to intellectual exertion, are pleased by bold and strong perceptions that would bore the sophisticated.⁷⁸

It is to the association of ideas and our unique sensibilities that we owe the desires and aversions that make up our personal identity. In this characteristic passage Priestley explains that accumulated associations based on our individual experiences entirely account for the diversity of taste. A shared experience would lead to a complete identity of taste.

Had all minds the very same degree of sensibility, that is, were they equally affected by the same impressions, and were we all exposed to the same influences, through the course of our lives, there would be no room for the least diversity of taste among mankind. For, in those circumstances, we should all have associated precisely the same ideas and sensations with the same objects, and the same properties of those objects; and we should feel those sentiments in the same degree. But since our situations in life, and the occurrences of our lives, are so very various, it cannot but have happened, that different persons will have associated different ideas and sensations with the same objects; and, consequently, they will be differently affected by the perception of them.

Priestley’s words may be usefully contrasted with Gerard’s work on the diversity of taste. Gerard tells us that the majority of people react uniformly to specific qualities of object. He establishes a norm and renders all other tastes deviations from this standard. In those instances where a naturally beautiful object fails to elicit a positive response, this must be ascribed ‘to some weakness or disorder in the person who remains unmoved’. He elucidates these disorders in detail. They relate to a defect in the internal senses, a lack of delicacy of passion and of sound judgment. If everyone possessed a perfect taste and responded properly to objects of refinement and beauty, then deviance and disagreement would be nonexistent.⁷⁹

Priestley’s polarisation of reason and prejudice suggests that reason generates ideas that are stable and held in common by virtue of their connection to external realities. Prejudice, on the other hand, tends to be conflated with all that is changeable, personal

⁷⁸ Priestley, *Autobiography*, pp.122-125. Priestley, *LOC*, p.72, p.134, p.140, p.200 and p.251.

⁷⁹ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.133-134. Gerard, *Taste*, p.77 and pp.79-99. G. Dickie, *The Century of Taste. The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford, 1996), pp.47-49.

and subjective. Priestley's aesthetic theory and his discussion of the generation of our personal desires and aversions are particularly interesting because of the challenges they present to this simple dichotomy. When it comes to the mechanical generation of personality on associationist grounds the theory has to accommodate a degree of diversity between people. Furthermore, some variations are purely physical; a lively imagination or a bad memory are due to a material difference in our brains. This diversity is the inevitable result of the constitution of our bodies and our individual passage through life. It is not, as Gerard has it, due to error, illness or delusion or, in Priestley's usual terms, the outcome of 'prejudice'. For this reason Priestley warns that the identification and establishment of a uniform standard of taste is not a simple matter. Given the existing diversity of taste Priestley says that a universal standard 'cannot be applied to those persons whose education and manner of life have been very different'. The closest we can get at present, he writes, is 'a considerable *similarity in taste*' between those whose education and manner of life have been very nearly the same.⁸⁰

As we have seen there can be 'relativist' implications to the associationist hypothesis. For some it robs us of our ability to say that some tastes are better than others. George Dickie writes in his analysis of Gerard that if association, 'can cause virtually *anything* to acquire *any* taste property for some person or persons, then the notion that there are standards that can adjudicate between differing tastes of persons does not make much sense'. The seemingly indiscriminate nature of associationism has led some to talk of Priestley's 'relativism', and Robert Schofield has called Priestley's work on the imagination 'his greatest contribution to aesthetic theory'. It is clear that Priestley's lectures can be read as an extended discussion of the origins of our personal tastes, and that individual desires and aversions play a crucial generative role in Hartley's theory of the self. However, while the most subjective elements of the associationist experience need careful exploration, there is little that can be gained from speaking of Priestley's 'relativist aesthetic'. His lectures do examine the associationist source of variations between individuals and his associationism does have to accommodate diversity. However, Priestley enumerates a number of literary devices that are universally deemed to please the imagination and examines the shared and general principles by which ornamented discourse entertains the mind. Moreover, Priestley also identifies many

⁸⁰ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.134-135.

properties in objects which, by means of their association with pleasure and enjoyment, come to give universal pleasure to the imagination.

The properties of *uniformity*, *variety*, and *proportion*, or a *fitness of some useful end*, having been perceived in most of the objects with which pleasurable ideas and sensations have been associated, a complex pleasurable sensation will universally be annexed to the marks of uniformity, variety, and proportion, wherever they are perceived

Priestley's lectures are structured around the common properties to which most people annex pleasurable sensations. His project would not be possible without some assumption of the uniform and predictable nature of taste.⁸¹

Priestley insisted that the constituents of good taste could be identified, and he looked forward to a time when a uniformity of taste would be established. In doing so he reasserted his dichotomy between reason and prejudice and insisted on the benefits of age and experience in the refinement of taste. Fine taste, Priestley tells us, consists only in the delicate pleasures of the imagination and excludes the gross passions.

Furthermore, no person can properly judge the merit of a composition without making a well informed judgment. As society improves and perfects, a 'uniform and perfect' standard of taste will establish itself. Good communication between universities and nations will bring differing tastes into harmony. Those without experience will be excluded from establishing a standard of taste as 'their minds have not been in a proper situation for receiving the ideas and sensations which are requisite to form a just taste'. Those who are most acquainted with the objects of taste will be consulted and from then on, 'a deviation from this general taste will be reckoned a fault, and a coincidence with it an excellence'. Therefore, while his aesthetic theory explains diversity, Priestley does not state that all tastes are equally valid. He links good taste with acquaintance with the fine arts and bad taste with lack of experience. Taste is educable and controllable. Bad taste 'may be overcome by opposite associations' and good taste may be refined by repeated experience. We may say that acquiring good taste is akin to the process of acquiring truth. Countering the potential relativism of mistaken associations requires

⁸¹ Priestley, *LOC*, p.134. Dickie, *Taste*, p.47. Schofield, *Enlightenment*, pp.115-117. Schofield talks of Priestley's 'relativism' but also acknowledges that Priestley believed that a 'uniform and perfect standard of taste' would eventually emerge. D. Townsend, "The Aesthetics of Joseph Priestley", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51, (1993), p.566.

education and free debate. Good taste, like truth, is thoroughly egalitarian; it is open to all who will pursue it and is 'within the reach of all persons whatsoever'.⁸²

IV Figurative Language the Pleasures of the Imagination

Priestley defines figurative language in the first of his lectures on 'style'.

In plain unadorned style every thing is called by its proper name, no more words are used than are apparently sufficient to express the sense, and the form and order of every part of the sentence are such as exactly express the real state of mind of him that uses it...

...*Style* may be said to be figurative when the literal interpretation, according to the usual sense of the words, and the construction of them, would lead a person to mistake the sense; as, for instance, when any thing is signified by a term which was not originally affixed to it; when the terms which are used to express any thing would, if interpreted literally, lead a person to imagine it was greater or less than it is; and when the form of the sentence is such as, when explained by the rules of grammar only, doth not truly express the state of mind of him that uses it.

Priestley here makes three related assumptions about the nature of language in general and about figurative language in particular. These are especially notable because of the ways in which Priestley's detailed analysis of figurative language goes on to challenge and augment this original definition.⁸³

In Chapter One we noted that Priestley's *Examination* presents language as separate from the reasoning process. We use language to formulate our knowledge into propositions, but words are not essential for making judgments. This notion, that words label pre-existing ideas but are not essential to thought, was the conventional model of Priestley's era. Stephen K. Land calls it 'ideational atomism': the theory that ideas pre-exist words as discrete entities in the mind of the speaker, and words are then applied as labels for these separate ideas. Such atomism holds that the meaning of a sentence is made up of the sum of the meanings of its component words or ideas. Language becomes an aggregate of separate signs. These signs are sequential and discrete because our ideas are too. On the whole Locke's theory of language can be regarded as

⁸² Priestley, *LOC*, pp.72-75 and p.134-135. The extent to which Priestley believed we can overcome all our personal tastes and all individual desires and aversions, good and bad, simply by virtue of experience and the accumulation of associations is detailed in Chapter Four.

⁸³ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.75-76. This discussion is not limited to metaphor and simile. He also considers metonymy, synecdoche, personification, hyperbole and humour.

atomistic. As Richard Allen puts it, ‘language, for Locke, is a dictionary consisting mostly of nouns, each of which marks an idea that is known prelinguistically to the speaker’. They are ‘voluntary signs’ imposed by the speaker and then arranged into a sentence in order to communicate. When words are spoken without an underlying idea, the speaker is simply parroting. Priestley’s definition of figurative language appears to be straightforwardly atomistic. He writes of ‘terms’ affixed to ‘ideas’. By implication this suggests that words are signs of separate ideas and are secondary to ideas that they label.⁸⁴

To these two assumptions Priestley adds a third. In a reiteration of his division between rational and ornamental language he suggests that figurative language should be classified as the latter of these discrete modes. Figurative language used to decorate a discourse and please the imagination. Figurative expressions lose their meaning when taken literally, and it is useful to contrast them with plain, unadorned speech which labels ideas in a direct and uncomplicated manner. To deem an expression ornamental is to align it with the artificial; to say it is a departure from literal truth is to hint that it may deceive the mind and cloud the judgment. In making such assumptions Priestley was in distinguished company. The idea that figures are an improper swapping of names is Aristotelian in origin. Ward in his faithfully classical *System of Oratory* describes how figures may be used to give elegance and beauty to a composition by virtue of their departure from plain speech. As W. S. Howell has explained, the new rhetorical tradition, as evinced by the Royal Society, typically denounced figurative language as standing in opposition to reason and to plain speaking. Figures were seen as unnecessary ornaments with unpredictable and irrational effects that serve only to detract from the clarity and precision of an argument. As Locke put it, ‘all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat’.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ S. K. Land, *From Signs to Propositions. The Concept of Form in Eighteenth-Century Semantic Theory*, (London, 1974). He sums up this thesis in the preface. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.218-229.

⁸⁵ See Ward, *Oratory*, p.383-397. Locke, *Essay*, p.508. Land, *Signs to Propositions*, p.50. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric*, pp.111-113 and pp.441-446 for defining characteristics of the new rhetoric. P. France, “Rhetoric” in Haakonssen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp.496-501.

These important words appear between the two passages from Priestley quoted above and outline an entirely different attitude to figurative language.

It is not enough to say, that plain, unadorned style is that mode of expression which is the most *natural*; for style the most highly ornamented, and enlivened with the strongest figures, is as natural as the plain style, and occurs as naturally, without the precepts of art, and even without design, in proper circumstances.

Priestley analyses the ways in which figures may be said to be natural, essential to good communication, and fundamental to language itself. Figurative language ‘is far from being calculated to *deceive*’ writes Priestley. Figures are said to bring clarity to a discourse, a composition or a discussion. They shed light on our ideas and illuminate the qualities of objects so that we may see them more clearly. For instance ‘the primary use of a simile is to give clearer and stronger ideas than we would convey without it’. Virgil called the Scipios, ‘*the thunderbolts of war*’ and no other expression better communicates the ‘force and impetuosity’ of those heroes. Hyperbole may be regarded as a departure from literalism and more than any other figure violates the truth and affirms an actual falsehood. However, despite this, it is a natural manner of speaking where no literally true expressions are accurate and where no words can be found that sufficiently answer the purpose of communication. When hyperbole is used well we get closer to the truth. ‘We instantly enter, as it were, into the mind, of the writer’. We see his words are ‘more true and just expressions of those feelings than any plainer terms could have been’. Hyperboles ‘by the appearance of falsehood, lead the mind nearer to the truth than any expressions more literally true’.⁸⁶

In order to understand why figurative language may be said to illuminate an idea or bestow clarity on an expression, we must return to the principle of transference discussed earlier in this chapter. As we have already seen, Hartley’s theory holds that the passions may be transferred onto objects which are similar or analogous to those with which they were originally associated ‘by means of a common property’. The transfer of emotion generates our basic dispositions and personalities. However, associationist transfer is not restricted to the transfer of passion. We can transfer ideas onto new objects, words, scenes and descriptions by renaming them and in doing so we endow them with the properties previously associated with that name.

⁸⁶ Priestley, *LOC*, p.75-76, p.169 and pp.241-243. A third way in which Priestley thought figures are essential to language is discussed in Chapter Three.

When a metaphor is used, the moment the mind hath caught the idea of any resemblance to the thing which it is about to express, it immediately transfers the terms belonging to the foreign object, as if they were one and the same thing. So that, in fact, using metaphors is nothing more than giving new names to things.

We associate ideas based on a perceived resemblance. Once this analogy has been noticed the two ideas are linked or connected in the mind and the qualities of one become the qualities of the other. These qualities are weaker in the original object and so the new name conveys a stronger idea of the qualities than any terms originally appropriated to it. 'Along with the name, other ideas, as of dignity or meanness, agreeableness or disagreeableness, and the like, will be transferred to the object to which it is applied'. For example, when Virgil called the Scipios 'two thunderbolts of war', he gave new names to his heroes and 'the ideas we conceive of the *rapidity* and *destructive power* belonging to thunderbolts, are hereby transferred upon them'.

Metaphoric language provokes this transfer of ideas with particular strength.

A metaphor is a comparison 'contracted to its smallest dimensions'. The difference between a simile and a metaphor is simply the extent to which ideas are transferred and compounded. In comparisons 'the difference between any two objects is preserved, whereas in metaphors they are confounded, and one of the things is changed, as it were, in idea, into the other'.⁸⁷

According to Priestley, the process of comparing ideas and transferring qualities is a source of great pleasure to us because it is fundamental to the way in which we think. Priestley has what Dabney Townsend, in his article on the *Lectures on Criticism*, calls an 'activist aesthetic'. Following Gerard, Priestley states that the pleasure we derive from a composition consists in the exertion of our faculties. Gerard had explained that pleasant sensations arise in the mind whenever it is of a 'lively and elevated temper'. The mind is languid and indolent without entertainment and craves strong impressions. For both Priestley and Gerard the mind requires a moderate exertion of the faculties. Just as our bodies enjoy warmth but avoid the intense extremes of heat and cold so too do our minds find pleasure in moderation and avoid the excesses of stimulation and languor. Our minds therefore find pleasure in the imaginative exertion required for

⁸⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, p.76, p.132, p.181, p.249.

combination and association of ideas and in the transfer of qualities in which it inevitably results.⁸⁸

Priestley explains that the pleasure we get from the transfer of ideas stems, in part, from our enjoyment in identifying uniformity and associating ideas based on their analogy. He explains how our judgment is agreeably employed in drawing comparisons and spotting similarities.

The moment we perceive that the parts of any object are analogous to one another, and find, or are informed, what that analogy is, the sight of a part, without any farther investigation, suggests the idea of the whole; and the *judgment* is most agreeably and successfully employed in completing the image... With what satisfaction may we often hear persons say, upon seeing part of such an object, or such a scheme, “Your need shew me no more: I see the whole!”.

What is most interesting about Priestley’s discussion here is that he links the pleasure we get from comparisons, metaphors and allegories to the basic associationist principle by which we pursue truth and generate universal propositions. Priestley’s work here reads like a reiteration of his definition of the analytic method, albeit in profoundly different and illuminating terms. Priestley explains that it is the association of ideas, based on their resemblance and analogy, that is the origin of all our figurative language. ‘Separate from the pleasure they give to the imagination’, similes identify analogies and in doing so ‘give clearer and stronger ideas of a thing than the plain description would suggest’. It is in the perception of analogies that all our knowledge consists.

To discern the analogy of things we are conversant with, is to become possessed of the clue of knowledge, by which we are led, with unspeakable ease and satisfaction, through the seeming labyrinths of nature. In this manner, by the help of a few general principles, we become masters of a great extent of valuable science; whereas without such general principles, which are derived from the knowledge of the analogy or uniformity of things, our speculations present nothing but a scene of confusion and embarrassment.⁸⁹

Priestley writes that the process of perceiving analogies, associating ideas and transferring qualities is the basis for our figurative language. For example, we employ personification ‘where any resemblance will make it natural’. He explains that the world

⁸⁸ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.136-138. Gerard, *Taste*, pp.3-9. Townsend, “The Aesthetics of Joseph Priestley”, pp.566-567.

⁸⁹ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.164-166.

is so ordered to provide us with abundant materials for such figures. We perceive a persistent thread of analogies through all things in the natural world. 'The animate and inanimate parts of nature abound so much in mutual analogies, stronger or weaker, that no person of the least imagination can help being frequently struck with those resemblances'. Alongside our perception of resemblance, Priestley explains that our pleasure arises from the moment we notice variety amidst uniformity, and disanalogy amidst analogy. The mind engaged in making judgments has to associate but it also has to disassociate. As we saw in Chapter One, an infant makes sense of the world by gradually perceiving repeated conjunctions. In this way objects and their properties emerge from the chaotic mess of sense data. While we associate two ideas we simultaneously disassociate accidental and unrelated ideas or sensations. Comparisons are heightened by contrast. 'Uniformity alone...doth not affect the imagination with any sense of pleasure. In order to produce this effect it is necessary that variety be joined to it'. Complete uniformity or too close a resemblance between the ideas associated by a simile or comparison tells us nothing new. It is the points of analogy, heightened by the points of contrast that make a simile so pleasing.⁹⁰

Our natural need to identify analogies is the basis for all similes, metaphors and allegories. Many other figures are also derived from the pleasures of contrast. When two objects present themselves to us simultaneously, we expect to identify some analogy and are disappointed when we perceive difference. We have a natural disposition to 'make everything complete and perfect in its kind'. Once we have engaged in perceiving the differences between objects we become wholly occupied with this activity and in turn become surprised to perceive resemblance. The mind oscillates between the perception of resemblance and difference, and as the mind vibrates between these two positions we may laugh out loud at the inconsistency. Contrast then, is the origin of many species of humour including riddles, puns, irony and the burlesque. For example a comparison that makes a transition from a high object to a low object is the source of much entertainment. To degrade an object by the transfer of mean ideas, to compare the sun to a lobster or a great man to a contemptible one, is to prompt laughter. As our ordered world is one of endless resemblances and reciprocations, analogies can always be found on which to rest the parody and the mock-heroic.

⁹⁰ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.166-167 and pp.247-251. See also Lecture XXIV.

Considering how far and how wide analogies extend themselves through all the part of nature; how possible is it that an object, the most respectable in the world, may be discovered so analogous in some respects, to another, even the most contemptible, that the oddness of the contrast shall produce a laugh!

Some may say that ‘ridicule is the test of truth’ but Priestley disagrees. Analogies are the basis for all our judgments; the basis of truth and the basis of ridicule. Nothing is exempt from ridicule as it relies on the simple mechanism of associating two ideas based on their resemblance. ‘There is no setting bounds to those analogies in nature or art which gives rise’ to humour. ‘We see the greatest analogous to the least, and the least to the greatest without limit’. It is impossible to name any class of things without finding an analogous group that strikes us as ridiculous. As these analogies are brought into view our ideas of both objects in question are altered. ‘They are universally either increased or diminished, raised or depressed’ and the extent of the analogy determines the effect of the comparison. Considering the levity of some people’s minds, analogies can always be found to raise laughter. Some laugh at the clothing of foreigners and some laugh at scripture. People even laughed when Copernicus suggested that the earth revolves around the sun.⁹¹

Metonymy and synecdoche work on similar principles. They are based on the constant association of ideas ‘variously mixed, combined, and transferred from one object to another’. The associations in question here are not based on analogy. Through the swapping of names two ideas are associated based on relationships other than those of resemblance. ‘A name is borrowed from another object, which stands in any relation to it than that of actual *resemblance*, which is referred to as *metaphor*.’ There is an almost endless variety of relations on which such figures can be based. For instance, we substitute effect for cause when we say the ‘day arose’, rather than the ‘sun arose’. We swap the particular for the general, when we talk of ‘a Nero’ as meaning a ‘tyrant’. In all cases, as with metaphor, simile, and allegory, ‘the figurative expression transfers upon it some foreign idea, which will improve the sense of a passage’. This process of transfer heaps new associations on old ideas, enriching a scene and entertaining the mind. For instance a ‘well-fought field’ suggests a stronger idea than a ‘well-fought

⁹¹ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.197-203 and pp.211-217.

battle' as it directly introduces a strong mental image and brings in view a whole landscape.⁹²

As Priestley's *Lectures on Criticism* explain the analytic method of investigating truth and the associationist basis of all our judgments in a radically different language, so too do they describe the fallibility of the associationist hypothesis in altered terms. Foreign objects, Priestley explains, can be endowed with sublimity without anything in themselves that may be considered sublime. It is transferred upon them by virtue of an association or analogy with a sublime object. Wealth and power become sublime simply because money ensures abundance and power the control of multitudes. In other cases the sublime nature of an object may be compromised by a poor analogy.

Ideas themselves sublime may entirely lose that quality by being expressed in terms which have connexions with low and mean objects...In this case *secondary associations* which accompany those words are transferred upon the object described by them, and destroy the sublime they would otherwise have.

To compare the Greeks at Troy to 'wasps, provok'd by children in their play' is to transfer the 'trifling and mean' and lessens our ideas of them. Not all comparisons shed light on a subject, just as not all our judgments accurately reflect conjunctions in reality. As any two ideas can be associated, the sources of our pleasure can be diminished as well as enhanced by comparisons and contrasts.⁹³

When Priestley turned to Kames' *Elements of Criticism* in order to better understand the nature of figurative language, he would have found something rather unusual. Instead of the detailed catalogue of various tropes and figures carefully noted and defined by ancient critics, Kames presents an explanation for the existence of figures based on the workings of the human mind. While Ward focuses on characterising various figures and tropes in order to ensure their precise use in ornamenting composition, Kames details the ways in which they naturally arise when the passions are strong and inflamed. Take, for example, the 'delusion' of personification. This figure arises when the mind needs to express a strong passion and uses an inanimate object to vent it upon. Kames speaks at length of the 'power many passions have to animate their objects'. When no animate being is present, the mind will transform something inanimate into something living in

⁹² Priestley, *LOC*, pp.231-235.

⁹³ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.160-178-178.

order to gratify the passion. 'The mind is prone to bestow sensibility upon things inanimate, where that violent effect is necessary to gratify passion'. When we crave empathy or understanding we make our surroundings feel our pain. Birds, trees and fountains will lament with us in our sorrow. In such cases the personification 'is so complete as to be derived from an actual conviction, momentary indeed, of life and intelligence'.⁹⁴

Priestley speaks of comparisons as heightening the perception of an idea. However, he also states that figures such as metaphor and personification give us a better understanding of a person's state of mind. In this very different manner they may again be said to bring clarity to an expression and be seen as far from deceptive or merely ornamental. 'We naturally *personify* every thing that causes us much pleasure or pain', he writes. Hyperbole 'is extremely natural when the imagination is raised'. Moved by strong passions a person naturally chooses to speak figuratively. A person in any situation will use language to communicate a clear idea of his feelings. 'In the greatest agitation of mind possible, and wholly occupied with any train of ideas, he will seize upon any circumstance in nature that will help him give a clear idea of whatever he would wish to communicate'. He dwells on foreign objects just long enough to use their assistance in communication. 'A person in extreme pain will naturally cry out to his friends, *Oh, I burn, I am torn to pieces, I am upon the rack, &c*'. We naturally use metaphors when our feelings and ideas are vivid and this communicates them to others. 'They are, therefore, very properly put into the mouth of a person under any emotion of mind; and the stronger are his emotions, the bolder figures he naturally uses'. 'In what plain terms we speak when our minds are languid' notes Priestley 'and how metaphorically when we have a flow of spirits'.⁹⁵

At the time when Priestley was writing, the conventional approach to language was atomistic. However, as Stephen Land explains, thinkers in the eighteenth-century instigated a move away from this representationalist paradigm. Part of this shift was an increased emphasis on the functional role of words in thought which severed the straightforward idea-word relationship. Figurative language only makes sense within an

⁹⁴ Kames, *Elements*, Vol. III, pp. 55-62.

⁹⁵ Priestley, *LOC*, p.77, pp.170-171, p.188, p.242. Priestley says that not all figures are suited to express the passions or arise from emotional states, pp.247-254.

atomistic paradigm when it is defined as a misuse of words; a departure from a literal norm that wrongly names one idea as another for ornamental effect. As we have seen, for Priestley this is not the case: figurative language is not simply an improper use of words superadded to a literal base. This has interesting and important implications. As Land puts it, 'if metaphor is essential to language the relation of words to ideas must be more complex than the representational model allows'.⁹⁶

Priestley said that figurative language expresses truth but that this truth is not literal. Figurative language gives us access to a person's deepest thoughts and feelings and this has significant consequences.

Figurative speech, therefore, is indicative of a person's real feelings and state of mind, not by means of the words it consists of, considered as *signs of separate ideas*, and interpreted according to their common acceptance; but as circumstances naturally attending those feelings which compose any state of mind. Those figurative expressions, therefore, are scarcely considered and attended to as *words*, but are viewed in the same light as *attitudes, gestures, and looks*, which are infinitely more expressive of sentiments and feelings than words can possibly be.

In making metaphor the language of passion Priestley makes it integral and natural to language. This initiates a move away from the atomistic explanation that metaphor is a severance of the relationship between a particular idea and its label and thus at best ornamental and at worst deceptive. Metaphor emerges in Priestley's discussion as something like a separate language, a non-literal language that has a closer relationship to the agitated mind than words ever could. In its expression it brings us closer to the truth of a person's mental state and is more truthful than a literal expression of the same feeling could actually hope to be. Figures are a language that bypasses the conventional or literal word-idea link and expresses vivid associations immediately and directly in a way that ordinary words never could. Priestley talks about how personification, when it arises from the impassioned mind, is not something chosen by the speaker, it is not a label assigned to a certain idea. Figures do not label individual words, nor do they label an underlying passion; they offer a means by which the mind can communicate its pain or joy. They directly express passions because they arise like a cry of pain or a gesture as an immediate response to an intense feeling.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Land, *Signs to Propositions*, p.187.

⁹⁷ Priestley, *LOC*, p.77.

When Priestley states that figurative expressions are not to be regarded as signs of separate ideas he is referring to figuration as the language of the passions. However, his discussion of the transfer of ideas and emotions equally challenges the atomistic paradigm. Before he composed the *Lectures on Criticism* Priestley wrote a small treatise called *Observations on Style* in which he said:

The correspondence between every person's thoughts and language is perhaps more strict, and universal, than is generally imagined: for since there can be but few perceptions or ideas existing in the human mind, which were not, in their very rise and first impression, associated with the words that denote them; it is almost impossible, but that ideas and the symbols or expressions of them, must arise in the mind at the same time...whether their attendance be necessary or not, the ideas of words will accompany the ideas of things.

While Priestley adheres here to the representationalist tradition, he hints at the close connection between words and ideas. Every time an idea occurs, a word accompanies it, and every time a word is heard, it is attended with ideas. However, in light of the associationist principle of transfer, this 'attendance' is enough to trouble the notion that words are solely labels of ideas. When words are spoken or heard they raise up strings of accumulated associations, a retrospect of ideas and feelings attached to a word by our personal experiences. Words do not only label ideas, they also tell us something about the speaker. The words we choose and the words that are most meaningful to us indicate not only our state of mind but also our previous experiences. They help us remember where we have been and what we have previously loved and hated. The emotional charge we attach to words reminds us of what has caused us pleasure and what has caused us pain. Just as significantly, the transfer of ideas and qualities lies at the heart of all comparisons and therefore all our judgments. It is the swapping of names, the dismantling of the link between an idea and its label and the reiteration of this idea in new terms, that allow us to understand something new about it. Words do not only label ideas, they give us clarity, help us to see ideas in a new light, and aid our judgment.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Priestley, *Observations on Style*, Works 23, p.483. This was originally an appendix to J. Priestley, *The Rudiments of English Grammar adapted to the use of Schools, with Observations on Style*, (London, 1761).

V Conclusion

Priestley's *Lectures on Criticism* are a vivid exploration of the pleasures of the passions, judgment and imagination based on an impressive range of literary sources. At the heart of Priestley's project is a desire to explain how and why the arts have such powerful effects on the human mind and his work is a rich psychological study of the origin and impact of a variety of literary devices. However, it is useful to keep in mind that this intricate and subtle delineation of the passionate and intellectual pleasures of the mind came from a man who was perhaps ambivalent towards the whole project. In his *Observations on Style* Priestley observes, 'for us to spend the best part of our time in literary criticism, and in poring over authors that have nothing to recommend them but the beauties of modern style, when the sublime studies of *mathematics* and *philosophy* lie open before us, is most preposterous'.⁹⁹

This lukewarm attitude to literary criticism arises from the central position that rational argument plays in Priestley's thinking. His distinction between reason and prejudice structures the whole course of the lectures. However, what emerges from an analysis of his *Lectures on Criticism* is that, when this recurring dichotomy is cast as a distinction between proper ends of oratory, it does not stand up to much scrutiny. Arguments may be powerfully persuasive while bypassing reason completely. Present-tense representation and various marks of candour harness previous associations with the truth in order to create vivid realities that engage belief and win assent. Meanwhile, metaphoric and figurative language is not simply non-literal decoration used to embellish a discourse; it is fundamental, integral and natural to language itself. Over the course of his lectures, Priestley's flimsy distinction between subject and ornament is therefore quickly and irrevocably broken down.¹⁰⁰

Priestley's lectures can be read, in part, as a catalogue of the problems and pitfalls of a hypothesis that insists on association as the sole source of ideas and mental operations. In seeing the associationist theory at its most fallible and subjective, we appreciate why Priestley was so keen to give reason such a pivotal position in his epistemology. It serves to illuminate his confidence in the power of associative reasoning to provide us

⁹⁹ Priestley, *Observations on Style*, 23 pp.490-491.

¹⁰⁰ Priestley, *Observations on Style*, 23 p.490.

with reliable truths. While Priestley's distinction between the ends of oratory clearly collapses, it exists to reinforce the idea that the proper basis for assent is reason and experience. Careful reasoning based on associations built up through repeated exposure to the realities of the external world acts to counter the impulsive and irrational passionate responses of youth. A standard of fine taste, too, can be acquired through experience and the 'right' associations. Taste is educable and improves over time. Again the impulsive associations of youth can be undone in favour of a fine taste based on judgment and experience. The *Lectures on Criticism* are Priestley's most extended application of the associationist theory and illustrate his key epistemological concerns. As we will now see in Chapter Three, his negotiation of these concerns also structures his developmental theory of language and his project to identify linguistic 'universals'.

Chapter Three

The Art of Language

I Introduction

‘Language, whether spoken or written, is properly termed an art’. With these words Priestley opens *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar*, written for his students at Warrington Academy and printed in 1762. Human beings are capable of extensive social connections and are barely able to subsist in isolation. Language is not a divine gift but a human necessity; it is an ‘art’ as it is created and developed by mankind for our own communicative needs. Priestley emphasises that our languages are constructed based on the particular needs and circumstances of the people who speak them. He highlights the extent of linguistic variability and the ways in which languages are changeable, inconsistent, and frequently liable to internal irregularity. Priestley devotes a considerable amount of his discussion to speculating on the link between languages and the specific social and cultural requirements of their speakers, and emphasises the difficulties this creates for translation and communication between nations. His theory of language is a fascinating explanation for linguistic diversity that seeks to compare, document and understand the real differences that exist between languages.¹⁰¹

Priestley’s starting point, however, is not linguistic diversity but the common principles on which all languages are constructed. Language is an art but ‘all *arts* are founded on *science*, or the knowledge of the materials employed in them’. Languages may have developed gradually over time but that does not mean they lack ‘natural principles’ that may be exhibited and understood. Working in his favourite ‘analytic’ or inductive mode, Priestley’s project is to investigate the general laws structuring all languages from an examination and comparison of particulars. He identifies common or analogous properties shared by all languages in order to construct general principles. Priestley wrote as an educator and his stated aims in his opening lecture are pedagogical and

¹⁰¹ J. Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar*, (Warrington, 1762), p.3. Henceforth *LLG*. According to Schofield the lectures were printed but not published. See Schofield, *Enlightenment*, pp.98-102.

utilitarian. A concern with successful speech permeates his work and he emphasises that languages are learnt more efficiently when their principles are understood. Priestley therefore intends his *Lectures* to be read as a general or universal grammar. A grammar that will ‘give such a description of any particular mode of speech as will agree with the general practice of those who use it, without taking notice of those deviations which fall within the practice of particular grammarians’. Priestley refers here to those parts or those functions of speech exhibited by all speakers, regardless of the particular language they happen to speak. Just as we can identify the rules of a particular language, so too can we elucidate a ‘*theory or rationale*’ of language in general, an underlying set of principles that universally structure all languages. As they are a study of the diversity of languages, Priestley’s *Lectures* are, then, also a detailed examination of linguistic universals.¹⁰²

To say that language is an ‘art’ is to encapsulate its dual nature as a diverse and varying human creation that is nevertheless characterised by underlying universal principles. This chapter explores the ways in which Priestley negotiates between the demands of the universal grammar and the rich realities of linguistic diversity. It is an interpretation of Priestley’s *Lectures* that emphasises the link between his theory of language and his empiricist associationist philosophy. Part One examines Priestley’s survey of linguistic universals and compares his work to other universal grammars that posited the existence of an innate reasoning faculty and innate ideas. Such grammars tend towards an a-temporal explanation of both language and the mind; they ground that which is universal in language on that which is innate and universal in the human mind. Priestley replaces this static picture with a focus on the dynamic and cumulative aspects of the reasoning process and of language, and this in turn is reflected in his definitions of the parts of speech. Parts Two and Three discuss the ways in which Priestley saw language and culture as intimately linked and locates the explanation for this in the inherent fallibilism of his associationist theory of knowledge. Languages differ not simply because the human voice is capable of myriad articulations with which to express the same ideas, but because they are related to sets of ideas that are themselves different. This is because ideas and words are proportioned to our specific cultural needs and circumstances and not directly to the reality of things. Part Four explains why this

¹⁰² Priestley, *LLG*, pp.3-5.

natural diversity of both ideas and languages is not especially problematic to Priestley and can be a useful historical resource. Priestley writes of the possibility of a 'philosophical language' in which all words directly reflect the order of nature. It is his optimism concerning the constant refinement of our ideas through the associative process that leads him to hope for a perfect language.

II Universal Grammar

Priestley's aim in the *Lectures on Language* is to identify an underlying rationale applicable to all languages. His project, as it is formulated in the opening lectures, rests on the hypothesis that linguistic diversity arises because words are arbitrary signs for universal ideas and mental activities. Languages vary not because our fundamental ideas or the ways in which we think are significantly different, but because the human voice is capable of a vast range of articulations. This array of modulations has furnished nations with sets of sounds so diverse that many languages have 'no one and the same word to express the same thing'. The uniformity of human nature and the invariable principles that govern the external world entail that the structure of human ideas remains essentially the same, regardless of time and place. We use language to express these ideas and therefore the words we use must to some extent reflect our thoughts. Therefore shared structural characteristics can be identified in all languages which, regardless of the different sounds with which they are expressed, may be deemed 'universal'. Priestley puts this clearly and succinctly when he proposes in his first lecture to:

Point out several powers and modes of expression that sounds and characters are capable of, to trace their connexion with, or relation to the ideas they represent; and to shew the actual variety of external expressions of the same mental conceptions which different languages exhibit.¹⁰³

Priestley had a long and fruitful tradition on which to draw when he came to compose his universal grammar. In particular he cites the influential *Grammaire Générale et Raisonnée* published by Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot in 1660 and republished throughout the following century, and James Harris' *Hermes or a philosophical enquiry concerning language and universal grammar* which first appeared in 1751. What these

¹⁰³ Priestley, *LLG*, p.7 and p.17.

texts have most obviously in common with Priestley's *Lectures* is the assumption that words do not directly represent the order of things in the world; rather, they represent our ideas of those things and the activity of the mind as it operates on those ideas.

Arnauld and Lancelot describe words as arbitrary and conventional signs. Words 'have no natural resemblance to the operations of the mind, are yet the means of unfolding all its secrets, and of disclosing unto those, who cannot see into our hearts, the variety of our thoughts, and our sentiments upon all manner of subjects'. Language is a set of perceptible signs that serve to make thought communicable. Rational thought utilises logical rules and, as all languages paint a picture of the rational mind, they all reflect these rules. This is true for all human beings regardless of the particular language that they happen to speak and on this basis, linguistic universals can be identified and analysed.¹⁰⁴

Published a century after Arnauld and Lancelot's *Grammar*, Harris' *Hermes* demonstrates that the search to identify a universal grammar had retained much of its potency during those years. Putting aside the Cartesian tradition, Harris sets his grammar on classical foundations. Following Aristotle, Harris calls language 'A SYSTEM OF ARTICULATE VOICES', that are 'not from Nature, but *from* COMPACT', and stresses the arbitrary and conventional nature of words. While it may be tempting to call language a 'Picture of the Universe', says Harris, words are not imitations of things and it would simply not be possible to invent a language that directly reflects real things like a mirror. 'If it be allowed that in far the greater part of Things, not any of their *natural* attributes are to be found in articulate Voices...it will follow that Words *must of necessity be* Symbols, because it appears that they cannot be *imitations*'. While Arnauld and Lancelot base their *Grammar* on a capacity for rationality that is both universal and innate, Harris sets his discussion on an equally stable, innate and universal foundation: the eternal and immaterial soul. For every man 'his speech or discourse is a *publishing of some Energie or Motion of his Soul*'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ A. Arnauld, *A General and Rational Grammar, Containing the Fundamental Principles of the Art of Speaking, Explained in a Clear and Natural Manner. With the Reasons of the General Agreement, and the Particular Differences of Languages*. Translated from the French of Messieurs de Port-Royal, (London, 1753), p.22.

¹⁰⁵ J. Harris, *Hermes or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar*, (2nd ed., London, 1765), pp.15-17, p.314, pp.324-330 and p.349.

In both the Port-Royal *Grammar* and Harris' *Hermes*, then, the possibility of identifying a universal grammar arises from an innate and unchanging quality inherent in what it means to be human. It is because human reason and the rational soul are innate that they are universal and have characteristics that may be meaningfully expressed and shared linguistically. The following discussion explores the ways in which Priestley decidedly departed from providing any such basis for his general grammar. Priestley's linguistic universals are also an expression of human psychology, but they express ideas that arise from sensation and a reasoning process based on association. For this reason alone it is clear that, when it comes to a comparison with Harris and the Port-Royalists, Priestley's universal grammar is going to look significantly different.

For Arnauld and Lancelot language and logic are intimately related and therefore an analysis of the logical operations of the mind is also the foundation for an analysis of universal grammar. Following the same structure as the better known Port-Royal *Logic* the *Grammar* is based on a conventional understanding of the mind as having three operations: perception, judgment and reasoning. The various parts of speech reflect these logical activities, so each of the operations of the mind is given a linguistic equivalent. Nouns substantive- indicating objects, and adjectives- indicating the qualities of those objects, correspond to the activity of perception. Propositions that use a verb to connect noun and predicate correspond to judgment and finally arguments connect propositions and therefore correspond to reasoning.¹⁰⁶

Arnauld and Lancelot use the nine classical word classes: noun, article, pronoun, participle, preposition, adverb, verb, conjunction, and interjection. However, they add a semantic division which groups all of these into two classes representing either the 'objects' or the operations of our thoughts. 'Men having occasion for signs to express what passes in the mind, the most general distinction of words must be this, that some signify the objects, and others the form or manner of our thoughts'. Their definitions of the traditional word classes depend on this distinction. Nouns, articles, pronouns, prepositions, and adverbs label the objects of our thought. While nouns and their articles are considered essential, other parts of speech develop for reasons of convenience and

¹⁰⁶ Arnauld and Lancelot, *Grammar*, p.21-24. R. Simone, in G. Lepschy (ed.), *History of Linguistics*, Vol. III, Renaissance and Early Modern Linguistics, (London and New York, 1998), pp.166-167.

abbreviation. Pronouns save us the trouble of repeating a noun, for example, and adverbs prevent us from having to use a preposition and a noun.¹⁰⁷

Having surveyed the signs used for the objects of our thought, the Port-Royal *Grammar* then examines those that signify operations. Men are ‘under the same necessity for inventing words that should signify the *affirmation*, which is the principal manner of our thoughts, as for inventing words to express the objects of them’. Verbs have the crucial task of indicating the act of judgment in a proposition, connecting the subject and attribute in order to affirm the agreement or disagreement between them. ‘We may say the verb of itself ought to have no other use but that of making the connexion, which we make in our minds, between the two terms of a proposition’. The verb is therefore used ‘to shew that the discourse in which this word is used, is the discourse of a man who not only has a conception of things, but moreover judges and affirms something of them’. To this Arnauld and Lancelot add conjunctions, disjunctions and interjections and all ‘other motions of the soul’ such as desires, commands and interrogations.¹⁰⁸

Harris classifies both sentences and words according to their function as an exhibition of the soul, drawing a distinction between its two fundamental powers: ‘Perception’ and ‘Volition’. The powers of perception refer to the senses and the intellect, the powers of volition to the will, the passions and appetites. As ‘all Speech is a publication of these Powers’, then ‘EVERY SENTENCE WILL BE EITHER A SENTENCE OF ASSERTION OR A SENTENCE OF VOLITION.’ Once classified in this way, the sentence as a unit of meaning can be resolved into its constituent parts. These parts are words and these also function as discrete units of meaning. Arnauld and Lancelot had divided all knowledge into either ideas or operations but Harris divides all knowledge into ideas and attributes of those ideas. In doing so he places less emphasis on the use of language to express the reasoning process and more on speech as a power of the soul to talk about ideas of objects and their qualities. Some of those qualities involve the same actions that Arnauld and Lancelot describe as reasoning. Therefore Harris classifies nouns and pronouns as ‘substantives’ and adjectives and verbs (as well as participles and

¹⁰⁷ Arnauld and Lancelot, *Grammar*, p.22-24.

¹⁰⁸ Arnauld and Lancelot, *Grammar*, p.24 and pp.90-92. Simone, in Lepschy (ed.), *History of Linguistics*, p.167. R. H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (London and New York, 1990), pp.136-139.

pronouns) as their ‘Attributives’. He also identifies linguistic accessories that lack an independent meaning outside of their function in the sentence - definitives, conjunctions, and interjections. The bulk of the discussion in *Hermes* is structured around these parts of speech, as Harris attempts to explain each as a universal idea or motion of the soul.¹⁰⁹

Priestley’s extensive use of Harris is especially interesting because of the epistemological divisions that existed between the two men. Harris’ *Hermes* is not a straightforward linguistic study; it is a deliberate attempt to undermine a theory of knowledge that he regarded as dangerously sceptical and atheistic. Harris subjected Lockean empiricism and Hartleyan materialism to some severe criticism and it is on this rejection of current trends in empirical thinking in favour of a classical innatism that his linguistic theory rests. He shared with Thomas Reid a motivation to rescue reason, ideas and truth from the kind of relativity that he saw inherent in any system that posits a direct causal relationship between the external world and ideas in the mind. For Harris, as this relationship relies on physiological sensations, it also suggests a link between mind and body that undermines the existence of an immaterial soul and reduces the role of the mind to that of a passive receptor moved only by sensation.

Harris’ criticism is framed in relation to his concern for successful communication. Empiricist philosophy effectively robs us of our ability to communicate because it takes away any certainty we may have that our ideas are shared and understood by others. Locke’s system traps us in an internal world of our own private ideas based on individual experiences of particular objects in the world. We can only talk intelligibly to one another, and to God, because ‘ALL MINDS, that are, are SIMILAR and CONGENIAL; and so too are *their Ideas* or *intelligible Forms*’. In order to communicate, the speaker must descend from ideas to words and the hearer must ascend from those words back to the very same ideas. ‘What then is requisite, that he may be said *to understand*? - That he should ascend to certain Ideas, treasured up *within himself*, correspondent and similar to those *within the Speaker*’. While this is perfectly possible if our ideas arise from the volitions of a rational and immaterial soul, it is not likely to occur if our ideas arise from the diversity of particulars in the external world. ‘Now is it not marvellous, there should

¹⁰⁹ Harris, *Hermes*, p.17 and pp.140-149. Robins, *History of Linguistics*, pp.168-170.

be *so exact an Identity of our Ideas*, if they were only generated from *sensible Objects*, infinite in number, ever changing, distant in Time, distant in Place, and no one Particular the same with any other?’ What is true for communication in general is also true for those compiling a universal grammar. For Harris a shared underlying grammar is only possible when founded on innate and shared ideas. He assumes that ideas based on experience would be chaotic, particular and subjective and therefore entirely lacking the consistent and shared rational structure that forms the basis of a universal grammar.¹¹⁰

Harris emphasises the subjective, fallible and particular nature of ideas under the Lockean system and implies such a theory mires knowledge in an unnecessary relativism. In addition to this criticism, he highlights the impiety of empiricist philosophy by questioning the role of the Deity in a system that gives bodily sensation priority over the mind in the formation of ideas. If all ideas are derived, writes Harris, they must be derived from something, ‘*which is itself not Mind*, and thus we fall insensibly into a kind of Atheism’. According to Harris the precedence given by both Locke and Hartley to the body over the mind leaves a gaping hole at the beginning of creation as it makes the divine mind an effect of something material and therefore fails to tell us from where divine ideas are supposed to have been derived. Furthermore the priority of sensation over ideas renders the mind passive and eradicates the need for a separate immaterial soul. Harris talks disdainfully of a system that places ‘that huge Body, *the sensible World*’ at the start of the process by which we gain knowledge out of sensible ideas ‘by a kind of lopping and pruning’. Under this hypothesis the mind is ‘*a sort of dead Capacity*’ until awakened by the body. To this Harris adds a snide description of Hartley’s alleged materialism.

Tis to this notion we owe many curious inventions, such as *subtle Aether, animal Spirits, nervous Ducts, Vibrations*, and the like; Terms, which MODERN PHILOSOPHY, upon parting with *occult Qualities*, has found expedient to provide itself, to supply their place.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Harris, *Hermes*, pp.395-399. P. Bergheaud, “Empiricism and Linguistics in Eighteenth-Century Great Britain”, *Topoi*, 4, (1985), pp.155-156 and p.158.

¹¹¹ Harris, *Hermes*, pp.340-341, pp.392-393 and p.400. Harris does not mention Locke and Hartley by name but describes their ideas so explicitly that we left in little doubt to whom he meant to refer.

To counter the problems of empiricism Harris aims to dismantle the cause and effect relationship between external objects and ideas and in doing so to decouple the link between bodily sensation and the mind. He establishes that 'MIND [is] *ultimately the Cause of all*; of everything at least that is *Fair and Good*'. He explains that although sensations seem to give rise to our ideas, they actually serve only to awaken a pre-existing 'CAPACITY or POWER', a faculty that may be called imagination or intellect. The process by which we acquire ideas therefore requires sensations but that does not mean that sensations can properly be said to have priority over the mind. Harris explains this in relation to the divine mind. The works of nature are the material creations of God: for them to have come into existence they would first have had to exist as ideas in His mind. 'Here then, on this System we have plenty of FORMS INTELLIGIBLE WHICH ARE TRULY PREVIOUS TO ALL FORMS SENSIBLE'. The external world is therefore a series of pictures of pre-existing archetypes. As these ideas were properly prior to the existence of the world it cannot be said that sensations of external objects cause ideas.¹¹²

In an appendix to his *Examination* Priestley roundly attacks the basis of Harris' epistemology, not least because he suspects Reid of borrowing from *Hermes* and failing to acknowledge the debt. The problem for Priestley, of course, is that at the core of Harris' argument is the notion that ideas are innate. 'If I understand Mr. Harris aright, *all our ideas are innate*; having been originally impressed upon our minds by the Deity, and being only awakened, or called forth, by the presence of external objects'. Unsurprisingly Priestley finds no evidence for such a hypothesis and no justification for Harris' 'ridicule and contempt' for Locke.¹¹³

According to Priestley, *Hermes* is a work of humour and imagination but lacks any philosophical rigour. Harris fails in his attempt to demonstrate that there is no connection between immaterial thought and the material body and relies instead on the assertions of metaphysicians. To counter such speculative error Priestley evokes 'the most obvious facts, and universal experience' to prove the cause and effect relationship between the sensible world and ideas in the mind.

Nothing is more evident, than that the principle which we call *mind*, whether it be material or immaterial, is of such a nature, that it *can* be affected by external

¹¹² Harris, *Hermes*, p.306, pp.354-359, pp.374-384 and pp.400-401.

¹¹³ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.152.

objects, and that its perceptions correspond to the state of the corporeal system, especially that of the brain.

If Harris can admit that sensible objects may awaken ideas, says Priestley, then he may as well admit that they also have the power of ‘originally *exciting* them’.¹¹⁴

Unlike Harris, Priestley does not use his *Lectures on Language* to defend an epistemological viewpoint and he borrows from Harris freely without acknowledging any obvious tensions. However, like all his work, the *Lectures* are suffused with Priestley’s associationist theory of knowledge and this has significant implications for his universal grammar. As already indicated, for Harris and the Port-Royalists some classes of words take precedence over others and in this restricted sense they may be deemed primary. For example, Harris’ division between ‘Principals’ and ‘Accessories’ allows him to rank words according to their importance or their function in a meaningful sentence. Likewise Arnauld and Lancelot distinguish between those parts of speech that are essential and those that have been invented for the purposes of convenience and abbreviation. Pronouns substitute for nouns and in this sense they take precedence but this lacks any concept of progression. Harris and Arnauld and Lancelot paint a static and a-temporal picture of language. When they seek to resolve language into its constituent parts they do not assume that some have historical priority over others and they do not conjecture about the stages of linguistic development. Priestley does the opposite. He begins his first lecture on the universal parts of speech with a statement that indicates an important departure from earlier universal grammars. ‘In order to give a clear account of the principles of Language, we must endeavour to trace the use of words to their origin, and through the whole course of their progress; from the first state to their last refinements’.¹¹⁵

For Priestley language is in a constant state of growth and development. He replaces a static understanding of the mind and language with a dynamic picture in which language grows proportionally to human knowledge and understanding. Priestley compares early human society to infancy. ‘The method of learning and using a language that is formed must be analogous to the method of its formation at first’. Children begin to speak by using simple utterances, and it is ‘very late’ before they learn to construct

¹¹⁴ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.154.

¹¹⁵ Priestley, *LLG*, p.50.

complex sentences using connecting particles. The same is true for the historical development of vocabulary. ‘Short and unconnected sentences would be sufficient for the most pressing necessary occasions of human life’. Primitive language was simple; it reflected a limited experience and knowledge of the world. Priestley explains that as human life became steadily more sophisticated, increased demand was put upon language to express new ideas and concepts. ‘As human life improved, as men became acquainted with a greater variety and multiplicity of objects, and new relations were perceived to subsist amongst them, they would find themselves under a necessity of inventing new terms to express them’. Priestley’s explanation of the co-development of knowledge and language appears, in general, to emphasise the role of words as labels for ideas. Knowledge increases first and words lag behind in this process: they are created in order to label and communicate new and exciting discoveries. Priestley’s insistence that his universal grammar must have an historical dimension thus emerges as a direct result of an associationist psychology that regards knowledge as a product of a cumulative process.¹¹⁶

Following the Port-Royal *Grammar*, Priestley makes a distinction between the ‘objects’ and ‘manner’ of thought and also takes note of those words that exist for the sake of convenient communication. ‘All the words of which the languages of men consist, are either the names of things and qualities, (the ideas of which exist in the mind,) or words adapted to denote the relationships they bear to one another; or lastly, a compendium for other words’. Also following the Port-Royalists, Priestley structures his discussion around the nine traditional parts of speech and his definitions are brief and conventional. However, Priestley departs from Arnauld and Lancelot because he gives historical precedence to some parts of speech, explores how the functions of some parts of speech alter over time and explains how others are evidence of an increasingly sophisticated rational capacity.¹¹⁷

Priestley’s theory of language is founded on his epistemology. We saw in Chapter One that, as individuals, we investigate and ascertain probable truths through a process of abstraction from particular facts. We identify the analogies that structure God’s ordered and necessitated world and in doing so associate ideas based on resemblance. This

¹¹⁶ Priestley, *LLG*, p.145-146.

¹¹⁷ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.65-66.

allows us to classify the world around us and construct general propositions that express invariable truths. An examination of Priestley's *Lectures on Language and Grammar* indicates that this so called 'analytic' method is applicable both to individuals and to whole societies in the progressive nature of their knowledge. Knowledge grows through a gradual process of abstraction, and language labels this process.

Priestley considers nouns the 'first and most important class of words' because of their primacy in the development of language. The nature of the noun changed alongside developments in knowledge. The first nouns were the names of sensible objects as these constituted the earliest knowledge of mankind: 'these are things that would first occur to their observation, and which their necessities would oblige them to have constant recourse to'. Priestley explains that knowledge develops as a process of abstraction and therefore while nouns were at first 'proper and incommunicable...other names would be applied, by analogy, to every other of the same species'. Adjectives were also invented to denote particular qualities but, after a process of analogy and abstraction, they came to express general ideas. They are a refinement on language that expresses the qualities of objects in a convenient form.

After observing things *in the gross*, men would attend to their parts and properties; and finding in many of them properties which they had in common with others...they would get names for sensible, and other qualities, which would not belong to any one object or species of objects in particular; but, upon being names, would recall to their minds ideas of a variety of things indifferently.¹¹⁸

Like Arnauld and Lancelot, Priestley explains that we not only perceive ideas of objects, we also perceive relations between those ideas. Reasoning is an activity of the mind based on apprehending the agreement or disagreement of ideas, and language can be used to reflect this activity, just as it is used to express ideas of objects and their qualities. Therefore most speech consists of propositions that affirm or deny the relationship between a subject (noun) and its predicate (adjective) and, in doing so, it expresses underlying associationist judgments. Priestley explains how the verb gradually developed to fulfil this function. Verbs were created sometime after the naming of things; propositions are a necessity but the 'first efforts in speech' did not

¹¹⁸ The nine classes of words that Priestley identifies are nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns, prepositions, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions and interjections. Like Harris, he considers interjections more properly to be 'inarticulate expressions of the passions...than words appropriated to any particular and determinate idea'. Priestley, *LLG*, pp.49-56.

contain verbs. Relations were denoted by the simple order of words in a sentence. ‘To express...agreement or coincidence, men would probably, at first, only name one after the other; as children do when they first learn to speak. For example they would say *a lion strength*, or a *lion strong*’. Later, verbs emerged as it was found convenient to introduce a word to express this affirmation; later still came adverbs as useful contractions of a cluster of words including a verb as, ‘*wisely*, in a wise manner’. Priestley’s discussion of the verb describes a situation in which it is not only our ideas about the world that are in a constant process of development but our reason itself. New and more subtle relations are perceived to subsist between objects and ideas, and the verb develops in order to express this increasingly refined reasoning process.¹¹⁹

III The Diversity of Languages

The idea that language is subject to progressive development presents problems for the conventional universal grammar. As an innate capacity of the mind or the soul, human understanding is presented as a universal and static faculty and this in turn means that linguistic universals are unchanging and a-temporal. Evidence of the diverse nature of languages presents related challenges to the principles on which the traditional universal grammar is founded. The following discussion explores how the enduring reality of linguistic diversity is accommodated in the Port-Royal *Grammar* and in Harris’ *Hermes*, and the extent to which Priestley’s treatment of the subject stands in significant and illuminating contrast. Priestley’s universal grammar, it emerges, is as much a detailed study of the historical and cultural specificity of language as it is a survey of linguistic universals. The explanation for Priestley’s emphasis on linguistic and cultural diversity can be located in his associationist understanding of ideas and language and his formulation of the relationship between thought and words.

While aiming to identify common linguistic characteristics, Arnauld and Lancelot inevitably come up against the countless grammatical differences that exist between particular languages. At some points variation is simply regarded as falling outside of their remit. They draw a distinction between the rational principles of language in general and the customs of languages in particular, and it is only the former they hope to

¹¹⁹ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.49-60.

explain. Particular usages are legitimate forms of speech, but such customs should not be understood using rational principles. On other occasions the *Grammar* attempts to accommodate linguistic diversity within its universalising theory. Some differences are explained away as surface variations that nevertheless reflect the same underlying operation of the mind or the same function in language. For instance, the six cases of Latin are assumed to exist universally but are expressed in modern languages by prepositions or word order. These are simply ‘vulgar’ variations with the same functions as cases: to express relations between words. Other linguistic variations are explained as having fallen short of a rational standard. Continuing their discussion of prepositions Arnould and Lancelot explain that the relations signified by prepositions are similar in all languages. However, ‘no one language has followed on the subject of prepositions what reason seems to require, which is that one relation should be marked only by one preposition’. Finally, some differences are put down to the corruption of languages or simply ‘groundless custom’. The relation between letters and the sounds to which they are supposed to refer is ‘intirely groundless, and the meer effect of the corruption that has crept into languages’, while the difference between the genders of nouns happens ‘thro’ meer caprice, and without any other reason than the influence of custom’.¹²⁰

Unlike Arnould and Lancelot, Harris does devote some time to stressing the inherent individuality of languages and attempts to explain some linguistic variations as the product of cultural pressures. He emphasises the close connection between languages and the historical circumstances of the people who speak them and comments that, ‘Nations, like single Men, have their *peculiar* Ideas’. He analyses the cultural circumstances of Britons, Greeks and Romans to explain some of the particular terminology of those nations. However, he regards such phenomena as problematic and as arising from the disappointing reality that our ideas are sometimes partial and erroneous. Such specificity is the result of error or imperfect reasoning. In emphasising linguistic diversity as the result of such caprice, Harris has much in common with the Port-Royalists.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Arnould and Lancelot, *Grammar*, p.16, p.34 and pp.82-86. R.H Robins, *History of Linguistics*, p.137. Lepschy, *History of Linguistics*, pp.168-169. R. Harris and T. J. Taylor (eds.), *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought*, (London and New York, 1997), pp.105-109.

¹²¹ Harris, *Hermes*, pp.403-412.

Like Arnould and Lancelot, Harris' discussion of the shared function of case inflexions in Latin and prepositional phrases in English insists that universal grammatical functions can be enacted in different ways according to the demands of the particular language. Meanwhile his discussion of tenses is especially revealing. He establishes a rational standard by which to evaluate the accuracy of languages and sees departures from this as evidence of the corrupting impact of custom and chance. Harris tells us that the 'Theorie of TENSES' rests on the 'Doctrine of TIME'. Based on an analysis of the ways in which we gain knowledge of the past, present and future, he establishes that the 'natural number' of tenses in all languages must be twelve. Regardless of the characteristics of the particular language, an accurate expression of time always includes all twelve tenses. However, this is not borne out with such precision in actual languages, and this is a problem that Harris cannot simply ignore. He concedes:

It is not to be expected that the above Hypothesis should be justified through all instances in every language. It fares with Tenses, as with other Affections of Speech; be the Language upon the whole ever so perfect, much must be left, in defiance of all Analogy, to the harsh laws of mere Authority and Chance.¹²²

Priestley's treatment of the same topic is revealing. Like Harris, Priestley explains that, as temporal beings, we speak of the past and future out of necessity. In all languages verbs are modified to express this: the universality of this practice mirrors the common experience of time, but this is the limit of Priestley's generalisation. Priestley parts ways with Harris when it comes to the utility of classifying verb modifications. Harris presents a precise framework of twelve tenses on which he assumes an accurate language ought to be based; departures from this scheme are the result of error. Priestley does not attempt such a framework. Instead he states that while all languages abound with tenses, none have been 'formed upon any accurately just and commodious division of time'. This is not a problem for Priestley; it simply requires a change in method. The 'harsh laws' of custom can be usefully explored and described. He turns to describing a few particular realities based on examples from Greek and containing a comparison with Welsh that runs in the footnotes. 'I shall mention some of the principal distinctions of time that have been actually observed in languages'. This is an important and significant departure from Harris and the Port-Royalists. Priestley's concession to the variable nature of languages gives him more scope to describe and explore existing

¹²² Harris, *Hermes*, pp.119-123. M. Cohen, *Sensible Words, Linguistic Practice in England 1640-1785* (Baltimore and London, 1977), pp.85-86. R. H. Robins, *History of Linguistics*, p.169-170.

differences while shifting emphasis from the critical or evaluative methods adopted by Harris.¹²³

At moments in his discussion Priestley talks of the caprice of language and, like the traditional universal grammarians, can be critical of departures from the rational standard. With respect to the practice of assigning gender to nouns, he says that while English ‘seems to have followed nature’, other languages, ‘by aiming at too great refinement, have departed from it, without gaining any advantage...for the absurdity and intricacy attending the practice’. However, while his discussion resembles that of the Port-Royalists and Harris, his explanation accommodates a much broader acceptance of the inconsistent and changeable nature of language. As with his work on the personal nature of our response to literature and the varied nature of taste, Priestley’s associationist theory of language has to accommodate a broad measure of difference and diversity based on the inherently fallible nature of associationism. Murray Cohen in his brief survey of Priestley’s *Lectures on Language* suggests that Priestley, while ‘eager to discover universals of language, places such limits on his search that he completely changes the idea of universality’. These limits, Cohen suggests, arise because language is an invention of man, not a work or a reflection of nature.¹²⁴

Priestley may have thrived on identifying simple, unifying principles in nature but he also knew when to accept the limitations of a human art. ‘Languages were not made by philosophers’, Priestley tells us, ‘but suggested by the necessities of beings in their first uncultivated state, and enlarged as their further occasions prompted’. Therefore it is ‘vain to expect that the laws and rules of them should be either perfectly natural or consistent’. It would be easier for the grammarian if such underlying laws did exist. Uniform principles, especially in the dead languages, would make language easier to understand and to use. However, as a look at Latin and Greek suggests, the reality remains that for every rule we lay down or term we define, we inevitably find exceptions. Priestley compares human language to divine creation and in doing so powerfully illustrates his point. ‘Only the most perfect intelligence, who can see the whole at one view, can establish laws that have no exceptions’. The works of nature are

¹²³ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.107-108.

¹²⁴ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.72-73. Cohen, *Sensible Words*, p.88 and p.101.

uniformly consistent but the existence of such universal principles offers no clue ‘in explaining what hath been the invention of men’. Priestley asks us not to attempt to reconcile linguistic variations to universal principles. Instead he asks us to make the best of a ‘lame and imperfect subject’. We should not deny ‘real defects and redundancies, or fruitlessly labour to reconcile manifest inconsistencies’.¹²⁵

On the authority of Old Testament history Priestley assumes that all languages may be traced back to the same point of origin and acknowledges the possibility that ‘the power of speech might have been communicated’ by God to early humankind. However, even if this were the case, he says, it was likely to have been a gift ‘only sufficient for the purposes of their own condition’. He dispenses with the Babel myth as an unnecessary explanation for linguistic diversity. ‘The present diversity of languages is generally believed to have taken its rise from the building of Babel...But it is no impiety to suppose, that this (agreeable to most other operations of the deity) might have been brought about by natural means’. This allows Priestley to discuss the growth and development of language as something essentially human and, because of its profound relationship to the needs and necessities of humankind, prone to the kind of instability that allows for swift diversification.¹²⁶

The diversification of language without divine interposition seems unlikely, Priestley tells us, when one conceives of the original language as perfect, regular and copious. However, the ‘natural deviation’ of language is more understandable once we appreciate that the earliest languages were simple and scanty and developed in proportion to human acquaintance with the world and capacity to abstract general propositions from experience. As humankind dispersed, the basic inflections of the original language would alter considerably, and ‘these different inflections would consequently introduce different constructions of words, and different rules of syntax; and thus what are called the very *stamina* of languages would be formed independently of one another and admit of all possible varieties’. These varieties are to be understood as products of particular cultural and environmental circumstances. ‘Considering into what climates mankind were dispersed, furnished with the bare rudiments of the art of speech, into what

¹²⁵ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.113-116.

¹²⁶ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.237-238 and pp.287-290.

different ways of living they fell, and how long they continued without the art of *writing*...it seems no wonder that languages should be so different'.¹²⁷

While Arnauld and Lancelot treat linguistic change as a story of degeneration and highlight the corrupting nature of irrational customs, for Priestley linguistic change and diversity becomes an object of study in its own right. Priestley rests his explanation for variation between languages on cultural and historical foundations that serve to tie language to the specific social needs of the people for whom it is a necessity. Priestley posits a broad universal story of linguistic development, progression and even decline to which all languages adhere. All languages 'whether *ancient* or *modern*; whether *simple* or *complex* in their structure...have a kind of regular growth, improvement, and declension'. Like all arts, languages begin in simplicity, emerge from a 'rough state of nature' and reach harmonious perfection before declining into 'whimsical ideas of excellence' and superfluity. This pattern of growth and decline is held in common, but we need to turn to the specific historical and cultural circumstances of individual languages to see how this applies in particular cases. Latin, for example, in its earliest form was barbarous and void of 'regularity and harmony'. It then flourished 'in consequence of the Romans having more power, wealth, and influence to contend for among themselves, and especially upon the introduction of the Grecian arts and sciences; all the chief men of the state applied themselves with indefatigable assiduity to the cultivation of their language'. Later, when the Commonwealth dissolved, 'when little use was made of the *Rostrum*, and judicial proceedings took a form which left little to the pleader...in those circumstances persons addicted to letters having no occasions for the ancient, manly and free eloquence, fell, through an affectation of novelty, into a number of trifling and puerile refinements in style'.¹²⁸

Priestley explains that linguistic change is a swift and unpredictable force based on unique historical pressures. Change can occur quickly and irrevocably. 'A language may be wholly lost in a very short time, if the people that speak it be subdued and carried captive by a nation that speaks a different language'. Hebrew, for example, was lost after the Jews were exiled. The close proximity of neighbouring languages means,

¹²⁷ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.287-290.

¹²⁸ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.168-169, pp.173-176. Cohen, *Sensible Words*, pp.122-124. Simone, in Lepschy (ed.), *History of Linguistics*, p.155.

too, that an exchange of words is inevitable. ‘Neighbouring independent nations, speaking different languages, but having an intercourse with one another, cannot avoid borrowing words from one another; and the language of the contiguous boundaries must be a mixture of both’. More is at stake here than mere vocabulary. It is the very framework or grammatical structure of language that can be altered by the intercourse of nations. Priestley tells us that individual languages are ‘liable to many intermediate fluctuations. No internal constitution can preserve them from the general revolutions, or the particular accidents’. Languages do not have an enduring structure or set of principles that can be expected to remain unchanged in the face of social and cultural upheaval. ‘Thus the people of *Italy*, in consequence of the frequent irruptions of the Northern barbarians, have entirely changed their language for another of a quite different genius and constitution, with different laws of modifications of words, and a different syntax’.¹²⁹

Aside from invasion, revolution and the mixing of languages, Priestley explores a number of other cultural factors that may serve to alter and develop language and may be used to explain the ways in which a vast array of languages may have arisen from a single origin. For instance, he explains the powerful impact that writing can have, transforming ‘incoherent and unconnected discourse’ into a refined and complex language. Priestley also dwells on the impact that isolation can have on the development of dialect. He speculates that a system of government such as that of ancient Greece was conducive to variations in pronunciation as ‘various modes of speaking jostled for primacy and no particular mode established itself as a standard’, while a country with a strong central power may be expected to have a uniform standard of speech. Linguistic diversity mirrors the diversity of cultures to be found in the world as each specific set of social pressures moulds and shapes a language. Sometimes we may apprehend ‘superfluities and defects’ in a language but in fact these are ‘no inconvenience’ after all. They are actually ‘peculiarly suited to the manners and occasions of the people that use them’. Hebrew, for example, has a clear and simple structure and is likely to have had a limited vocabulary. This is because ‘the private life and policy of the *Hebrews*, living under an absolute monarchy, and whose religion forbade them the use of the arts

¹²⁹ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.168-169 and pp.219-224.

of painting and statuary' restricted their acquaintance with new ideas and with neighbouring nations.¹³⁰

'Universally, in countries where there were no arts to exercise the inventive faculties of men, and to augment and diversify their stock of ideas...language hath been very barren'. Much of what Priestley has to say about the close relationship between a nation's language and its particular social and historical circumstances can be pared back to reveal an underlying discussion about the relationship between knowledge and culture. Under certain circumstances knowledge grows and new ideas flourish while language reflects this. The tightly-bound relationship between culture and ideas places significant limitations on Priestley's universal grammar. It rules out the possibility that when Priestley spoke of the universal 'mental conceptions' shared by all languages, he was referring to a complete identity of ideas. The diversity of social and historical circumstances that exists in the world gives rise to an equal diversity in ideas and knowledge. This means that it is not possible to speak of a set of ideas shared by all speakers that are simply expressed using different articulations.¹³¹

A comparison with Harris' *Hermes* may illustrate this point. Harris said, 'THOSE PARTS OF SPEECH UNITE OF THEMSELVES IN GRAMMAR, WHOSE ORIGINAL ARCHETYPES UNITE OF THEMSELVES IN NATURE.' He posited a natural concord between objects, ideas and language. He explained that in nature it is apparent that some things 'co-alesce and unite of themselves'. For example, qualities unite with their objects: '*a fierce Lion, a vast Mountain*'. From this natural concord of object and quality arises a logical concord of subject and predicate and a grammatical concord of substantive and attributive. Harris' confidence in this three-fold identity stems from his rejection of the empiricist relationship between sensations and ideas. Our ideas are identical to those archetypes found in nature, but this is not because sensible objects cause ideas, it is because both are manifestations of the divine mind. Ideas and the external world are not related by experience, they are related due to their shared origin in the mind of God. This lies at the core of Harris' understanding of universal grammar, and it means that nations divided by time, place and language will nevertheless share, for the most part, an identical set of ideas. 'Tis upon the same principles we may perceive the reason,

¹³⁰ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.135-137, p.157, pp.169-170 and pp.268-272.

¹³¹ Priestley, *LLG*, p.172.

why the dead Languages (as we call them) are *now* intelligible; and why the Language of *modern England* is able to describe *antient Rome*'.¹³²

Harris explains that words are symbols for ideas, but these ideas cannot be of particular objects and their attributes, as these are infinite and mutable. Naming ideas of particular individuals would extend language to incomprehensible proportions and rob us of our ability to make general affirmations or propositions. Successful communication between people, between nations and across time requires universal ideas, and the ideas of individual objects in the world are simply too fleeting and too particular to be shared. 'It will follow, as Individuals are not only *infinite*, but *ever passing*, that the Language of those, who lived ages ago, will be as unknown *now*, as the very Voices of the Speakers'. Instead, says Harris, words represent general ideas. Ideas 'AS ARE COMMON TO MANY INDIVIDUALS; not only to Individuals which exist now, but which existed in ages past, and will exist in ages future'. This universalises language and ensures that all humankind speaks of the same ideas despite their particular experiences.

Were therefore the Inhabitants of *Salisbury* to be transferred to York, tho' new particular objects would appear on every side, they would still no more want a new Language to explain themselves, than they would want new Minds to comprehend what they beheld.¹³³

Harris explains the process by which we gain general ideas. An innate and spontaneous energy of the mind 'discerns what in MANY is ONE; what in things DISSIMILAR and DIFFERENT is SIMILAR the SAME'. From this the mind is able to 'behold' a comprehensive and general class of objects that represents a multitude of particulars but is itself universal and permanent. General ideas, then, already exist both in the mind and in nature and are awakened in the mind by abstraction. As we have seen, it is clear from his discussion of nouns and adjectives that Priestley also saw the creation of general ideas as a process of abstraction from the particular to the general, by which words come to represent classes of ideas that share analogous qualities. However, while the abstract nature of general ideas is, for Harris, what makes them universal, for Priestley it is this reasoning process that ties ideas to specific social, environmental and cultural

¹³² Harris, *Hermes*, pp.262-263 and p.373.

¹³³ Harris, *Hermes*, pp.338-349 and p.373. Harris says that words can also represent particular ideas (especially for the 'common people') but this is only secondary to their primary function of representing general ideas.

circumstances. For Priestley the growth of knowledge is a gradual and cumulative business. Ideas arise first from sensations and this in itself ties them to our particular experiences. An associationist process of abstraction then allows us to expand and diversify our ideas based on the external realities that surround us. The general ideas that develop out of this process are therefore inevitably tied to the cultural and historical contexts in which they arise.¹³⁴

Priestley's associationist understanding of the mind and ideas limits his universal grammar to that which identifies shared functions of language and shared classes of words. It can tell us nothing about the specific ideas or knowledge of a nation; for that we must attempt to understand its culture and history. Language represents a universal process of abstraction by analogy, but the actual analogies and ideas that are used in the process depend on the circumstances and needs of the speakers. This becomes particularly apparent when Priestley discusses mixed or compounded ideas.

The regular growth of languages proceeds from the necessity of giving names to new objects, new ideas, and new combinations of ideas; combinations existing, either in nature, or formed in the imagination. Hence the language of those nations hath ever grown copious whose situation and occasions were such as brought them acquainted with various scenes of nature, or obliged them to have recourse to the improvements of art.

The kinds of ideas discussed by Harris directly reflect the order of things in nature: this is inevitable as both ideas and things have the same relationship to the divine mind. As this passage in Priestley's *Lectures on Language* indicates, the same is not true of ideas derived from experience and association. The compounds of simple ideas that make up most of our knowledge may sometimes arise from combinations in nature as they do for Harris. However, they can also be 'formed in the imagination' and this makes them vulnerable to a considerable cultural diversity.¹³⁵

Priestley's discussion of the way in which compound ideas arise from culturally specific circumstances relies heavily on Locke's explanation of general ideas and mixed modes. Locke explains in the *Essay* that simple ideas are taken directly from our experience of reality and of reflection. As Locke sees it, this means that they are the same for all men:

¹³⁴ Harris, *Hermes*, pp.361-366.

¹³⁵ Priestley, *LLG*, p.169.

they are ‘perfectly taken from the Existence of Things and not arbitrary at all’. The same cannot be said of those complex ideas that are designated as ‘mixed modes’. Ethical ideas and religious ideas, such as ‘Justice’ and ‘Temperance’, have no corresponding object in the external world. In Priestley’s words, they are combinations that are ‘formed in the imagination’. According to Locke such terms are particularly culture-bound, as they are constructed by humans according to their specific needs and beliefs and consequently vary considerably between nations. In a passage that is a striking paraphrase of Locke, Priestley expresses this with clarity.

Many of our compound ideas are not natural, but artificial and arbitrary combinations of simple ideas; particularly those measures, customs, terms of art, and those relating to the abstract sciences in general. In these cases, the occasions and circumstances of people who spoke different languages may be different, and not lead them to form the same combinations.¹³⁶

Priestley work on the extent to which our compound ideas may vary between cultures mirrors his work on the diversity of taste. Both discussions have their origins in an associationist understanding of the mind that denies the existence of an innate rational faculty and emphasises the relationship between experience and knowledge. As Priestley puts it in the *Examination*:

Men in the same situations, that is, exposed to the same influences, we have reason to believe, will have the same ideas; in similar situations they will have similar ideas, and in different situations they will have different ideas, and different in proportion to the differences in their situations.

For Priestley, our ideas are as universal and our experiences happen to be. His work navigates between the uniformity of knowledge that arises from an experience of God’s well-ordered world and the diversity that arises from our unique passage through life. While his discussion often recalls Locke these ideas are well expressed by Hartley and nowhere more clearly than in this discussion of translation found in the *Observations*.

The Languages of different Ages and Nations must bear a great Resemblance to each other, and yet have considerable particular Differences; whence any one may be translated into any other, so as to convey the same ideas in general, and yet not with perfect Precision and Exactness. They must resemble one another, because the phenomena of Nature, which they are intended to express, and Uses and

¹³⁶ Priestley, *LLG*, p.229. Locke, *Essay*, p.428 and pp.569-573. Harris and Taylor, *Landmarks*, p.128 and p.133. N. Hudson, “Locke’s Nominalism and the ‘Linguistic Turn’ of the Enlightenment”, *The European Legacy*, 2, (1997), pp.223-224.

Exigencies of human life, to which they minister, have a general Resemblance. But then, as the bodily Make and Genius of each People, the Air, Soil, and Climate, Commerce, Arts, Sciences, Religion, &c. make considerable Differences in different Ages and Nations, it is natural to expect, that the Languages should have proportionable Differences in respect of each other.

For Hartley, our ideas and language have every potential to mirror the order of nature as they are drawn directly from our experience of it. Most of our ideas do roughly correspond to external realities and this makes communication and translation possible. However, this same reliance on experience means that ideas and language are equally likely to be partial and suited to our fleeting and irrational needs rather than to God's rational plan. This is not the result of error; it is due to the inherent nature of knowledge, language and humankind. It occurs due to the everyday pressures of life, from climate to religion.¹³⁷

So far we have seen that languages can vary based on the specific combinations of ideas which they label. This is an appreciation of diversity that does not necessarily imply that some conjunctions and associations approach closer to the truth than others. However, as we saw in Priestley's discussion of taste, his polarisation of reason and prejudice, and his tendency to assume that rational ideas are invariable and common to all those who apply reason, seems to rule out the possibility of straightforward relativism. While Priestley's work tends to accommodate some level of inevitable diversity he tends to negotiate between individual differences by ascribing some to reason and others to prejudice.

As Locke puts it, all our general ideas are 'the Workmanship of the Understanding' and can be fallible. The 'Boundaries of *Species*, are as Men, and not as Nature makes them', and all general ideas thus contain in them a measure of subjectivity. Priestley's associationist account of the process of abstraction contains a similar acknowledgment of fallibility. As we have already seen, the judgments we make and the perceived analogies by which we associate ideas may reflect the order of the external world but ideas are equally likely to adhere to each other by the power of emotion, and assent may be generated in cases where the analogies pursued have no relation to reality. The process by which we come to general ideas can be inconsistent or irrational. However,

¹³⁷Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.343. Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, pp.281-282.

what is significant about Priestley's *Lectures on Language and Grammar*, is that they do not contain the account of linguistic diversity that may be expected to arise from Priestley's polarised epistemology. Nowhere does he say that differences between ideas (and therefore languages) that are based on varying cultural needs and differences are based on mistakes and false analogies. Rather he accounts for linguistic diversity and accommodates existing variation while remaining silent on issues of truth and falsehood.¹³⁸

That is not to say that Priestley avoids all mention of the fallibility of the associationist system. He adds a further consideration to his discussion of the cultural specificity of compounded ideas that arises from the principle of transference discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Priestley says that many words come to express a complex combination of ideas that include an 'accidental association of numberless foreign circumstances'. New ideas and associations can become annexed to a word, which are not immediately connected with its general meaning. 'Many words and phrases, besides the principal ideas they represent, convey to the mind of those who are perfectly acquainted with every circumstance in the use of them, a number of other ideas that have no relation to the principal ones, but which adhere inseparably to the words, and may make the use of them very improper. For example 'a word being very much used by people of low and mean professions, may, from that circumstance only, be reputed mean and vulgar'.¹³⁹

The degree of relativity, and even fallibility, that characterises the Lockean process of abstraction explains why Harris said that this theory of 'loping and pruning' ideas is inherently flawed and tends toward scepticism. Priestley directly tackled such relativism when he addressed the question of translation. The culturally specific nature of compounded ideas leads Priestley to question the extent to which direct translation is possible. 'One nation, not having the same ideas with the other, but ideas consisting of different parts, it is impossible they should have terms to express them'. The changeable and custom-bound nature of our associated ideas and the accidental associations bound up with them means that it is impossible to preserve the entire meaning of some words in translation. It is unlikely that all the component ideas of a particular term exist in two different languages. This is particularly true of the dead languages. Over time many

¹³⁸ Locke, *Essay*, pp.446-454. Hudson, "Locke's Nominalism", pp.224-225.

¹³⁹ Priestley, *LLG*, p.232-235.

accidental associations are lost, forgotten or impossible to trace. Priestley suggests some practical methods by which the translator can lessen the impact of these problems. Some compound terms, if they have no corresponding equivalent, may be retained in their original form and introduced into the translation as ‘proper names’. Others may be best expressed by inventing a new word which comes nearest to expressing the ideas required. Without these methods, says Priestley, emphasising the extent of linguistic diversity, ‘it is impossible to translate faithfully, or indeed at all’.¹⁴⁰

IV The Figurative Extension of Vocabulary

Knowledge, says Locke, ‘though founded in particular Things, enlarges it self by general Views; to which, Things reduced into sorts under general Names, are properly subservient’. This account of the creation of general ideas through abstraction makes knowledge a necessarily gradual and cumulative process both for the individual and for societies. It is this genetic approach to the human understanding that is expounded so clearly in Priestley’s discussion of linguistic universals, and it is the relationship between gradually developing general ideas and the needs and customs of those who create them, that serves to tie language and culture together so tightly. So far in this chapter we have considered these relationships between culture, ideas and language to be straightforwardly linear. Experiences cause ideas which in turn are labelled by words. However, there are suggestions within Locke’s *Essay* that the relationship between thought and language is considerably more subtle than this linear account suggests. This in turn acts to further bind together language and the social and historical contexts in which it is spoken.¹⁴¹

Hans Aarsleff has suggested that, for Locke, the progression of the understanding relies on the active and creative role of words. Locke, as Aarsleff puts it, ‘made it plain that words often play an active role in thinking, especially the words for the complex ideas of mixed modes. Words are abbreviations of our manifold experience, and this fact of abbreviation makes it possible for us to handle experience and knowledge in thought’. Language does not simply reflect our reason and our ideas; it can help to refine reason and create ideas. ‘*General truths*’ are ‘*seldom apprehended, but as conceived and*

¹⁴⁰ Priestley, *LLG*, p.229. Bergheaud, “Empiricism and Linguistics” p.158.

¹⁴¹ Locke, *Essay*, p.410.

expressed in words'. The activity of naming gives our ideas clarity and stability that they would otherwise lack. Many ideas would pass barely noticed amongst our myriad impressions and sensations if they were not named and thus clarified. From these various perceptions those that we chose to name and understand depend largely on our needs and culture. We make distinctions between human relationships, father, son, aunt etc., but have no analogous system to classify those of animals. The reason for this is closely related to the needs of speakers. Different communities or those in different professions require different classifications and different general terms. While one nation may not have a word for 'horse', a jockey may need to speak of a wide range of pedigrees. It is these requirements, and not the order of external reality, that determines how we name and therefore understand the world.¹⁴²

Locke is ambiguous about the exact nature of the relationship between language and thought. In hinting at the functional role of some classes of words in the process of thinking or reasoning, Locke troubles the straightforwardly 'atomistic' model of language we saw outlined in Chapter Two. We have already seen that Priestley challenged his own formulation of the representational relationship between words and ideas by discussing the connection between figurative language and the passions and the role of words in the mechanical generation of the personality. The same functionalist model of language re-emerges during Priestley's discussion of metaphor as a formative principle in language itself. In his *Lectures on Criticism*, his *Lectures on Language* and the much shorter *Observations on Style*, Priestley suggests that figuration allows language to develop and extend its semantic range over time. Many more words than we commonly think are figurative in origin, says Priestley in the *Observations on Style*. This is because 'in the infancy of the world, when mankind were under a necessity of using a language, and had little leisure for diversifying it, they were obliged to make use of the same name, to represent all the ideas that bore a considerable resemblance to each other'. Priestley develops this idea in the *Lectures on Criticism*. It is to 'necessity' that we are indebted for the first use of figures, 'it was neither possible, nor convenient, that

¹⁴²Locke, *Essay*, pp.224-226, pp.349-350 and p.579. H. Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure, Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*, (London, 1982) p.108 and p.160. Hudson, "Locke's Nominalism", pp.225-226.

every different object should have a distinct name. That would have been to multiply words, both to the overburthening of the memory and the prejudice of science'.¹⁴³

Priestley's discussion of the extension of vocabulary through figuration is essentially a paraphrase of Hartley. Hartley asks us to suppose:

A People so rude in Language and Knowledge, as to have Names only for the Parts of the Human Body, and not to have attended to the Parts of the Brute Creatures, Association would lead them to apply the same Names to the Parts of the Brute Creatures as soon as they became acquainted with them.

This application is figurative although 'by degrees' these words come to be equally applied to the body parts of both men and brutes, and so 'it would cease to be a Figure, and become an appellative Name'. Priestley explains this using the figurative application of the word 'foot', as it is used first to label the foot of a man or beast but later to describe the foot of a mountain or the foot of a chair. As Hartley points out, this means that figures have their source not in our need for ornamentation and embellishment, but simply in the 'various Resemblances which Nature and Art afford' and in the necessity of extending and improving language by using these resemblances. As long as language 'be narrow, and much confined to sensible Things, it will have a great Occasion for Figures'. Figurative expressions in these cases have a crucial function: they will 'naturally occur in the common Intercourses of life, and will in their turn as they become literal Expressions in the second Sense, much augment and Improve the language and assist the Invention'.¹⁴⁴

Language progresses by figurative leaps, but this process is not so much about the extension of language as about conceptual advancement. Priestley hints at this when he states, 'it greatly favours the propagation of knowledge, to call things that are similar to one another by the same name'. He may simply have meant that knowledge is garnered more quickly if we do not have to remember a multitude of different names for every

¹⁴³ Priestley, *Observations on Style*, 23, p.486. Priestley, *LOC*, p.183. S. K. Land, "Universalism and Relativism: A Philosophical Problem of Translation in the Eighteenth Century", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (1974), p.606. While Land does not mention Priestley in *From Signs to Propositions*, he does comment in this separate article that Priestley 'sees the metaphor, not as a structural principle inherent in language, as Herder did, but rather, with Locke, as an occasional departure from a literal norm'.

¹⁴⁴ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, pp.291-293. Allen, *Hartley*, p.235. David Bartine briefly mentions Priestley on metaphor in, "Tropology and Critical Reading", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, 6, (2004), pp.92-93.

particular idea. However, he adds that without the figurative principle of extension ‘there could be no such thing as general principles or general knowledge’. ‘It is one and the same process by which we make general or abstract terms, and by which figurative expressions are invented. The difference is only in degree not in kind’. While a pre-linguistic theory of knowledge suggests that we have ideas and then label them, Priestley is hinting here at the opposite. General terms help whole societies advance in knowledge and understanding through a process of abstraction that is essentially figurative and therefore necessarily verbal.¹⁴⁵

Priestley does not develop this point in great detail. However, Richard Allen has explained that for Hartley this notion is essential to his understanding of language and thought. Hartley dismissed the active faculty of reflection that is so crucial to Lockean epistemology. Relying only on association, Hartley had to explain how the mind can actively work on ideas. His solution was to make thinking linguistic; certain classes of words play an active and creative role in the process of abstraction. Hartley said that the figurative extension of words based on analogy ‘seem[s] at first only to answer the Purposes of Convenience in affording Names for new Objects, and of pleasing the Fancy’. However, figures actually ‘pass into analogical Reasoning, and become a Guide in the Search after Truth’. Language is ‘one Species of Algebra’; it allows us to move from the known to the unknown. The figurative application of a word, based on an analogical resemblance, allows us to say something about the properties of the object to which the word has been applied. Analogy is simply a recognition that the language used to describe one object may also usefully be employed to describe another by virtue of their resemblance or relationship.

The analogous Natures of all Things about us are a great Assistance in decyphering their Properties, Powers, Laws, &c. inasmuch as what is minute or obscure in one may be explained and illustrated by the analogous Particular in another, where it is large and clear. And thus all Things become Comments on each other in an endless Reciprocation.¹⁴⁶

For Hartley, then, language does not label our pre-existing ideas. Conception and language proceed together. Abstraction is not a reflective operation on simple ideas as it is in pre-linguistic theories; it is a verbal process that allows for conceptual extension.

¹⁴⁵ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.183-184. Land, *Signs to Propositions*, p.188.

¹⁴⁶ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.293. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.234-237.

Metaphors in particular are not so much labels for separate ideas, as component parts in a linguistic machine as it changes, develops and progresses. The meaning and significance of a figure arises not from the idea it labels but from the role it plays within language. We cannot safely draw such conclusions for Priestley. His discussion does not clarify the creative role of figuration. However, despite this ambiguity, Priestley's work on figurative language does indicate the extent of his departure from the atomism ascribed to pre-linguistic theories of knowledge and the extent to which Priestley regarded language as inextricably linked to specific cultural contexts.

Both of these implications are considered most explicitly in the *Lectures on Language* as part of Priestley's discussion of translation. Priestley's emphasis is on the difficulties and pitfalls of the translation of figurative words. His discussion has two elements: he focuses on the non-atomistic nature of idiomatic expressions and on the high degree of cultural relativity that characterises metaphoric language. Of idioms Priestley observes that for some expressions we 'learn to affix single ideas to those whole sentences, in the same manner as they usually do to single words'. In such cases, Priestley explains, 'the ideas of the parts do not compose the idea of the whole'. For expressions such as 'to give over a thing' in English and '*il y a*' in French, the meaning of the phrase cannot be resolved into the meaning of the individual words taken separately and this renders translation particularly difficult. Equally irreconcilable differences also exist between languages because of the different ways in which figuration is used to extend vocabulary.

There are few words, in any language, that are not made use of to express more ideas than one...Now as languages were formed independent of one another, it cannot be supposed that any two terms should denote a considerable number of the very same independent ideas...Thus the Romans said *cornua tauri*, and we say *horns of a bull*; but though the *Romans* moreover said *cornua exercitus*, we do not therefore say the *horns of an army*, but, using another metaphor, not at all more natural, but what custom hath established, say the *wings of an army*.

As with the problem of the translation of compound ideas, Priestley's advice is straightforward but limited. He suggests that the translator should use different terms in his own language to express ideas for which the same term is used in the language he is

translating from. Despite this advice the problem remains. Languages by their very nature can display much variation and are subject to a significant level of relativity.¹⁴⁷

V Utility of Diversity

For Priestley the changeable and progressive nature of language and knowledge means that words can alter both their function and meaning over time. Figurative language labels, perhaps even facilitates, the process of abstraction, but the function of the metaphor is not stable. Over time words that were once figurative become ‘evanescent’ and forgotten. They are absorbed into the language and can no longer appropriately be called figurative. Many ancient figures are particularly hard to identify, as it is not obvious where the literal use of the word ends and the figurative use begins. For example ‘*face, voice, cheeks*, and many others...have been applied to men and brute animals so promiscuously, that some persons may be inclined to call the application of them to brute animals figurative, while others will contend that it is literal.’ Priestley identifies two factors that mediate the extent to which figures are likely to become evanescent. First, where the analogy between the two words is greatest, the figure may quickly slip into evanescence, while in other cases ‘the analogy is scarce perceptible, and consequently the metaphor is harsh and unnatural’. The second factor at work is the ‘arbitrary and capricious’ authority of custom. Custom can reconcile us to extraordinarily harsh figures. Expressions can become familiar even in cases where the resemblance is slight. Such familiar expressions as ‘a blind way’, ‘a good house’ or ‘a fine hand’ require serious attention before we discern that they are figurative.¹⁴⁸

Priestley’s work on ‘evanescence’ questions the unique nature of figures as a separate categories of words by implying an instability that allows the figure to collapse back gradually into literalism. It also adds new layers of meaning; a figure is something that has a rise and a fall. Figurative words have their own histories, and, as they are created from the needs and circumstances of people this history can tell us something about human society over time. There is a useful and remarkable passage in Locke’s *Essay* that may help to explain this in more detail.

¹⁴⁷ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.227-232. Land, “Universalism and Relativism”, pp.604-606.

¹⁴⁸ Priestley, *Observations on Style*, 23, pp.486-487. Priestley, *LOC*, p.185, pp.191-192 and pp.237-238.

‘It may also lead us a little towards the Original of all our Notions and Knowledge, if we remark, how great a dependence our *Words* have on common sensible *Ideas*, and how those, which are made use of to stand for Actions and Notions quite removed from sense, *have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible Ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations*, and made to stand for *Ideas* that come not under the cognizance of our senses; v.g to *Imagine, Apprehend, Comprehend, Adhere, Conceive, Instill, Disgust, Disturbance, Tranquillity*, etc. are all Words taken from the Operations of Sensible things, and applied to certain modes of thinking. *Spirit*, in its primary signification, is Breath; *Angel*, a Messenger: and I doubt not, but if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all Languages, the names, which stand for Things that fall not under our Senses, to have had their rise from sensible *Ideas*. By which we may give some kind of guess, what kind of Notions they were, and whence derived, which filled their Minds, who were the first beginners of languages...’

Locke expresses here what Hartley was later to explore in more detail. Linguistic growth and therefore the process of abstraction and the creation of general terms is essentially a step-by-step metaphoric process. From a limited core vocabulary based on the names for simple ideas of sensation a sophisticated language will eventually emerge. This is perhaps Locke’s clearest indication that he toyed with the idea that thinking was a linguistic process. It is significant because Locke implies that careful etymological study may well enable us to work out the true and original meaning of such words and that such excavation could also reveal a great deal about the development and expansion of ideas. In turn this means that the study of language can also tell us about the ideas, culture and circumstances of the people who spoke it. Aarsleff has explained that the ways in which Locke’s work on this subject were taken up by later thinkers transformed linguistics. ‘The individual’s introspection into the operations of his own mind and its growth could now, so it seemed, be replaced by the philosopher’s study of the origin and progress of language, of etymology, both in regard to words and grammar’.¹⁴⁹

With echoes of Locke, Priestley makes a similar point in the *Lectures on Criticism*,

There is no surer method of discovering those sensations and ideas, which are apprehended to be analogous by mankind in general, than by observing the analogies of *words* in various languages; for the one will correspond to the other. As mankind, when the bulk of any language was invented, were not in a situation to invent superfluous terms, we may naturally conclude they would content themselves with the same term when there was a great resemblance in the ideas they represented.

¹⁴⁹ Locke, *Essay*, p.403. H. Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, (London and Minneapolis, 1983), p.33.

In the *Lectures on History* Priestley puts this idea to work in order to illustrate the importance of linguistic study to those ‘who would get a thorough insight into the history, the genius, and the manners of a people’. His concerns are those of the historian and so he begins his discussion with a survey of the uses of written texts in general and highlights the usefulness of those texts not directly intended to be records of events. Priestley asks us to study all the remains of the time: ‘even poets and orators may be considered as historians, and every law and custom as a piece of history’. All written sources betray the particulars of the era in which they were written and all writers unintentionally reflect the style of their times. For Priestley language is a resource; the diversity of languages is useful because it allows us as historians to explore the origins of nations and cultures. Language can reveal the story of a nation, its rise and fall, its revolutions and conflicts. The mixture of words in a language is sometimes more useful than documented evidence as a means by which to trace migrations and invasions.¹⁵⁰

Developing his discussion, Priestley explains that ‘language takes a tincture from the civil policy, the manners, customs, employment and taste, of the nation that uses it’. His explanation of this phenomenon is a sophisticated attempt to place Locke’s epistemological and etymological work into the practical hands of the historian.

If we only consider that all people must be under the greatest necessity of inventing terms to express the ideas of things about which they are the most early and most frequently conversant, and that these terms, preferably to others, are universally transferred to things analogous to them (because most allusions will necessarily be made to things of the most frequent occurrence), this method of tracing the original genius, manners, and employment of a nation, subtle as at first sight it may appear, will easily be perceived to have a foundation in nature.

The process of abstraction using figuratively analogous terms is universally employed but the combinations of ideas that arise from this process are unique and culture-bound. The Hebrew word for ‘stranger’ derives from the word for ‘fear’ while the Latin word for ‘stranger’ originally signified ‘enemy’ as well, clear indicators that those languages were formed at a time when travel and communication between nations were hazardous. ‘Concealed metaphors’ are especially revealing. The war-faring Romans borrowed

¹⁵⁰ Priestley, *LOC*, pp.155-156. Priestley, *Lectures on History and General Policy, To which is prefixed An Essay on the Course of Liberal Education for Active and Civil Life; and an Additional Lecture on the Constitution of the United States*, (Philadelphia, 1803), Works 24, pp.68-72.

terms from military affairs for general use. ‘Intervallum’ signifies distance but was originally used for fortification. Likewise frequent use of terms borrowed from husbandry and pastoral life betrays the origins of the Hebrew people.¹⁵¹

The principle of evanescence means that languages contain the fossilised remains of the reasoning process, the analogies that people chose to describe their world tells us something about their ideas and their culture. We shall see in Chapter Five that Priestley put this idea to work in his theological texts. However, Priestley also identified a second way in which the realities of linguistic diversity may be put to good use. We have seen that the inherent fallibility of the associationist hypothesis means that while the figurative manner in which we construct our knowledge may identify analogies existing in nature, the associations do not always correspond exactly to the order of the external world. This accounts for the profound variation between languages. Relationships between things in nature are fixed and determined, conjunctions between ideas can be faulty. However, despite criticisms from thinkers such as Harris or Reid, Priestley did not believe that association leads to scepticism. As much as this epistemology contains within it an acknowledgement of the fallibility of human understanding, it also harbours some long-term remedy for these problems. The fact that we gain all our knowledge through experience of the external world means that, while it may be partial and mistaken, it can also be tested and refined over time and come to better reflect reality. For Hartley and Priestley this means that knowledge has the potential to reach perfection, and as knowledge can converge more completely on the order of reality, so too can language.¹⁵²

Hartley combined his associationism with a providential optimism that foresaw a time when external realities, our ideas and our language, would converge and become identical. He believed in a time when a language would emerge that exactly expressed the order of nature. In such a language every verbal analogy would correspond exactly to a natural analogy; it would be perfect. Reading the story of Babel literally, Hartley looked forward to a time when a new ‘philosophical language’ would be established akin to the ‘Language given by God to *Adam* and *Eve* before the Fall’ and therefore be a perfect reflection of the nature of reality. Following Hartley, but with considerably

¹⁵¹ J. Priestley, *Lectures on History and General Policy*, 24, pp.78-81.

¹⁵² Locke, *Essay*, p.349. Allen, *Hartley*, p.253.

more caution, Priestley also professed the optimistic hope for a future perfect language.¹⁵³

Hartley writes of his hope that a philosophical language could be based on present knowledge and understanding. Priestley says the opposite. Neither our knowledge nor our understanding of language will allow us to say with certainty that a philosophical language will ever arise. However, it is probable that a single perfect language will emerge over time as a result of a gradual process of refinement based on careful comparative work. While ‘generally complained of as a great inconvenience to the human race’, linguistic diversity is not simply the result of the arbitrary nature of our signs and our ideas. It is also part of a grander divine plan and has considerable advantages:

The study of languages hath a most happy influence upon the human mind, in freeing it from prejudices and errors, which arise from verbal associations and analogies. We see that persons who have no knowledge of more than one language are perpetually confounding the ideas of words with the ideas of things; which the comparison of languages and frequent rendering from one into another, helps to make us distinguish.

Comparing languages allows us to ‘disentangle and distinguish’ our ideas. It allows us to identify parts of speech with precision and therefore aids in the construction of a universal grammar. Above all, the comparison of languages explodes major religious and philosophical controversies by tracing those analogies that are ‘merely verbal’. It is thereby the key to closing the gap between our ideas and the realities of the external world.¹⁵⁴

VI Conclusion

Priestley’s *Lectures on Language* cast language as an ever-changing and developing human creation that nevertheless has identifiable and unvarying characteristics. He fuses an interest in the origin and growth of language with an intent to identify those parts of speech that are universal. Aarsleff has explained that by the time Priestley wrote his *Lectures*, it had become the norm to merge the tradition of universal grammar with a

¹⁵³ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, pp.315-318. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.253-256. Simone, in Lepschy (ed.), *History of Linguistics*, pp.170-176. Aarsleff, *Locke to Saussure*, pp.260-265.

¹⁵⁴ Priestley, *LLG*, pp.292-302.

new interest in the origins of language. By the end of the century the term ‘grammaire général’ had become applicable to both. Aarsleff concentrates on that which is shared by the two traditions, despite the long-standing notion that concern for origins grew from empiricism and that universal grammars are built on rationalist premises. ‘Both modes in the study of language made the same basic assumptions regarding reason and the uniformity of human nature, and both were directed toward the same subject matter and aim; only their methods of approach were different’. However, Priestley’s attempt to survey linguistic universals is notable because of his considerable departures from the aims and assumptions of traditional universal grammarians such as the Port-Royalists and Harris. Priestley’s so-called ‘universal’ grammar reflects his empiricism and his associationist epistemology and in doing so differs significantly in its approach and aims.¹⁵⁵

Like Arnauld and Lancelot, and like Harris, Priestley isolates particular parts of speech that have a common or ‘universal’ function in all languages. However, the kind of progressive linguistic change described by Priestley implicitly challenges the hypothesis of the traditional universal grammar. It swaps the Port-Royal notion of an innate rational capability for a theory that holds knowledge and the reasoning facility to be the product of a cumulative and dynamic associative process. In turn it regards certain linguistic functions as reflective of this process. Thus while verbs in the Port-Royal *Grammar* reflect the innate reasoning process, the same part of speech in Priestley’s system is linked to the associative relationship between ideas. Nouns and their adjectives describe only our ideas of objects and their qualities, according to Arnauld and Lancelot. For Priestley they also reflect the process of abstraction using analogy: words that were proper nouns come over time to represent whole classes of ideas in the inductive process of generating universal propositions from particular facts. Priestley’s work also marks a sharp break away from Harris’ position in *Hermes*, in which language is the soul’s expression of the eternal ideas that pre-exist material creation in the divine mind. If ideas emerge solely from our experience of the external world they are universal only insofar as our experiences are the same. There is nothing innate that determines an identity of ideas between peoples, eras or nations.

¹⁵⁵ Aarsleff, *Locke to Saussure*, pp.110-114.

Priestley's discussion of linguistic diversity highlights the extent to which languages are inherently linked to historical contexts. The Port-Royalists' rationalism led them to identify an inherent rational structure in language and dismiss departures from this structure as irrational errors. They used the customs and caprice of particular languages to explain such departures and in turn rendered linguistic diversity an unfortunate reality to be ignored and excluded from discussion. Harris also had a generally negative view of the particular differences between languages. His confidence in the three-fold identity of world, mind and word meant that he saw archetypes for general ideas in external reality. When particular linguistic groups depart from these archetypes, Harris, like Arnauld and Lancelot, refers us to the 'harsh laws' of custom. Priestley's treatment of linguistic diversity is markedly different. He emphasizes the changeable and inconsistent nature of languages. His discussion treats particular variations between languages as inevitable and he does not try to reconcile these variations to a universal rational standard, nor does he dismiss them as mere caprice. Instead he transforms his universal grammar into a detailed discussion of the ways in which languages and cultural or social circumstances are intimately related. In turn this has considerable benefits for the historian because language, once considered historically, becomes a rich and useful repository for ideas and a means by which the unique origins of a nation can be identified.

Priestley devotes so much time to his speculative exploration of the links between culture and language because of his empiricist understanding of the creation of general ideas. Following Locke, Priestley explains that general ideas do not rely directly on the order of nature. They do not directly reflect the external world and instead may be said to be formed in the imagination. This is especially true of those ideas that Locke calls 'mixed modes' and that Priestley calls compound ideas formed in the imagination. However, to some extent it is true of all general ideas. Being the creation of men for the sake of communication, general ideas reflect, above all else, the needs and circumstances of those that create them. This entails significant levels of linguistic diversity as different groups of people form ideas and words based on their specific needs and experiences. However, it is this basis of our ideas in experience that also gives Priestley considerable confidence in the refinement and eventual perfection of our knowledge and language. While linguistic terms may reflect only analogies based in the imagination, careful comparison between languages enables us to identify and eradicate

such mistakes. On this basis a truly universal and philosophical language may be possible, one that directly reflects the order of nature, closes the gap between our limited knowledge and the external world, and mitigates for the fallibilism inherent in Priestley's empiricist and associationist explanation of mind.

Chapter Four

The Final Cause of so strange an Appearance

I Introduction

The testimony of God ‘comes from one who cannot err, and will not deceive’ writes Locke in the *Essay*. As long as we are satisfied that a revelation comes from the divine being our assent ‘carries with it Assurance beyond Doubt, Evidence beyond Exception’. Our assent to divine doctrine is absolute: faith is as free from wavering and uncertainty as intuitive knowledge itself. However, to avoid the excesses of enthusiasm, our assent must be conditional on the prior acceptance of a revelation as genuine and to ascertain this we should never neglect to use our own reason. In the *Essay* Locke’s emphasis is on ensuring that scriptural doctrine is consonant with reason but, as Locke explains in more detail in his posthumous *Discourse on Miracles*, we may also apply our reason to the evidence of miracles as attestation of divine revelation. As a young man already familiar with Locke, Priestley would not have been surprised to hear something similar from Samuel Clark at Daventry Academy. The metaphysics course there was based on Doddridge’s lectures in which he states that ‘when a man performs evident and uncontrouled miracles as a proof of any doctrine, virtue requires those who have sufficient evidence of the reality of such miracles, to admit the doctrine as true’. Both Locke and Doddridge share a long-standing and compelling assumption on which Priestley bases his entire discussion of the ‘Christian evidences’. As God instituted the laws of nature only God can suspend them. Solely on the basis of a well-evidenced miracle one can accept revelation as both divine and infallible.¹⁵⁶

‘Miracles’ writes Priestley ‘clearly prove the existence of a Being distinct from what is visible in nature, and a Being who can controul the laws of it; and this can be no other

¹⁵⁶ P. Doddridge, *A course of lectures on the principal subjects in pneumatology, ethics, and divinity: with references to the most considerable authors on each subject*, (London, 1763), p.231. Locke, *Essay*, p.667-668 and pp.693-695. Locke’s *Discourse on Miracles* appears in his *Writings on Religion* and is a reply to William Fleetwood’s *An Essay on Miracles*. It is discussed by M. A Stewart, “Revealed Religion”, in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp.685-688. Schofield in, *Enlightenment*, pp.46-47, talks about the influence of Doddridge’s lectures on later teaching. Clark taught Priestley at Daventry; he also edited Doddridge’s lectures for publication in 1763. For Doddridge and Priestley miracles are phenomena that actually violate the laws of nature while Locke includes events that only appear to violate those laws.

than the *Author of nature*'. While the study of natural religion derives its inferences from the usual course of nature, revealed religion relates to the knowledge we gain from the interruption of natural principles. As God is intelligent and benevolent such miracles must answer a distinct purpose: to teach, instruct and elevate mankind. Revelation attested by miracles can therefore be accepted as genuine. For Priestley, miracles are a useful and expedient means of validating divine truth because they make a profound and lasting impact on the human mind. As we saw in Chapter Two the *Lectures on Criticism* detail the ways in which variety amongst uniformity piques human interest and entertains the imagination. Here Priestley uses similar language to explain the arresting nature of miraculous phenomena:

Whenever any appearances become quite *uniform*, and *constant*, they cease to strike; insomuch, that it is very possible even for nations of mankind, who have never been taught any thing concerning God, to pass their whole lives, in the view of all the wonders of creation, without ever raising their thoughts to the great Author of all. Whereas, if the usual connection of causes and effects be interrupted, and things happen contrary to their fullest expectations, founded upon long experience, their attention is immediately roused, and they cannot be satisfied till they understand the efficient and final cause of so strange an appearance.

As Priestley states elsewhere the human mind is primarily 'led by analogy' and, as we noted in Chapter One, the way in which we reason is predicated on the assumption of an ordered and regular universe of endless similarities and associations. When we perceive a suspension of the laws of nature it breaks a chain of associations in our minds and violates every expectation we have laid down based on prior experience. We sit up and pay attention, immediately prompted to fit this new experience into old patterns and the result is a profound identification with our maker as the ultimate cause of both analogy and disanalogy in the natural world. A man in a room full of endlessly ticking clocks may fool himself that such devices are 'self-moving machines'. A man who sees a clock first broken and then repaired concludes that it cannot be an automaton.¹⁵⁷

The miracles of Moses, Christ and the Apostles are thus at the heart of Priestley's discussion of revealed religion. Scriptural truth stands or falls on the basis of the evidence for these events. His zeal for reason and his rejection of everything that is irrational or unverifiable did not lead Priestley to discard revelation or turn to the Deism

¹⁵⁷ J. Priestley, *Discourses on the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, (London, 1794), Works 15, pp.345-346 and p.350. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.432. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.109-111 and p.191.

of many of his contemporaries; on the contrary, he sought to bring the empirical and inductive methods of natural philosophy to bear on the evidences of revelation. His demonstration that the evidence in question can survive such rigorous scrutiny is arranged in order to assure us that our knowledge concerning miracles is of the very highest order. Priestley was determined to illustrate that our religious knowledge is of the same kind of certainty as any other. Thus his tendency, as Leslie Stephen puts it 'is to reduce all religious theory to a department of inductive science'. While a number of commentators have remarked on Priestley's assessment of scripture doctrine according to rational principles, this chapter examines Priestley's application of the same method to the evidence for these revelations.¹⁵⁸

Who is there, asks Locke, 'that hath the leisure, patience and means, to collect together all the Proofs concerning most of the opinions he has, so as safely to conclude, that he hath a clear and full view?'. Where the evidences of revelation are concerned Priestley aimed to do just this. Over the course of his life he published hundreds of pages on the topic, considering it in exhaustive detail and from every possible angle. This chapter examines Priestley's entire collection of 'evidences texts' and all are referenced in the footnote below. Sometimes rambling and usually repetitive, at other moments concise and illuminating, Priestley's works are always underpinned by a logical skeleton that illustrates his commitment to an empiricist and associationist epistemology. The following chapter uncovers the bare bones of the inductive method by which Priestley felt he had brought scientific certainty to an age-old topic. The discussion also examines Hume's sceptical challenge to Priestley's methods and how Priestley answered him in relation to the Christian evidences. The second part of this chapter looks at Priestley's parallel motivation in the evidences texts to demonstrate that rational assent to revelation is a necessary and crucial part of the development of personality. Priestley's examination of the reasons for infidelity reveals that his theory of the mechanical generation of personality is premised on the same epistemology that informs his linguistic and theological work and, as such, is vulnerable to the same criticism.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Hoecker, "Reification", pp.48-49. Stephen quoted by Hoecker.

¹⁵⁹ Locke, *Essay*, p.659. Priestley 'evidences' texts that have not already had a full reference are as follows, in chronological order, with subsequent abbreviation in inverted commas if the abbreviation is not obvious: J. Priestley, "An Essay on the Analogy between the methods by which the perfection and happiness of men are promoted, according to the dispensations of natural and revealed religion", Signed 'Clemens', *Theological Repository*, 3, (1771), Works 2. "Analogy". J. Priestley, *Two discourses; I. On habitual devotion, II. On the duty of not living to ourselves; Both Preached to Assemblies of Protestant*

II Testimony and Assent

Priestley's confidence in miracles as the sole attestation for divine revelation may seem uncontroversial but his formulation of this well-recognised argument is not entirely orthodox. This is illustrated by a comparison with Hartley's discussion 'Of the Truth of the Christian Religion' in the second volume of the *Observations*. Here Hartley's emphasis is on the 'genuineness of scripture'. The battle-lines between believer and unbeliever are to be drawn over the reception of the Christian scriptures as true and authentic. 'The Genuineness of the Scriptures proves the Truth of the principal Facts contained in them'. If scripture can be proved to be authentic then the histories it contains, including those that detail the miracles performed, can also be accepted. To this end Hartley includes propositions to demonstrate that the language, style and detail of the scriptures can be used as proof that they are genuine artefacts and relay accurate historical facts. Edward Evanson, the subject of severe criticism in Priestley's *Letters to a Young Man*, here expresses the same point.

The miraculous acts there and there only related, cannot prove the truth and authenticity of those histories, because the authority and credibility of the histories must be firmly established before the miracles contained in them can reasonably be admitted as real facts.

For Evanson accounts of miraculous events are intended to grab our attention as we read scripture. Miracles cannot prove that a particular revelation is divine because our knowledge of both comes from the books of the Bible. Like Hartley his argument is the reverse of Priestley's: our belief in miracles is an important consequence of our assent

Dissenting Ministers, and published at their Request, (Birmingham, 1782), Works 15. "Not Living to Ourselves". J. Priestley, *Letters to the Jews; inviting them to an amicable discussion of the evidences of Christianity*, (Birmingham, 1786), Works 20. J. Priestley, *Letters to the Jews, Part II, Occasioned by Mr. David Levi's reply to the former letters*, (Birmingham, 1787), Works 20. J. Priestley, *Letters to a young man, occasioned by Mr. Wakefield's essay on public worship; to which is added, a reply to Mr. Evanson's objections to the observance of the Lord's day*, (London, 1792), Works 20. J. Priestley, *Letters to a young man, Part II, Occasioned by Mr. Evanson's treatise on the dissonance of the four generally received Evangelists*, (London, 1793), Works 20. J. Priestley, *Letters to the philosophers and politicians of France, on the subject of religion*, (London, 1793), Works 21. J. Priestley, *A continuation of the Letters to the philosophers and politicians of France, on the subject of religion; and of the Letters to a philosophical unbeliever; in answer to Mr. Paine's Age of Reason*, (Salem, 1795), Works 21. J. Priestley, *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion, Delivered in the Church of the Universalists, At Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia, 1796 and 1797), Works 16. "Philadelphia Evidences". J. Priestley, *An Outline of the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, (Philadelphia, 1797), Works 21, "Outline". J. Priestley, *Four Discourses, Intended to have been delivered at Philadelphia, Published by Desire of the Author*, (Northumberland, 1806), Works 16. "Apostles".

to scripture. For other critics meanwhile, even the assumed divine origin of miracles was open to scrutiny. David Levi, Priestley's adversary in his series of *Letters to the Jews*, states that 'miracles only are not a sufficient proof of a divine mission'. His argument is that, as beings other than God have the power to alter the laws of nature, we need additional evidence before we can sort the divine from the diabolical.¹⁶⁰

Despite the critics Priestley was undeterred. Across the evidences texts as a whole he pays relatively little attention to the question of authenticity and the *Institutes* is his only text with an entire section of a chapter devoted to the subject. As already noted, the *Lectures on Oratory* list certain 'marks of truth' that demonstrate to us that a discourse is authentic. Using a similar criterion in the *Institutes*, Priestley assesses the scriptures and, like Hartley, finds in their style, manner, language and historical particularity the hallmarks of authenticity. The books of scripture have as many proofs of their genuineness as any of the other historical books that we commonly receive as true. Unencumbered by a belief in scriptural infallibility Priestley is able to conclude that despite numerous inaccuracies and inconsistencies the 'leading facts' of scripture describe actual historical events.¹⁶¹

Priestley's inattention to scriptural authenticity did not, therefore, stem from a sense of disregard. He simply felt that the subject had already been settled. This position is well expressed in his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*.

That the gospels and the book of Acts, which contain the history of the rise and progress of Christianity, are genuine productions of the age to which they are usually ascribed...I must take for granted, because this does not appear ever to have been disputed; and there is as much evidence of it as there is of the genuineness of any histories.

¹⁶⁰ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, pp.72-104. E. Evanson, *A Letter to Dr. Priestley's Young Man, with a postscript the Rev .D. Simpson's Essay, &c. in answer to Evanson's Dissonance and Volney's Ruins*, (Ipswich, 1794), p.3 and pp.12-16. D. Levi, *Letters to Dr. Priestly, in answer to those he addressed to the Jews; inviting them to an amicable discussion of the evidences of Christianity*, (2nd ed., London, 1787), pp.83-88.

¹⁶¹ Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.123-130. Priestley, *Outline*, 21, p.171. Priestley considered prophecy to be a particular kind of miracle and a good means of verifying revelation. His work on prophecy is straightforward and, like Hartley's, mainly consists in quoting scriptural predictions and discussing the extent to which they have been fulfilled. As it relies less overtly on his empiricist methods it is not considered here. See Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.170-190 for a good example of his work in this area. Also Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, pp.150-157.

Priestley accepted that the books of scripture were not forgeries; they were written at the time and speak of real facts. However, he did not believe that the texts were infallible and therefore could see no necessary reason to accept their account of miraculous events. Instead our belief in miracles must be based on an evaluation of the value of scripture as testimony. Before we can agree to the truth of scriptural miracles we have to establish both the validity of testimony in general and the probable truth of testimony 'so circumstanced' as that which we find in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁶²

As we noted in Chapter One Priestley followed Locke in distinguishing between knowledge that is intuitive or demonstrable and judgements based on the induction of particulars. When we immediately perceive an agreement between two ideas, our knowledge is said to be certain and self-evident. When the perception of an agreement arises from our repeated experience of the conjunction of two ideas our knowledge is only probable and may be subject to revision. We often make such judgments ourselves and from our own experience we are able to evaluate the likelihood that they are true. However, as Locke explains, much of our knowledge does not come from our own experience. Many of the propositions, both self-evident and probable, that we reason and act upon every day, we assent to on the authority of testimony. Furthermore our assent to these propositions will often 'border so near upon Certainty, that we make no doubt at all about them; but *assent* to them as firmly, and act, according to that Assent, as resolutely, as if they were infallibly demonstrated'.¹⁶³

Each of Priestley's evidences texts contains a discussion of testimony as grounds for assent, and in each text the emphasis is on the high level of certainty with which good testimony is invariably accompanied. Priestley's concern is to assure us that testimony is as valid as our own experience and even our own intuition. Testimony, he says, is no different from memory. As we accept the truth of our own recollections so too should we assent to testimony. Likewise testimony is no different from the information of our own senses. All men are 'constituted alike' so we can have little doubt that what one man sees or hears in a particular situation would have the same effect on us. The evidence of testimony informs every aspect of our daily lives, it is functional, useful and expedient. As children it is crucial we accept the authority of our parents for our own

¹⁶² Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.476.

¹⁶³ Locke, *Essay*, pp.654-657.

safety and well-being. As adults we take many truths on the authority of testimony and often trust the observations of others more than our own. ‘There are no truths which more readily gain the assent of mankind, or are more firmly retained by them, than those of an historical nature, depending upon the testimony of others’. Testimony is that which most suits the ‘bulk’ of mankind; it does not require abstract speculation but still grants us firm persuasion. It is on the basis of the strength and authority of testimony and its impact on the human mind that God chose to signify his will to men through miracles attested by the proper evidence. ‘We ought not, therefore, to think lightly of the nature of faith in revelation, because it is an *historical faith*, and depends upon *human testimony*; for the same is the foundation of the greatest, and most valuable part of human knowledge’.¹⁶⁴

In order to illustrate Priestley’s work on testimony it may be interesting to compare his work to the idiosyncratic approach taken by fellow-Unitarian Edward Evanson. In his reply to Priestley’s *Letters to a Young Man* Evanson outlines an argument that overrides the value of testimony almost entirely. While he shares with Priestley a firm conviction in the divine mission of Christ, he writes, their great differences stem from the foundations for that belief. He criticises Priestley for having built his belief on the shaky ground of testimony when this is not sufficient for reasoned assent. Do not, he advises, ‘pin your religious faith upon the wisdom or the folly, the falsehood or the veracity of any number of fallible and erring men’. Evanson points out that it is the evidence of our own experience that ought to convince us and satisfy our reason when it comes to revelation; we should not be expected to rely on the dubious veracity of others. Fortunately for Evanson it transpires that God never intended that his creatures should give credit to his revelations on the basis of miracles alone. In the place of revelation God provides the ‘rock’ of completed prophecy, the evidence for which each man can see for himself. William Hammon, yet another of Priestley’s adversaries, argues the opposite but on the same grounds. In order to avoid perpetual doubt a few more miracles could go a long way. ‘It is allowed miracles ought not to be cheap and plenty. One or two, at least, every thousand years may be admitted’ he writes. Hammon is

¹⁶⁴ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, pp.328-330. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, pp.453-455. Priestley, *Philosophers and Politicians*, Part II, 21, pp.118-122. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.113-118. Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.172-176.

tongue in cheek but his point is a serious one: each individual's own experience should be the standard for true knowledge.¹⁶⁵

Unlike Evanson, Locke and Priestley state that while in some cases it can be dangerous to rely on the opinions of others this hardly means we should dismiss the value of testimony outright. The possibility that we will be deceived entails that it is our job, as rational thinkers, to assess the value of testimony and regulate our assent accordingly. Locke suggests that the probable veracity of testimony depends on various criteria such as the number, integrity and skill of the witnesses involved and the existence of contrary testimonies. Priestley does the same and his 'rules for estimating the value of human testimony' mirror Locke's. Our assent will be determined by many factors including the number of well-informed, competent, independent witnesses who are free from bias or the wish to deceive. In many ways Priestley's discussion of the value of testimony is old-fashioned and characteristic of arguments that had been around for centuries. For example, never the mathematician, he wisely avoids Hartley's quantitative formalisation of the value of dependent and independent evidences. However, in one significant way Priestley's discussion marks a departure from tradition. Priestley uses an associative language to explain the process of assent to testimony that transforms the basic Lockean analysis.¹⁶⁶

Reid called credulity 'the gift of nature' and argued his case on the basis that the principle is strongest in childhood and only later 'limited and restrained by experience'. In the *Examination* Priestley briefly establishes that he believes Reid's reasoning to be 'exceedingly fallacious'. For Priestley any explanation for assent to testimony must be based on reason and experience rather than relying on innate principles. As infants we are credulous because our parents rarely lie to us and it is only later in life that we experience falsehood. Assent must be based on reason and this process is best explained using the association of ideas. As we saw in Chapter One Priestley held that our assent to a proposition is based on an association between the ideas in question and the idea of

¹⁶⁵ Hammon quoted by Priestley in *Unbeliever*, (additional letters), 4, p.436. Evanson, *Priestley's Young Man*, pp.4-5 and pp.17-18. William Hammon is a pseudonym for Matthew Turner, a chemistry tutor at Warrington Academy who was known to Priestley.

¹⁶⁶ Locke, *Essay*, pp.654-657. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.118-120. Priestley, *Philadelphia Evidences*, 16, p.118-119 and pp.129-130. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.237-246. M.A Stewart, in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp.685-686. Priestley summarised Hartley's work on quantitative probability in, *Lectures on History*, 24, pp.57-58 but did not apply it in the evidences texts.

‘truth’. As Hartley puts it, rational assent follows from ‘a close Association of the Ideas suggested by the Proposition, with the Idea, or internal Feeling, belonging to the Word Truth’. Assent is thus based on repeated experience. If on repeated occasions we see that ‘milk is white’ we associate ‘truth’ with the proposition formulated to express this constant conjunction. When Priestley in the *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* says that he will explain his faith in testimony ‘from the first principles of *assent*’ this associative principle is at the heart of his discussion. Priestley explains that the validity of testimony ‘rests ultimately on the association of ideas; human testimony in certain circumstances not having been found to deceive us’.¹⁶⁷

For Priestley our assent to testimony is based on probabilities and arises only from our experience of human nature. As we go through life our general experience establishes that our fellow creatures are likely to tell the truth. We associate ‘truth’ and ‘testimony’ and identify them as necessarily linked. Over time we repeatedly find that testimony can be depended upon, ‘that there is generally a correspondence between what is asserted by men, and the things or events, which their assertions respect’. Then, as we become more experienced in receiving the testimony of others we can refine this initial association. We find that on some occasions we ought to associate testimony with falsehood, perhaps in cases where men are badly informed or have an interest in deceiving us. This in turn strengthens our faith in testimony when it does not resemble these occasions. Thus through a process of association and dissociation we build up a detailed and subtle knowledge refining our understanding of the kinds of circumstances in which testimony is reliable. We associate the kinds of factors listed above, such as the high number of well-informed witnesses for example, with ‘truth’. ‘Our faith in mathematical truth cannot be perceived to be stronger than our faith in such historical propositions as these’.¹⁶⁸

A significant portion of Priestley’s work on the evidences of revelation is taken up with analysing scriptural testimony in order to determine whether it can be deemed reliable; whether it is of the quality that we normally associate with truth. Priestley’s discussion

¹⁶⁷ Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.82-83. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 2, pp.453-455. Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.324.

¹⁶⁸ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 2, pp.328-330. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 2, pp.453-455. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, p.114. Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.172-176. Similar argument in Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, pp.142-143.

of the resurrection of Jesus in his *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion* gives us a flavour of his general approach to the subject. 'The circumstances of the re-appearing of Jesus after his crucifixion were such as were calculated to give the greatest satisfaction possible' he tells us. The disciples did not expect a resurrection and so cannot be said to have been deceived by 'their fond imaginations'. Jesus appeared to a number of people, talking, eating and drinking with them and 'even offering himself to be handled'. None of his appearances occurred at night when people waking from sleep do not have perfect use of their senses or judgment. Instead his appearances were sufficiently frequent and lasted long enough for sensible witnesses to ascertain his identity. Over five hundred people saw Jesus in the time after his resurrection, people who were unlikely to have been deceived and unlikely to have any wish to impose on others. Finally his appearances continued for a sufficient period, long enough for witnesses to recover from the initial shock of meeting their dead friend and long enough to examine the evidence at their leisure. Elsewhere Priestley explains that the same standards by which we assess the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus apply in equal measure to the miracles of Moses. As Priestley makes clear in his *Letters to the Jews* all the miracles of scripture are based on the same sound evidence and valid testimony. Our assent to either testament ought to entail our assent to the other on the same principles. The testimony on which we should ground our assent to the miracles of Moses, Christ and the Apostles is of the kind we have previously associated with truth. The evidence is of the highest order, our assent is granted, and our certainty almost absolute.¹⁶⁹

Locke established a general rule for ascertaining the degree of assent to testimony appropriate in a given situation. Near-certainty arises, he writes, when we are told of things that conform to the uniform course of nature as attested by our own experience and the concurrent reports of all others. Meanwhile, for testimony that conflicts with our experience of the ordinary course of nature, the level of probability is substantially lowered. In proportion to this disanalogy in our own experience our response will be 'Belief, Conjecture, Guess, Doubt..., etc'. For Locke, our experience is therefore to be the standard by which we evaluate probabilities, our own observations on the course of nature forming the basis for assessing the testimony of others. However, Locke makes an important exception to this rule. In the case of miraculous events 'the strangeness of

¹⁶⁹ Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.176-177. Priestley, *Evidences*, 15, pp.325-331. Priestley, *Letters to the Jews*, Part I, 20, pp.234-242.

the Fact lessens not the Assent to a fair Testimony given of it'. Despite violating every expectation, miracles are to be allowed probable on the basis of testimony. When events occur suitable to the ends of God who has the power to alter the course of nature, any level of disanalogy from previous experience can be balanced by fair testimony. In the century following Locke's *Essay* his major exemption of miracles from the rules by which we normally assess testimony came to be regarded by many as an unacceptable concession. Like Locke, David Hume suggested a set of precepts by which we should evaluate testimony and based these rules on degrees of uniformity in our personal experience. Both men ask us to weigh the reliability and veracity of a witness against the cumulative evidence of our own experience. However, unlike Locke, Hume did not make miracles a special case and was therefore able to deliver a compelling sceptical blow to the traditional use of miracles as evidence for revelation.¹⁷⁰

The first part of Hume's chapter 'Of miracles' in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* examines the requisite standards for testimony concerning miracles. His argument is well-known. A wise person 'proportions belief to evidence' and this evidence is based on our experience. The strongest evidence arises from our experience of uniform and constant conjunction and the weakest from conjunctions that rarely occur. Our uniform experience of the constant laws of nature is of the very strongest kind. It amounts to a proof against a miracle, as it always outweighs the strength of testimony given in attestation of such an event. By definition a miracle violates the laws of nature and therefore stands against the proof of uniform experience. In opposition to such proof is the weaker evidence of human testimony. Based only on probabilities such testimony will always fall short of proofs arising from unvarying experience.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience as can be imagined... And as uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Locke, *Essay*, pp.661-668. M.A Stewart, in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp.685-686.

¹⁷¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, T. L. Beauchamp (ed.), (Oxford, 1999), pp. 169-174. Beauchamp, "Editor's Introduction", in Hume, *Enquiry*, pp.44-48. M. A. Stewart, in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, pp.695-698. H.S. Price, "A Few Observations on David Hume and Richard Price on Miracles", *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 5, (1986), pp.21-25. Hume's work is more ambiguous than this exposition implies. He leaves it open to interpretation whether it is actually possible that ideal testimony could exist which would be sufficient to

In the *Institutes and Observations on Infidelity* Priestley summarises this argument in stark and simplified terms. ‘Mr. Hume...has advanced, that we ought not to listen to any evidence in favour of *miracles*...because every such evidence is contradicted by our own constant experience of absolute uniformity’. Priestley’s tone is dismissive. Like all other unbelievers Hume has failed to examine the historical evidence for miracles and does not seem to have given any great attention to the subject. ‘All Mr. Hume has advanced...is, that there have been no miraculous events because there have been none’. Constant experience establishes only a reasonable expectation, says Priestley, and as such we must be allowed to revise our assumptions based on new evidence. A universal proposition founded on the induction of particulars must always be open to refinement. On Hume’s principles every new fact in philosophy is incredible and no new knowledge should be accepted that contradicts our expectations. It is true that miracles break an established analogy. However, what this means in real terms is simply that they require more concrete evidence than other facts that come to us on testimony. Accounts of miracles should not be rejected *a priori* on an assumption about the uniform laws of nature. Instead the evidence actually alleged in their favour needs due consideration. Priestley’s Hume becomes another Evanson, determined to pit the authority of his own experience against the authority of testimony and in consequence finding all such testimony significantly lacking.¹⁷²

For Priestley an impartial look at the evidence reveals that the veracity and credibility of the witnesses to scriptural miracles outweigh the profound disanalogy of such phenomena. The evidence is such that we can revise our expectations based on the evidence for this break in analogy and refine our understanding accordingly. Priestley also formulates a related attack on Humean scepticism arising from the associative explanation, for our assent to testimony is also to be found in Hartley’s *Observations*. Association and analogy are synonymous, Hartley reminds us. We associate ideas because they are similar and our expectations based on previous analogy lead us to assent to or dissent from a proposition. ‘A Man’s Thoughts, Words and Actions, are all generated by something previous; there is an established Course for these Things, an Analogy...’. Now it happens in some cases that a proposition is supported and

counter the evidence of experience, although he demonstrates that none such has ever occurred. Priestley ignores these subtleties.

¹⁷² Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.36-37. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.114-117.

discredited by rival analogies and it is difficult to determine on which side our assent should be granted. An extreme case of this is miracles as in this case both the testified fact and its negation imply a miracle. On one hand you have God's alleged violation of the laws of nature, whilst on the other you have your own experience of credible testimony. It is a miracle of the human mind to suppose that the testimony of so many witnesses could be false or accepted for hundreds of years without good reason. 'Here then a Man must either deny all Analogy and Association, and become an absolute sceptic, or acknowledge that very strong analogies may sometimes be violated'.¹⁷³

Priestley tells us that his argument for the credibility of human testimony can be reduced to the method of 'judging from known and even present appearances'. Testimony may speak of second-hand facts but our assent to it is based on our own experience of human nature. When we carefully evaluate the validity of testimony, experience is pitted against experience, analogy against analogy. If one is to assent to or dissent from miracles on the basis of reason, one must accept that analogies based on our own experience can sometimes be broken:

I invite you to admit nothing but what shall appear to be least contrary to *natural analogy*, and consequently to *probability*. For I maintain that, as unbelievers in revealed religion, you admit what is more contrary to common experience and daily observation than I do. I well know you laugh at the idea of *miracles*: but I say, that it will be found, upon inquiry, that you believe in greater miracles than myself.

The evidence in favour of scriptural miracles is so circumstanced that its falsehood would be more extraordinary than the events it relates. If each and every one of the thousands of witnesses to the Christian miracles has been fooled, or is under some delusion or is conspiring in a falsehood, this would be a greater miracle than the events in question.¹⁷⁴

'There is nothing that is possible in itself' writes Priestley 'but may be proved to have taken place, by human testimony'. Many of the evidences texts include an argument

¹⁷³ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, pp.146-148.

¹⁷⁴ Priestley, *Institutes*, 2, pp.111-113. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, pp.456-457. Priestley, *Philosophers and Politicians*, Part I, 21, p.89. Priestley, *Philadelphia Evidences*, 16, p.119. Hume, of course, establishes the same principle as a 'general maxim': 'that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish'. Priestley ignores this. Hume, *Enquiry*, p.174.

from ‘antecedent probability’ in which Priestley establishes that divine revelation attested by miracles is possible, expedient and even desirable. By including this argument Priestley was able to strengthen his position against Humean scepticism. Arguments from ‘antecedent probability’ were nothing new and Priestley’s contemporaries would have been familiar with the content of his discussion. For instance, Doddridge devotes Part V of his lectures to ‘the Reason to expect and desire a Revelation’. The majority of mankind are entangled in secular cares and have no time for laborious enquiry, Doddridge explains. We are superstitious by nature, our reason is limited and our morality easily corrupted. God is powerful and benevolent and would not ‘suffer mankind to have fallen into apostasy, unless he had intended them such an assistance’. Therefore we have a ‘*probable hope*’ that God would grant a revelation. Meanwhile Levi uses the same technique to establish the divine mission of Moses. The miracles of Moses were of pressing practical necessity. The plagues and the parting of the Red Sea were required for the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt and manna from Heaven was essential for their subsistence. In such circumstances a divine interposition from our benevolent God is only to be expected. Our assent to miracles is strengthened if they first be established as useful, rational and expedient.¹⁷⁵

Priestley spends a great deal of time discussing the desirability of revelation and his argument focuses on the limited nature of the knowledge we receive from natural religion alone. ‘The sufficiency of the light of nature is the frequent boast of unbelievers in revelation; but the deductions of moral and religious truths, speculative or practical, from mere appearances in nature, is, in many cases, far too difficult’. There is a necessary connexion between natural and revealed religion; inferences about God from studying his universe may impress the mind with a belief in his existence and perfection. However, Deist claims to truth are unfounded. While many truths are indeed attainable to our natural reason these facts are rarely hit upon unaided. All that can be demonstrated by natural religion was not actually discovered by it. Furthermore the bulk of mankind do not pay attention to natural appearances for long enough to make any useful inferences at all. The inferences we make from natural appearances are limited, partial and too abstract to be of practical use. Priestley compares the vague and

¹⁷⁵ Priestley, *Evidences*, 15, p.129. Levi, *Letters to Priestley*, pp.71-72. Doddridge, *Lectures*, pp.221-231.

speculative truths of natural religion to the straightforward historical facts of revelation that make use of a kind of reasoning familiar to us all.¹⁷⁶

In order to demonstrate the limits of human reason when it comes to constructing a sufficient moral system, Priestley devotes considerable space to outlining the vicious lives of the heathens. Guided by natural reason alone the state of mankind in early times was 'sunk into the most deplorable state of ignorance and vice'. In vivid detail Priestley outlines the worst excesses of heathen depravity including polytheism, human sacrifice, cruel religious rites and 'vile' acts of 'lewdness'. It is contrary to reason to imagine that a benevolent God would allow such suffering and vice to continue. The heathens struggled because the light of nature provides us with no idea of God's 'moral character'. The Heathen's God was merely a figurative personage and as such a fully developed relationship with him was impossible. 'You cannot form such an idea as you do of a *person*, approaching more nearly to a human being, of whose feelings you have a perfect knowledge, and to whom, by the principle of association, sentiments of veneration and love, which lead to obedience, are intimately united'. Deducing morality from natural appearances alone is an uncertain business, but receiving moral instruction from God himself is significantly more compelling. Language makes moral precepts both forcible and intelligible and removes any ambiguity. A personal and intimate relationship with God therefore guides our morality and preserves us from sinful heathen practices.¹⁷⁷

'Upon the whole, therefore, though the relation of miracles would be incredible, could we perceive no sufficient *occasion* for them, the incredibility vanishes when it appears that they are calculated to answer so great and valuable a purpose'. Priestley's discussion of antecedent probability deploys long-standing ideas but he integrates these into the overarching logical framework of his argument in order to consolidate his position against scepticism. Like Locke and Hume, Priestley writes of a gradation in our assent based on previous experience and future expectation. As our reasoning is led by analogy we require stronger evidence in favour of a fact 'according to the degree of its

¹⁷⁶ Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.175-176. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.324 and pp.459-462. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part I, 2, p.xx. Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, p.16 and p.93. Priestley, *Philosophers and Politicians*, Part II, 21, pp.114-117.

¹⁷⁷ Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.175-176. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, pp.459-462. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part I, 2, p.24.

previous improbability'. Testimony concerning divine miracles is not received by a blank mind; the way in which such testimony is treated depends on the degree of existing expectation. Establishing that revelation is possible, expedient and highly desirable creates a new chain of associations in the mind. It provides us with a new set of analogies or expectations from which to reason. Miracles are a violation of the laws of nature but this profound disanalogy is mitigated or even overturned by the understanding that they are a rational and desirable part of God's ordered universe. If the correct preconditions exist, miracles are far from disanalogous events. The highly improbable outcome of such a set of circumstances would in fact be the absence of miraculous intervention. Priestley's examination of the associative mechanism of assent to testimony together with his discussion of antecedent probability is designed to challenge both the premises of Hume's argument. Priestley weakens the 'proof' arising from experience of constant conjunction by establishing an alternative set of expectations also arising from experience while simultaneously strengthening the degree of our assent to testimony by making its falsehood a violation of the laws of human nature.¹⁷⁸

Christian faith is founded on the same principles as any other kind of knowledge, says Priestley. To set faith apart from reason only favours the unbeliever. 'The philosophical Christian forms his judgment concerning all similar propositions on similar principles and makes no exception with respect to matters of religion'. It is clear from the discussion above that, as with all areas of his work, Priestley's examination of the evidence of divine miracles is founded on a logic formed from Lockean principles and refined by Hartleyan associationism and thus relies on a view of the mind as 'led by analogy'. In Chapter One we noted the importance of hypothesis and analogy for the extension of knowledge and the pivotal role that this analytic method of moving from the known to the unknown plays in Priestley's epistemology. A liberal interpretation of Newton's rules enabled Priestley to argue that universal propositions formulated through the induction of particulars have a predictive quality, as they may be applied to future circumstances based on analogy. Priestley's work on the validity of testimony provides us with a working example of this method. Significantly it also illustrates Priestley's assertion that causal relations may be counted among these universal

¹⁷⁸ Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.175-176. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, p.119. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.459.

propositions, and therefore that which holds true between repeated pairs of events related by cause and effect also holds true between analogous pairs of events, even where the cause is unknown.¹⁷⁹

A number of instances in which the testimony of a particular person is afterwards shown to be true establish a constant conjunction between their testimony and veracity, explains Priestley. Furthermore we may assume this relationship is causal. There is something about the circumstances or the nature of this person that causes them to speak the truth.

If one person tells me that another said or did so and so, and I find by other evidence, (for instance that of my own senses,) that he actually *did* say or do what I was informed of, I am satisfied that the assertion I heard was true. If I find by repeated experience, that the same person never does deceive me, I conclude that there must be a sufficient *cause* for this *constant appearance*, and that, in the same circumstances the same effect may be depended upon. In common language, I say that my informer is a man of veracity.

As human nature is universal we may extrapolate from this experience: ‘among mankind at large, a regard to truth greatly prevails over falsehood, I conclude that there is in general sufficient ground for *faith in testimony*’. Cause and effect remain constant in human nature, so whatever caused the veracity of our first witness may be depended upon to apply to all mankind. A universal proposition about human nature establishes a general law or principle that does not differ from those that govern the natural world and that may be reliably applied to analogous circumstances. This means that even at times where we cannot verify a statement, testimony can still be depended upon:

‘...we have found by our experience, that in certain circumstances the testimony of others has not deceived us, and therefore we presume that, in the same circumstances, it never will deceive us; and therefore that it may be depended upon, even as much as that a stone, if left to itself, will fall to the ground’.¹⁸⁰

According to the *Institutes*, testimony is the only proper evidence that miracles have occurred. However, Priestley also speaks of another important means by which we may prove divine intervention. This also illustrates the analytic method at work and provides us with a further example of Priestley’s applied epistemology. The evidence of

¹⁷⁹ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.457. Priestley, *Examination*, 3, pp.15-17. Tapper, “Joseph Priestley”, p.319. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.363-364.

¹⁸⁰ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.454. Priestley, *Outline*, 21, p.173.

testimony may be strengthened and consolidated by the consideration of ‘present appearances’ writes Priestley. Arguments from natural religion arise from our need to account for everything we see in the world around us and lead us to conclude that such appearances can only be properly explained by the existence and agency of a Supreme Being. Likewise there exist many facts of ‘universal observation or recorded in general histories’ that can best be accounted for on the basis of divine interposition:

Unless we admit that the Divine Being has interposed in the government of the world, in such a manner as the histories of the Jewish and Christian revelations assert, it is impossible to give a satisfactory account of the known state of the world in past and present times.¹⁸¹

In the *Institutes* Priestley considers the process of accounting for present and historical appearances as useful but secondary to the evidence of human testimony, and later texts such as the *Discourses on Revealed Religion* and the *Philadelphia Evidences* continue in this vein. However, Priestley’s *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* and *Letters to a Young Man* rely more heavily on the historical approach and place it at the forefront of discussion as the ‘true and philosophical state of the question’. At the heart of this argument lies a shift in our use of testimony as evidence. Our task here is not to assess the value of testimony but to consider it as a ‘fact or appearance’ that requires explanation.

It is not because four persons, through the most unexceptionable evidences, assert that Christ and his apostles wrought miracles, that we believe the facts. We believe them on the evidence of tens of thousands, themselves well acquainted with the facts, by whom it cannot be denied that the contents of these books were credited.¹⁸²

When Evanson questioned the genuineness of the gospels, it was this historical ‘testimony of the age’ that Priestley used to counter his claims. The argument is supposedly effective because it entirely bypasses questions of scriptural authenticity and the validity of testimony and thereby robs scepticism of its foothold. The miracles of Christ and the apostles must have occurred, so the argument goes, or the belief in Christianity could not have been so effortlessly established nor the religion propagated so rapidly. In fact the mere existence of Christianity is evidence enough for its truth and credibility. ‘The Jewish and Christian religions were so circumstanced, at their

¹⁸¹ Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.111-113 and p.153.

¹⁸² Priestley, *Letters to a Young Man*, Part II, 20, pp.364-366. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.457.

institution, that it seems impossible to account either for their existence, or the credit which they are known to have obtained, without supposing them to be true and divine'. Priestley's argument from historical and present appearances is thus founded on the premise that a carefully formulated hypothesis based on sound analogy is a useful means by which we may extend our knowledge. As with his work on the value of testimony Priestley explicitly uses the language of cause and effect. 'The books called *the Gospels* were not the *cause*, but the *effect*, of the belief in Christianity in the first ages'. We know from our own repeated experience that all testimony arises for a reason, even 'the most idle report cannot be raised without a cause'. We can then hypothesise that the valuable testimony found in scripture requires a cause of some magnitude. In other words, such testimony can only be explained by genuine miracles. The conclusion to be derived from Priestley's explanatory hypothesis is straightforward and unwavering. 'All history is a standing and sufficient evidence of the truth of Christianity, and affords a firm foundation for our faith'.¹⁸³

'With respect to *hypotheses*, to explain appearances of any kind, the philosophical Christian considers himself bound to admit that which, according to the received rules of philosophizing or reasoning, is the most probable'. Priestley devotes much of his time in the evidences texts to explicating the mental and historical impact of belief in Christianity in order to establish miraculous intervention as the only probable cause. Amongst the immediate effects of this order Priestley counts the transformed characters of the apostles, the moral revolution manifested by increasing numbers of adherents to Christianity and even the sublime and rational virtue demonstrated by Jesus. So too must the acceptance of Jesus as a moral leader despite his humble beginnings and uncouth ways be explained as a direct result of his miraculous mission. Meanwhile other profound effects continue to this day, he explains, the on-going suffering and dispersal of the Jews and the existence of religious rites and customs to commemorate miraculous events being notable instances. Finally the sublime nature of Jewish and Christian morality can only be explained on the basis of divine interposition. Such an

¹⁸³ Priestley, *Letters to a Young Man*, Part II, 20, pp.364-366. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, p.457. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, p.153. Priestley, *Jews*, Part I, 20, pp.234-242.

admirable, exalted and excellent set of principles could never have arisen unaided amongst a people otherwise known to be ‘stiff-necked and slow of understanding’.¹⁸⁴

We saw in Chapter One that the predictive application of universal propositions to analogous circumstances and the use of past experience to determine the outcome of future events rely on the assumption of pre-ordained uniformity in nature. For Priestley reasoning by association and analogy in the natural sciences is only possible because of determined principles which necessitate that the same causes will always result in the same effects. In the same way there is ‘some *fixed law of nature respecting the will*’ and so there is a necessary connection between all things, past, present and future, in the intellectual as well as the physical world. Priestley’s work in the evidences texts is useful because it fleshes out these claims and illustrates the extent to which Priestley relied on a deterministic explanation of human psychology. Our assent to testimony is based on an assumption about the constant and unvarying laws of the human mind.

‘It depends upon a principle no person will deny, viz. that human nature has been the same in all ages, and therefore that, if the testimony of persons now living, who could not be deceived themselves, and who had no motive to impose upon others, may be depended upon, that of persons in the same circumstances a hundred or a thousand years ago may be depended upon’.

It is evident that arguments from present and historical appearances also rest on the belief that all humankind is constituted alike and that we may explain the behaviour of those in the past using principles derived from our experience in the present. The analytic method is vital to Priestley’s epistemology but necessarily presupposes a universe governed by unvarying and necessary principles. In turn this entails that the necessary associations between ideas in our minds are the result of correspondingly necessary conjunctions in nature. A universal proposition tells us about the relationship between ideas in our minds and in equal measure expresses determined relationships in the external world. When we reason correctly our mental landscape directly reflects the

¹⁸⁴ Priestley, *Letters to a Young Man*, Part II, 20, pp.364-366. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, pp.153-164. Priestley, *Evidences*, 15, p.340. Priestley, *Philadelphia Evidences*, 16, pp.143-145. Priestley, *Jews*, Part I, 20, pp.231-240. Priestley, *Jews*, Part II, 20, p.255 and pp.264-268. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4 pp.457-459 and pp.477-478. Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.29-30. Priestley, *Apostles*, 16, pp.446-471. Levi uses similar arguments to demonstrate the divine mission of Moses, Levi, *Letters to Priestley*, pp.89-90. Priestley also relies heavily on Hartley.

order of the universe: the necessary principles governing the external world are reflected by necessarily conjoined ideas in the mind.¹⁸⁵

Priestley was well aware of Hume's sceptical attack on this position. 'Mr. Hume' writes Priestley 'subverts the very foundation of all our reasoning from effects to causes'. According to Priestley, Hume had denied that our ideas of causal relationships can be known to correspond to a causal relationship in nature. We perceive a conjunction of ideas only; causation is a habit that arises from repeated experience, and 'there is no absolute nor metaphysical relationship' between cause and effect. 'Mr. Hume says, that all we can pretend to know concerning the connexion of cause and effect, is their constant *conjunction*; by the observance of which the mind is necessarily led from the one to other'. In the *Examination* published in 1774 Priestley claimed he had no wish or need to answer Hume's scepticism, as 'Mr. Hume has been very ably answered'. However, six years later Priestley published the first volume of his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* and this includes four chapters devoted to Hume's work. Priestley's tone is still dismissive, 'with respect to Mr. Hume's metaphysical writings in general, my opinion is, that, on the whole the world is very little wiser for them'. However, he acknowledges that Hume's work has been useful to atheists and so deserves attention. If our idea of cause and effect is 'merely arbitrary', effects may exist without causes and the universe without a creator. Priestley therefore formulated an answer to Hume's scepticism to defend his work on natural and revealed religion from the twin forces of scepticism and atheism.¹⁸⁶

Priestley's Hume is a complete sceptic denying the existence of any objective causal relations in the external world. Priestley therefore intended to establish with certainty that universal propositions express a necessary connection between subject and predicate arising from a determined law governing nature. He could not deny that our idea of causation arises from experience. To do so 'comes under the description of other *innate principles* or *ideas*, which have been so long, and, I think, so justly exploded'. However, while our idea of causation arises from association, it is an idea that

¹⁸⁵ Priestley, *Letters to a Young Man*, Part II, 20, p.362.

¹⁸⁶ Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, p.87. Priestley, *Examination*, 3, p.xxvii. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, p.367 and p.398. Hume summarises his argument at the end of a chapter on the idea of necessary connexion in Hume, *Enquiry*, p.147. R. H. Popkin, "Joseph Priestley's criticisms of David Hume's Philosophy", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 15, (1977). p.440-443. McEvoy and McGuire, "God and Nature", pp.364-368.

‘corresponds to something *real* in the relation of the things that suggest it’. Priestley agrees with Hume that our ideas of cause and effect arise from an experience of two constantly correlated events. I find that the sounding of one musical string will make a string that is in unison with it sound, and I find that the first string is that cause, the second the effect. He also agrees that this correlation alone does not entail a necessary conjunction. Necessity arises instead from the constant and unvarying law of nature that links the two events. Our knowledge of this necessity comes about when this law is uncovered. Thus, I do not see why the sounding of one string causes another ‘till I discover that sound consists of a vibratory motion of the air, and that the air being put into this vibratory motion by the first string, communicates the same to the second by its pulses’.¹⁸⁷

Priestley’s point is that the necessary connection between effects and their causes is always governed by an unchanging law of nature. It is this, rather than their repeated conjunction, that determines their relationship. However, while we need to make these natural laws intelligible in order to identify necessity, we function successfully without knowing these laws. ‘Without having made any discovery at all, we could not but be sensible, that if two events always follow one another, there must be some sufficient reason for it’. Priestley explains that we can move from cases in which we know the natural principle that links causes to their effects to making causal inferences in those where we do not. This is because we obtain our idea of causation in the same manner that we obtain any other idea that may be formulated as a universal proposition, that is, through the induction of particulars. We can then apply this knowledge analogically to novel situations in which the law relating cause and effect is still unknown. Hume’s mistake was to assume that causation is a simple idea. In fact, it is a complex and abstract idea, one of the most complex ideas we have.

‘It represents the impression left by the mind by observing what is common to numberless cases in which there is a constant conjunction of appearances or events, in some of which we are able to see the proximate cause of the conjunction, but with respect to the rest we only *presume* it from the similarity of the cases’.

¹⁸⁷ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, pp.398-404. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.364-368.

For Priestley causation is actual power or property in bodies that necessitates the relationship between the events. In consequence of our experience of this, it becomes 'indelibly impressed' in our minds that no effect exists without a cause and that the same causes always necessitate the same effects. The inference from effects to causes is therefore 'as safe as any reasoning whatever'. As for Hume's argument: 'No sceptic can derive the least advantage from it'.¹⁸⁸

III

Revealed religion and 'Comprehension of Mind'

Chapter Two examined Priestley's explanation of the mechanical generation of personality as it appears in his *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*. Priestley closely follows Hartley's delineation of the self, using the associative principle in which he traces the emergence of the pattern of memories, perceptions and dispositions that make up our unique personalities back to a set of sensate responses to external circumstances. We noted that, for Hartley, the generation of intellectual ideas from physical responses is an inevitable consequence of the relationship between the associative mind and the external world. 'The sensible Pleasures and Pains must be transferred by Association more and more every Day, upon Things that afford neither sensible Pleasure nor sensible Pain in themselves, and so beget the intellectual Pleasures and Pains'. We are all subject to situations in which we experience physical pleasure or pain. The associative mechanism transfers affections generated by these bodily events onto the recollection or anticipation of them and thus sensate experiences become intellectual ideas. Such ideas form associative clusters and so the emotion felt in a particular context may easily be transferred upon similar or analogous situations. As creatures that fundamentally seek pleasure and avoid pain we rapidly learn to hate those circumstances which cause us pain and to love those which give us pleasure. Our individual desires towards and aversions from people, objects, places and things all depend upon the pleasure or pain that we have learnt to associate with them. They become compounds of the sum total of all our previous experiences. What we love and

¹⁸⁸ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, pp.398-404. McEvoy and McGuire, "God and Nature", pp.364-368. Dybikowski, in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, pp.107-108. Popkin, "Priestley on Hume", pp.443-445.

what we hate are based entirely on these experiences and form our unique characters and dispositions.¹⁸⁹

As Priestley explains to great effect when discussing the intellectual ‘pleasures of the imagination’, emotional transference occurs not only between associated experiences, circumstances or memories but also between words, figurative phrases and propositions. The affections associated with a childhood memory may transfer to the words used to describe it and conversely the words used to describe a place or event may trigger particular passions and desires. As we saw in Chapter Two, the emotional charge we attach to words significantly increases our pleasure in reading a composition or a piece of poetry and makes our reading of a literary work a highly personal and subjective encounter. However, for Priestley, there is a darker side to this story. As beings so readily motivated by the passions we may be persuaded to give our assent to a proposition merely on the basis of an emotional charge, bypassing reason altogether. As judgments form the basis of our knowledge we may be easily misled and a series of mistaken associations can lead us into ‘knowledge’ that is false or partial and based on nothing but whim and fancy. Like Priestley, Hartley too was acutely aware that there is nothing about the associative process itself that guarantees that the ‘factitious’ ideas it generates match up to external realities. Upon examination of our desires and aversions, he writes, we find no fixed or shared goal but only myriad ‘differences and singularities’ between different people, or even within the same person at different times.¹⁹⁰

We have already established that while both Priestley and Hartley were prepared to explore the subjective and individual nature of human experience and personality, they cannot be called relativists. Priestley was keen to emphasise that experience and reflection are sound remedies to the problems caused by misguided assent. Despite exploring the diversity of taste in the arts he also reminded us that such tastes can be evaluated according to a universal standard. His tantalising references to the transformative effect of cumulative experience in establishing objective truth go largely unexplored in the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*. However, we may turn to Priestley’s evidences texts to fill many of these gaps. Priestley’s work on the

¹⁸⁹ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.82. Marsh, “Hartley’s System”, p.271. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.265-273. R. Haven, “Coleridge, Hartley and the Mystics”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20, (1959), p.482.

¹⁹⁰ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. I, p.89. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.273-279.

importance of reasoned assent to revelation supplies us with a detailed examination of the progressive and perfectibilist mind. As it turns out, for Priestley and Hartley, the pleasures of the imagination are but one dimension of a much broader story of the self. Our various sensate and intellectual pleasures and pains are simply orientations on a journey towards complete self-annihilation and ultimate union with God. The associative genesis of the personality is only the beginning of a progressive story of the self that terminates in the transcendence of all that is limited, subjective and individual.

While no innate drive determines the mechanical process of emotional transference, that is not to say that common patterns of pleasures and pains cannot be identified. Hartley's examination of the personality begins when he identifies six classes of 'Intellectual Pleasure and Pain' namely imagination, ambition, self-interest, sympathy, theopathy and the moral sense. People experience desires and aversions from all six classes simultaneously but the categories must also be understood as sequential and progressive. Each class of pleasure and pain emerges from a coalescence of those that come before it and alterations in the higher categories may in turn act to 'new model' those that are lower in the sequence. Sympathy, for example, emerges from the pleasures and pains of imagination and ambition, and a refinement in our affections towards others may in turn profoundly alter our tastes and our desire for praise. Having previously discussed the pleasure that may be found in sensate experiences, Hartley first details the intellectual enjoyment that arises from the perception of beauty found in people, places or landscapes. These pleasures of the imagination are prompted by the relationship between one's self and an external object. Meanwhile ambition reverses the flow of pleasure: the self becomes an object of scrutiny, and it is the self that becomes an object of praise and admiration. As with the imagination, the higher pleasures of benevolence also focus on an external object, directing our attention to the happiness and pleasure of others. Mirroring ambition, theopathy makes the self an object and encompasses the pleasures that arise from pleasing God and becoming an object of his approbation. Finally at the end of the developmental process emerges the moral sense, a complex and abstract sense of right and wrong that prompts good conduct and right action.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ This outline relies on Richard Allen's interpretation of Hartley's work. See Allen, *Hartley*, pp.279-286 and pp.290-296.

For Hartley self-interest has a separate and crucial function in maximising our enjoyment of the other intellectual pleasures and protecting us from the consequent pain of unregulated indulgence. Hartley applies the term ‘gross self-interest’ to the regulation of our lower pleasures, ‘the pursuit of the Means for obtaining Pleasures of Sensation, Imagination, and Ambition’. Gross self-interest guides us in the maximisation of the lower pleasures, allowing us to forbear some indulgences for the sake of future enjoyment. As such self-interest is transformative and occurs in response to particular circumstances, it allows us to alter and regulate our behaviour according to our baser needs. ‘Refined self-interest’ refers to the same economical mechanism of ensuring pleasure and avoiding pain when applied to sympathy, theopathy and the moral sense and again transforms the personality and new-models the lower affections in the process. Finally, rational self-interest maximises our happiness according to our beliefs about God’s rules and expectations. Rational self-interest allows us to identify God as the first cause of all our happiness and therefore to turn our attention entirely his way. As God’s design is for our own happiness and that of others, rational self-interest helps us deepen both our theopathic and sympathetic affections and refine the moral sense.¹⁹²

Priestley’s version of this progressive story toward moral and spiritual perfection appears in the first volume of the *Institutes* and closely follows Hartley’s analysis. He identifies four ‘passions or affections’ that he describes as the ‘springs of all our actions’, although while these are clearly progressive in nature, he does not touch on the elaborate process of generation and ‘new modelling’ that occupied much of the *Observations on Man*. Priestley’s descriptions of the pleasures of sense and imagination match Hartley’s. Like the brute animals, we are prompted to pursue corporeal pleasures for our own subsistence and the propagation of the species, and unlike other creatures we are also able to pursue the refined intellectual pleasures of the beautiful and sublime. Priestley then considers a class of passions that ‘may be termed the *social* because they arise from our connexions with mankind’. This broad category encompasses the pleasures and pains of ambition, the sympathetic affections, the ‘relative duties’ within a household and, most significantly, the reciprocal love of God. Finally, Priestley summarises Hartley’s work on the moral sense, ‘or a love of virtue and a hatred of vice in the abstract...the greatest refinement of which we are capable’.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, p.271. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.284-286.

¹⁹³ Priestley, *Institutes*, Vol. I, 2, pp.28-31.

‘No man comes into the world to be idle’, writes Priestley; ‘every man is furnished with a variety of passions, which will continually engage him in some pursuit or other; and the great question we have to decide is, what passions we ought to indulge, and what pursuits we ought to engage in’. Thus the *Institutes* functions as a practical moral guide in which Priestley not only delineates the various intellectual pleasures but also attempts to deduce from natural appearances ‘several very proper rules by which to form our judgments in this case’. Reason reveals these rules to be obedience to the will of God and a regard to our own real happiness, and with these rules as a touchstone Priestley assesses the duties and restraints by which we should regulate each class of pleasure. He emphasises the need for careful reflection in deducing such moral precepts, although in parallel he discusses the role of conscience as a substitute for reason in moral emergencies. Following Hartley, Priestley also considers the regulatory mechanism of self-interest as holding ‘a kind of *middle rank* between our vices and virtues...its principal use is to be a means of raising us above all the lower and vicious pursuits, to those that are higher, and properly speaking, virtuous and praise-worthy’.¹⁹⁴

Describing self-interest, Priestley’s language is wary and peppered with warnings about the dangers of pursuing our own needs above those of others. Self-interest is rather to be seen as ‘a scaffold to a noble and glorious edifice, though it be unworthy of standing as any part of it’. Self-interest is essential to check and restrain the lower pleasures but it ought to be shed by degrees in order for us to reach absolute perfection. Unsurprisingly Priestley’s discussion borrows much from the *Observations*. Self-interest is crucial to Hartley’s narrative of the self but his story does not end with a happy and benevolent being who, regulated by rational self-interest, finds pleasure in obeying God and loving others. For Hartley a person guided by self-interest may be virtuous and benevolent but is still locked in a private kind of hell. The self-interested being is still essentially a limited and individual creature who may be driven by partial, misguided and damaging notions of the divine will or may even become gratified by the pursuit of self-interest itself. Such ‘idolatry of ourselves’ is a permanent barrier ‘to a complete happiness in the love of God’. Neither Priestley nor Hartley was prepared to locate the perfection of the

¹⁹⁴ Priestley, *Institutes*, Vol. I, 2, p.25 and pp.37-38.

self in the moral refinements of the individual. For both thinkers real perfection lies not in self-interest but in spiritual self-annihilation.¹⁹⁵

An individual preoccupied with securing intellectual pleasures and avoiding intellectual pains can never be truly happy. Our happiness is only in proportion to the extent to which such pleasure can be gratified and our continued enjoyment of food, art or praise, for instance, is fragile and uncertain. Self-interest is required for the regulation of these pleasures because they are finite commodities. For Hartley self-annihilation begins with the realisation that, by contrast, the pleasures of sympathy, united with those of theopathy and the moral sense, are limitless. Our love for others and for God needs no regulation because it can 'increase perpetually'. Self-interest is therefore expedient, but only temporarily. Once we identify God alone as the first cause of all our happiness and the unbounded pleasures of loving and being loved are fully realised, our desire for other pleasures dissolves. With them disappears the need for a regulatory mechanism, the need for a self.

The Virtuous dispositions of benevolence, piety, and the moral sense, and particularly that of the love of God, check all the foregoing ones, and seem sufficient to utterly extinguish them at last. This would be perfect self-annihilation, and resting in God as our centre...though it be impossible to begin without sensuality, and sensual selfishness, or to proceed without the other intermediate principles, and particularly that of rational self-interest; yet we ought never to be satisfied with ourselves, till we arrive at perfect self-annihilation, and the pure love of God.¹⁹⁶

According to Priestley the lower pursuits of our natures are those most inclined to suggest to us 'in a thousand respects, the idea of *self*...the *worm* which lies at the root of all human bliss'. On the other hand '*self-annihilation*' is a 'state of the most complete happiness to which our natures can attain'. Like Hartley, Priestley recognised that all of the pleasures pursued by the 'self' may be damaging, even those that are useful and virtuous in themselves. Wealth, ambition, art and even science may become 'our snare'. 'All these pursuits are equally capable of confining our attention to what is immediately before us'. For Priestley we transcend these self-interested pleasures only when we realise the timeless nature of our existence, when we rise above present pleasures and

¹⁹⁵ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, p.22. Priestley, *Not Living to Ourselves*, 15, p.135. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.312-329.

¹⁹⁶ Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, p.282. Allen, *Hartley*, pp.326-334.

appreciate that we ‘are but in the infancy of an endless, and, therefore, an infinitely important existence’. Priestley thus augments Hartley’s perfectibilism by introducing the idea of ‘comprehension of mind’ to their shared theory of personality development. Comprehension of mind is generated by the same basic associative principle that transforms our sensate perceptions into intellectual ideas and ultimately it is this that allows us to transcend our individual desires and aversions. Unlike animals we do not live entirely in the present: our pleasure and pain responses readily transfer to anticipation and memory, and so experience quickly grants us an idea of the past and the future. Infants may live solely in the moment but as we grow older our mind can comprehend an ever increasing breadth of time. A sufficient comprehension of mind and the assurance that we are infinite beings reveal to us a universe that is designed to guarantee our ultimate happiness. This knowledge overpowers any temporary suffering and lessens the intensity of present evil.

The perfection of intelligent beings consists in *comprehension of mind*, or that principle whereby ideas of the past and future mix with those of the present, and excite one common sensation: in which good and evil so perfectly coalesce, and are so intimately united, that the *medium* only is perceived. Consequently, if happiness be apprehended to prevail, in that portion of time of which we have this perfect comprehension, and every part of which may be said to be *present* to us, we are conscious of pleasure only in the contemplation of it, the pain being lost, and absorbed, together with so much pleasure as was equivalent to it. By this means happiness comes to be of a more stable nature; and it is less in the power of single accidents to produce a sense of misery.¹⁹⁷

Pain is subservient to greater pleasure and temporary evil is merely long-term good. Therefore a comprehensive view allows us to associate suffering with its beneficial consequences. Ideas of pain and evil coalesce so completely with their ultimate ends that when the experienced among us suffer they do so content in the knowledge that this apparent evil will terminate in good. Comprehension of mind is sufficient to make us virtuous as well as happy. It allows us to apprehend the damaging consequences of a vice-ridden life and these coalesce perfectly with our idea of the vice itself. ‘In this case, even the pleasures of the vice would be shunned with abhorrence, because we could never separate them from the idea of the infinitely greater pains’. Priestley explains that the dignity and elevation that arise from such an extensive view of things ‘carries the Christian wholly out of himself in the great pursuits of disinterested benevolence’. Self-

¹⁹⁷ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, 4, pp.317-321. Priestley, “Analogy”, 2, pp.231-235. Priestley, *Not Living to Ourselves*, 15, p.134. McEvoy and McGuire, “God and Nature”, pp.345-346.

interest may usefully check the lower pursuits of our nature but to the comprehensive mind these pleasures become ‘absorbed and lost’. An elevated perspective allows us to see such pleasures, vices and subjective attachments for what they really are—associative means to a great end, a means of bringing men ‘to this state, which *Hartley* calls *self-annihilation*’.¹⁹⁸

Priestley makes it clear that the comprehension of mind required for true self-annihilation arises only as a response to revelation. Priestley writes, in the *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, that our superiority over brute creatures consists in a capacity for happiness and benevolence that stems from a broad and comprehensive view of the past, present and future. For the same reason that man excels other animals, a Christian is superior to an unbeliever; ‘his comprehension of mind being enlarged by such knowledge as revelation brings him acquainted with’. Belief in God and habitual contemplation of his infinite wisdom, power, goodness and providence extend the mind beyond that which we see and hear around us. An idea of God the Father suggests we are ‘the children of one common parent’ and this enlarged view allows us to see that our happiness is intimately connected with the happiness of those around us. ‘We are nobly carried out of, and beyond, ourselves’. Furthermore if we contemplate God’s benevolent providence we cannot be upset by short-term suffering. ‘The gloom vanishes, and daylight bursts upon us’. Meanwhile in a chapter written for his edition of *Hartley’s Observations* Priestley explains that while pride and self-conceit arise from the philosophical doctrine of free-will, scripture allows us to view ourselves as objects of God’s necessity and this ‘must greatly accelerate our progress to humility and self-annihilation’. Finally and above all else it is the knowledge of a future state of retribution that enlarges the mind and elevates our views. Knowledge of future rewards and punishments instils us with a sense of the importance and consequence of our actions. ‘A being of a day will have his views, thoughts, and schemes adapted to a day’ but a man who habitually believes he is ‘born for eternity’ is raised above mean pursuits, appetites and gratifications.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Priestley, “Analogy”, 2, pp.235-238 and Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.20-22.

¹⁹⁹ Priestley, *Not Living to Ourselves*, 15, pp.134-146. Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.20-22. Priestley, *Evidences*, 15, pp.198-208. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, (additional letters), 4, pp.437-440. J. Priestley (ed.), *Hartley’s theory of the human mind, on the principle of the association of ideas; with essays relating to the subject of it*, (London, 1775), pp.365-367. R. B. Hatch, “Joseph Priestley: An Addition to Hartley’s *Observations*”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (1975), pp.549-550.

‘The great and extensive views of Christianity do tend to elevate and purify the mind...the narrow views of *unbelievers* tend to depress and debase it’. In counterpoint to his discussion of the benefits of revelation to the progression of the mind, Priestley details the profound negative impact of unbelief. If we do not understand God’s providence and do not regard ourselves as eternal beings destined for ultimate benevolence and happiness we are liable to suffer unnecessarily. Trapped in the present we are disturbed by every bad event; ‘all is darkness and confusion, anxiety and dread’. Just as our happiness is profoundly increased by our assent to revelation so too is our virtue. Knowledge of a future life is therefore central to Priestley’s discussion.

No reflection is of so much use in carrying us beyond ourselves, and inspiring benevolence for others, as that of all mankind having one common parent, of our being trained by him in the same school of discipline here, and our being heirs of the same hope of immortal life hereafter.

Lacking belief in God ‘man is comparatively a being of narrow views, but little advanced beyond the brutes, and has but little motive to attend to any thing beyond himself, and the lowest gratifications’. Without God we have no sense of a common interest with those around us. ‘We feel as so many unconnected individuals turned adrift upon the wide world, where we must each of us scramble for ourselves’. Captured by the present moment unbelievers simply gratify their self-interest and indulge the lower passions; instant happiness becomes the unworthy foundation for their moral principles. Even the best of unbelievers who cultivate refined self-interest love virtue solely because it is pleasurable; they will never arrive at the elevation of mind and selflessness attained by the Christian.²⁰⁰

Richard Haven in his brief analysis of Hartley’s work on personality states that under Hartley’s system theopathy necessarily results from the constitution of the human mind and its interaction with the physical world. ‘Like the Deists, he dispenses with the language and premises of traditional dogmatic theology’. A look at Hartley’s discussion of ‘the rule of faith’ suggests that Haven overstates the case. Hartley writes ‘that no one can comply with this Rule, unless he be a sincere Deist’. However he also makes it clear that it is revelation that will most assist us in the path towards perfection. ‘All Things else being alike, a Person who believes in Christ will become superior to him who does

²⁰⁰ Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.20-22 and pp.100-105. Priestley, *Evidences*, 15, pp.198-208. Priestley, *Institutes*, 2, pp.98-108.

not'. If Hartley was ambiguous about the necessity of revelation to the attainment of self-annihilation, Priestley was not. James Hoecker tells us that, for Priestley, our natural perfectibilism means there will come a time when a perfection in our reason means we can transcend the need for revealed religion altogether. What Hoecker neglects to mention is that, for Priestley, some truths are above reason. Although his *Institutes* broach the idea that we can ascertain the probability of life after death from natural appearances alone, it is obvious from the evidences texts that Priestley's mature position was that we cannot. 'It was absolutely impossible that, by the mere light of nature, men should ever have attained to the knowledge of a *future state* of retribution; whereas the most satisfactory evidence of it possible is easily communicated by revelation'. Reasoning from natural appearances alone indicates that there is nothing in the constitution of man on which to found an expectation of immortality. Men cease to breathe, cease to think and cease to perceive like all animals and they dissolve into the ground by a process of putrefaction. There are no analogies in nature that lead us to conceive of a future state. Therefore only the Divine Being through miraculous revelation can assure us that our finite lives on earth are not the end of our existence. Human perfection consists in comprehension of mind and this in turn is the result of assent to the doctrine of a future state found only in revelation.²⁰¹

According to Priestley human minds are universally governed by the same general laws. Why then, he asks in his *Observations on Infidelity*, do some people assent to the truth of scripture while others adopt deism and atheism? If the evidence for revelation is entirely satisfactory the believer must account for the rejection of Christianity in both ancient and modern times. Infidelity is 'a fact that cannot be denied' and like the early promulgation of Christianity requires a well-founded causal explanation. The truth of revelation is not self-evident; its contradiction does not entail a logical impossibility. We are dealing with probabilities and where these are concerned people will always entertain contrary opinions, but these may be explained once the process by which we generate beliefs is properly understood. Priestley suggests that some people may fall victim to poor reasoning; 'misled by specious *analogies*, and superficial but fixed maxims grounded on such analogies'. However, as Priestley explains here, in his *Letters*

²⁰¹ Priestley, *Outline*, 21, pp.175-176. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part II, 4, pp.459-462. Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.89-93. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part I, 2, pp.58-64. Priestley, *Philosophers and Politicians*, Part II, 21, pp.122-127. Hartley, *Observations*, Vol. II, pp.347-348. Haven, "Coleridge", p.486. Hoecker, "Reification", p.49.

to a *Philosophical Unbeliever* and in the *Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France* the majority of unbelievers never reason at all. They are simply misled by prejudice. Infidelity cannot be the result of a want of sufficient evidence. Therefore we must assume that unbelievers are subject to a 'previous state of mind' that prevents them from turning their attention to the Christian evidences and necessitates their rejection of revelation. In this state of prejudice no evidence is compelling enough to gain assent.²⁰²

'The generality of unbelievers are averse to inquire into the evidence of revelation' Priestley writes. They suffer from prejudice that inhibits their assent and prevents them from examining the evidence. In his *Letters to the Jews* Priestley details Jewish prejudices both past and present and prevails upon his readers 'to attend with calmness' the evidence for the divine mission of Christ. Elsewhere he dwells on the prejudices of the heathens in order to explain the rejection of revelation in the early years of the Church. Priestley's primary concern is, however, the modern growth of infidelity. He examines this problem in a number of the evidences texts and identifies various causes for prejudice. Some unbelievers simply have a turn of mind that leads them to 'look at the dark side of everything' and reflect only on the difficulties and objections attending the scriptural evidences. Others habitually fail to take 'the requisite pains to form a judgment themselves' and are therefore easily misled on the authority of others whose opinions they adopt without any examination. Some take on the opinions of men of celebrated genius simply because they do not want to be classed with the 'bulk of mankind'. However, the strongest prejudices against religion arise from an addiction to vice and the 'previous disposition of the mind with respect to morality'. Christianity is not merely speculative and is intimately connected with temper and conduct. The renunciation of certain vices and the 'meekness and passiveness of disposition which is essential to the Christian character' are not characteristics celebrated by the majority of mankind. They may lead to contempt or ridicule and this is enough to prevent many from turning to the scriptural evidences. 'Hence arises an almost invincible prejudice in the minds of men occupied with the business and pleasures of the world, to those principles which would lead them off from them'.²⁰³

²⁰² Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.12-14 and p.33. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Vol. II, 4, p.462.

²⁰³ Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.15-26 and p.32. Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Vol. II, 4, p.464-466 and pp.480-493. Priestley, *Jews*, Part I, 20, p.229. Priestley, *Institutes*, 2, pp.212-223.

In an attempt to explain the prevalence of unbelief Priestley polarises reason and prejudice, making them incompatible absolutes. He explains that the mind, unencumbered by prejudice, and reasoning from the copious evidences of revelation, will necessarily assent to its truth.

The arguments in favour of Divine revelation may be sufficient to convince the candid, impartial and well-disposed, at the same time that they may afford those who are of different disposition enow for cavilling, such as, in their state of mind, will justify their rejection of it to themselves.

Priestley's discussion of the mechanical generation and ultimate transcendence of the self is predicated on the idea that personality arises from a causal chain of beliefs and prior states of mind. Our individual desires and aversions can be said to be caused by a necessary and mechanical response to our circumstances. These responses are universal and we only differ between individuals to the extent that our circumstances and particular associative experiences also vary. The generation of particular beliefs can be traced back to a previous state of mind that always necessitates a particular outcome. In turn this means that we may identify a state of mind based on our knowledge of the belief it has caused. Personality is progressive and some ideas, beliefs or states of mind may be deemed more advanced or developed than others. Ideas that allow us to attain the highest degree of perfection are caused by the appropriate use of reason while those that leave us little better than brute creatures are necessitated by prejudice and passion. Considering the question of assent to revelation, we can identify a prior state of mind based on the outcome it necessitates. Those who accept the validity of scriptural testimony do so on the basis of reason; those who reject it must necessarily do so because of prior prejudice.²⁰⁴

Priestley's work on the role of revelation in the progression of the personality and his explanation for unbelief enrich our understanding of his epistemology and the motivation behind his attack on Hume. It relies on the maintenance of a dichotomy of reason and prejudice that Priestley believed to be wholly undermined by Humean scepticism. As far as Priestley was concerned, Hume's analysis of cause and effect assumes that the connexion between our ideas is 'merely arbitrary'. For Hume the joining of ideas by association is based only on 'custom and habit' and therefore:

²⁰⁴ Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, pp.26-27 and p.36. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part II, 2, p.226.

He may, with superficial readers, have weakened the foundation of our reasoning from effects to causes, as if it were properly no *reasoning* at all (which is the language that he frequently uses), but only an arbitrary, and perhaps ill-founded, association of ideas.

We saw in Chapter Two that Priestley's disdain for common sense principles stemmed primarily from the way in which he felt Reid undermined the use of reason in the pursuit of truth. This collapses the polarisation of reason and passion fundamental to Priestley's discussion in the *Lectures on Oratory*. Hume's scepticism functions in much the same way. For Priestley, Hume's insistence that causation is a subjective experience of the human psychology conflates reason and prejudice. It undermines reason and reduces our knowledge of cause and effect to nothing more than human whim or fancy. Priestley's explanation of the development of personality collapses if we are no longer able to discern reason from prejudice. Hume robs us of the standard by which we can evaluate the perfection of the self. Without this standard the progressive narrative of personality collapses, no one set of desires and aversions can be meaningfully said to be better than another, and human perfection loses the boundaries of its definition.²⁰⁵

IV Conclusion

It is commonplace to regard Priestley as an exponent of rational religion committed to eradicating the mysterious and ineffable and determined to place religious belief within the realms of science and certainty. However, little work has been done on Priestley's texts on the evidence of revealed religion or on his attitude to miracles as attestation for divine revelation. This chapter seeks to redress the balance and offers an interpretation of Priestley's texts on the Christian evidences that emphasises his reliance on empiricism and associationism and explains how this epistemology provides a structure for his argument in favour of the validity of scriptural testimony. Priestley offers a narrow definition of knowledge; truth arises solely from the proper application of reason. In his evidences texts Priestley traces the steps of the supposedly water-tight reasoning process founded on the analytic method and explained using associative language in order to demonstrate that our assent to scripture is based on the best logical principles.

²⁰⁵ Priestley, *Unbeliever*, Part I, Works 4, p.398 and p.403. McEvoy and McGuire, "God and Nature", p.365.

Priestley argues that we should accept the scriptures as authentic histories of their time but that our assent to the doctrines they expound should be based on an analysis of the evidence for the miraculous events supposed to attest these teachings. The evidence available is that of testimony, and Priestley sees no reason why this should not bring with it as much certainty as the evidence of our own senses. Our assent to testimony is based on prior associations. Repeated experience demonstrates to us that testimony is usually reliable and allows us to discern the circumstances in which we may accept truths on the authority of others. Priestley finds the testimony of scripture to fulfil the criteria expected for valid testimony and suggests we assent on this basis. He dismisses Hume's scepticism when it comes to the evidence for miracles by establishing that both our assent to and dissent from propositions involving miraculous events involve breaking a string of previous analogies. Our knowledge of testimony is based on previous associations arising from the principles of human nature, just as our knowledge of the usual course of things is based on associations arising from the laws of nature. When we assent to scripture, we are therefore compelled to accept a disanalogy arising from our experience, and Priestley finds that it would be more of a miracle if the considerable number of witnesses to scriptural miracles were deceived or intended to deceive than if the laws of nature had been violated. In his work on 'antecedent probability' Priestley strengthens this argument against Hume by examining the reasons why we may expect or desire a revelation.

Priestley's work on the evidence of revelation illustrates in detail the logical principles outlined in the *Examination* and *Lectures on Oratory*. Priestley harnesses the predictive power of the universal proposition applied analogically in order to explain the mechanism behind our assent to testimony and also to construct an historical hypothesis to explain the rapid rise and propagation of Christianity. Like all his work, Priestley's use of the universal proposition in relation to the Christian evidences relies on the assumption that such propositions express necessary and unchanging principles governing the external world. Priestley dealt with Hume's sceptical doubts regarding this assumption, because he recognised that Hume's work gave considerable leverage to atheism and threatened to undermine the foundations of his epistemology. He therefore attempted to challenge Hume by asserting that propositions concerning cause and effect identify real and necessary laws of nature and are valid even when the working of these laws remains unknown.

The second part of this chapter suggests that Priestley's evidences texts are a valuable resource when it comes to understanding his theory of the mechanical generation and perfection of personality. Chapter Two examined Priestley's explanation of the generation of the pleasures of the imagination and in particular looked at the subjectivist consequences of this theory. The evidences texts confirm to us that Priestley's subjectivism never collapsed into relativism. The texts place the pleasures of the imagination firmly within a broader developmental narrative that locates the perfection of the personality in the ultimate transcendence of everything that is partial, subjective and individual. Priestley's story of the self relies on his concept of comprehension of mind, and this in turn is said to be generated by assent to scripture and knowledge of the eternal nature of humanity. It is predicated on the dichotomy of reason and prejudice and collapses if these categories are undermined. We may better understand Priestley's reaction to Hume's scepticism when we appreciate that Priestley felt Hume conflated reason and prejudice in his explanation of associative reasoning and therefore undermined our ability to speak meaningfully about the proper grounds of assent. Hume's attack therefore hit at the heart of Priestley's epistemology and shook the foundations of his work on assent to revelation. Priestley's defence against this scepticism, his work on testimony and analogy and his examination of the role of reason and prejudice in the formation of the self illustrate the ways in which he integrated every aspect of his belief system into an overarching logical framework based on the explanatory principles of empiricism and associationism.

Chapter Five

The Language of the Naked Facts

I Rationality and Orthodoxy

The discussion presented here concludes our exploration of Priestley's work on judgment, assent and the investigation of truth, adds to our understanding of his work on the development of personality and completes the examination of his theory of language. It brings all the themes of the dissertation to bear on an analysis of Priestley's theological system and pays particular attention to his treatment of figurative language in scripture. Priestley's *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* succinctly outline his definition of reason and describe with clarity the analytic method as a means by which we may both investigate and communicate truth. Chapter Four examined the ways in which this analytic method provided an underlying rationale for Priestley's work on the evidences of Christianity and granted him a robust defence of revelation based directly on his associationist epistemology. This chapter works in tandem with Chapter Four. It once more brings together Priestley's linguistic and theological texts in order to shed new light on his understanding of scripture. The opening discussion outlines the characteristic elements of Priestley's rational dissent and the ways in which they parallel his fundamental epistemological principles. It also explains briefly how they relate to the moral and spiritual development of the individual. Part two examines the ways in which Priestley's approach to figurative language directly impacted upon his scriptural exegesis and provided the basis for a contentious historical justification for his rational 'Socinian' theology.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶Priestley theological texts that have not already had a full reference are as follows, in chronological order, with subsequent abbreviation in inverted commas if the abbreviation is not obvious. J. Priestley, *The scripture doctrine of remission. Which sheweth that the death of Christ is no proper sacrifice nor satisfaction for sin: but that pardon is dispensed solely on account of repentance, or a personal reformation of the sinner*, (London, 1761). J. Priestley, *A Consideration on Differences of Opinion among Christians; with a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Venn in answer to his Full and Free Examination of the Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper*. Corrections made by J. T. Rutt from the 1790 edition, (London, 1769), Works 21. J. Priestley, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, on the subject of Church Discipline; with a Preliminary Discourse concerning the Spirit of Christianity, and the corruption of it by false notions of religion*, (London, 1770), Works 21. "Corruptions of Spirit". J. Priestley, "The Socinian Hypothesis Vindicated". Signed 'Liberius'. *Theological Repository*, 3, (1770), Works 7. J. Priestley, "Remarks on the Reasoning of St. Paul." Signed 'Paulinus'. *Theological Repository*, 3, (1771), Works 7. J. Priestley, "An Essay on the One Great End of the Life and Death of Christ, intended more especially to refute the commonly-received Doctrine of Atonement." Signed 'Clemens'. *Theological Repository*, 1, (1773), Works 7. J. Priestley, *A Free Address to Protestant*

Priestley polarised reason and prejudice. This fundamental and pervasive dichotomy is a thread that runs through all of the works examined in this dissertation and binds them tightly together. In Chapter One we saw that ‘reasoning’ is not an activity of the mind. It is a term that describes a passive judgment, the mechanical perception of the agreement between ideas whose referents have a corresponding association in reality. Meanwhile, ‘prejudice’ is the perception of a conjunction between our ideas of things that have no corresponding relationship in the external world. Rational judgments are based on sound experience, while false associations arise from the untoward influence of passion and imagination or the use of specious analogies. In Chapter Two we explored the ways in which Priestley’s rhetorical theory distinguishes between rational and ornamental language. He warns against conflating the two functions in case we create fictional realities that bypass reason and generate assent based solely on a passionate response to language. In Chapter Three we noted that words label, or even facilitate, the reasoning process. The mechanism by which we combine ideas and extend knowledge by analogy structures the grammar and vocabulary of all languages.

Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord’s Supper; and a Letter to the Author of The Protestant Dissenters Answer to it, (3rd ed., London, 1774), Works 21. “Lord’s Supper”. J. Priestley, Letters and Queries, Addressed to the Anonymous Answerer of An Appeal to The Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity, to the Rev. Mr. Thomas Morgan, and to Mr. Cornelius Caley, (Leeds, 1777), Works 21. J. Priestley, An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, Two Volumes, (Birmingham, 1782), Works 5. J. Priestley, “Essays on Inspiration”, Signed ‘Pamphilus’, Theological Repository, 4, (1784), Works 7. J. Priestley, An History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ compiled from Original Writers: Proving that the Christian church was at first Unitarian, (Birmingham, 1786), Works 6-7. J. Priestley, Defences of Unitarianism for the year 1786 containing Letters to Dr. Horne, Dean of Canterbury, to the Young Men, who are in a course of education for the Christian ministry at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge; To Dr. Price, and to Mr. Parkhurst, on the Subject of the Person of Christ, (Birmingham, 1787), Works 18. J. Priestley, Defences of Unitarianism, for the year 1787; containing Letters to Rev. Dr. Geddes, to the Rev. Dr. Price, Part II, and to the Candidates for Orders in the two Universities, Part II., relating to Mr. Howe’s appendix to his fourth volume of Observations on Books, a letter by an Undergraduate of Oxford, Dr. Croft’s Bampton Lectures, and several other Publications, (Birmingham, 1788), Works 18. J. Priestley, Defences of Unitarianism, for the years 1788 and 1789, containing Letters to Dr. Horsley, Lord Bishop of St. David’s, to the Rev. Mr. Barnard, the Rev. Dr. Knowles, and the Rev. Mr. Hawkins, (Birmingham, 1790), Works 19. J. Priestley, Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn, Of St Mary’s Chapel, Birmingham, In answer to his Letters on the Infallibility of the Apostolical Testimony concerning the Person of Christ, (Birmingham, 1790), Works 19. J. Priestley, An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity, on the following subjects, viz. 1. The use of reason in matters of religion. 2. The power of man to do the will of God. 3. Original sin. 4. Election and reprobation. 5. The divinity of Christ, and. 6. Atonement for sin by the death of Christ. To which are added a concise history of those doctrines and the Triumph of Truth being An Account of the Trial of Mr. Elwall, for Heresy and Blasphemy, New Edition, Printed with A Familiar Illustration, (London, 1790), Works, 2. J. Priestley, A Catechism for Children and Young Persons, (7th ed., London, 1802), Works 21. J. Priestley, A General History of the Christian Church, (2nd ed., Northumberland, 1803), Works 8-10.

However, we also saw that languages do not conform to simple rational rules. While they are modelled on a common reasoning process, they also display considerable variation based on the specific cultural circumstances of different societies. Chapter Four revealed that Priestley's analysis of the evidences of Christianity is based on the notion that the testimony in favour of scriptural miracles is so powerful that it cannot fail to generate reasoned assent. Meanwhile infidelity is said to be the result of a disordered or prejudiced mind determined to ignore the evidence placed before it. We also saw in Chapter Four that Priestley's associationist explanation of the generation of personality holds that comprehension of mind is the result of rational associations, while false conjunctions based on passion and prejudice debase the mind and result in a narrow, partial understanding.

An analysis of his theological texts completes our picture of Priestley's enduring polarisation of reason and prejudice. This dichotomy underlies his analysis of scripture just as surely as it structures his epistemology, theory of language and understanding of the self. Priestley is well known for his vocal defence of rational religion and his insistence that assent to revelation does not require submission to the irrational or incomprehensible. Priestley insisted that revelation is the manifestation of divine reason and argued in favour of a series of simple, rational doctrines, which he said best represented the original divine revelation communicated to Jesus and his disciples. In his rejection of all that is mysterious and ineffable, Priestley made rationality the antithesis of orthodoxy, and consistently worked to undermine the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Calvinist beliefs of his contemporaries. In the dedication to his infamous *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* Priestley speaks of the 'gross darkness of that *night* which has for many centuries obscured our holy religion' and promises that 'the *morning* is opening upon us'. With considerable rhetorical force he contrasts light and darkness, good and evil, purity and corruption, in a highly polemical attempt to distinguish pure truth from corrupt doctrine and recover simple principles from the complicated irrationality of orthodox Christianity.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ *Corruptions*, 5, pp.3-12. J. H. Brooke, "'A Sower went Forth': Joseph Priestley and the Ministry of Reform", in A. T. Schwartz and J. G. McEvoy (eds.), *Motion Towards Perfection: The Achievement of Joseph Priestley*, (Boston, 1990), pp.30-31.

We have already seen that Priestley adhered to the conventional Lockean distinction between reason and faith that was prevalent amongst rational dissenters of his era and that he used this to structure his polarisation of rationality and orthodoxy. Locke acknowledged that our assent to revelation must be absolute because God ‘cannot err, and will not deceive’. However, he added that ‘still it belongs to *Reason*, to judge of the Truth of its being a Revelation’. We must use our reason as a standard by which to evaluate scriptural doctrine. It is when we relinquish our reason, warns Locke, that we leave ourselves open to irrational enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is unfounded confidence in the truth of a revelation; it causes us to mistake ‘the ungrounded Fancies of a Man’s own Brain’ for genuine religious truth and to accept ‘extravagant Opinions and Ceremonies’ that have no basis in revelation.²⁰⁸

Priestley’s decidedly Lockean celebration of reason and his disdain for prejudice, superstition and enthusiasm reached their zenith in his theological texts, and nowhere are the terms more obviously opposed. In Chapter Four we saw the results of Priestley’s application of reason to the evidences of revelation. Here we see the use of reason as a standard by which to evaluate Christian doctrine. Priestley’s rational dissent was informed by his early departure from Calvinist theology, which had emphasised the importance of religious ‘experience’ and the necessity of undergoing a ‘new birth’ in order to be counted among the saved. When an anonymous critic maintained that ‘Christ is very God upon the experience of every real Christian’, Priestley’s retort was blunt. ‘I ask how can the truth of any proposition of this kind be ascertained by experience, or what do you mean by *experience* in this case?’ We have seen throughout this dissertation that Priestley equated passion with prejudice and ascribed false associations to the influence of emotion. In his campaign to distance himself from what he saw as the superstitions of Calvinism and Anglicanism, Priestley insisted that scriptural doctrine can be reduced to a series of propositions or judgments. Mirroring his outspoken criticisms of Reid’s philosophy Priestley argued repeatedly that we have no need for an appeal to vague and changeable internal feelings, when we can assess the truth of these propositions based on reason, in the same way that we verify hypotheses in all our other endeavours by testing them against probabilities.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Locke, *Essay*, pp.694-698.

²⁰⁹ *Letters and Queries*, 21, p.13. See also *Church Discipline*, 21, pp.402-403.

The role of reason in attaining truth makes it egalitarian. God's revelation is ongoing in the sense that it is open to all who search the scriptures. Error, on the other hand, often comes to us on the basis of authority and is allowed to flourish when received facts go unquestioned. It puts out tenacious roots in the minds of those who fail to reason independently. The opposition between rationality and orthodoxy is thus also the battle of unfettered reason against the dictates of authority. We must 'search the Scriptures' writes Priestley, and this does not mean we should merely read them. It means actively applying our reason in order to reflect, judge and compare biblical passages for ourselves. The source of error is the implicit acceptance of the hypotheses of others, and the remedy against long-perpetuated falsehood is the active application of individual reason and a return to the 'first principles' of scripture. Words can be twisted in order to support any doctrine. The prejudiced mind may find even the language of transubstantiation in scripture and it is only by harnessing reason that we can counteract those who would persuade us of it. 'Distrust therefore all those who decry human reason, and who require you to abandon it... when once they have this point with you, they can lead you whither they please'.²¹⁰

In his *Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture*, Priestley outlines the orthodox 'Supralapsarian' system, a series of beliefs he equated with irrationality and unfounded prejudice and which, he argued, had been wrongfully imposed on generations of Christians. He writes of the:

Eternally-destined fall of man, an infinite penalty incurred by one, and, by the imputation of his sin, affecting all, and an infinite atonement adequate to it, made by an infinite Being; by which means a small remnant of the human race are necessarily saved, while all the rest of mankind...are consigned to everlasting torments with the Devil and his angels; from whence results glory to a God, who, in all this dreadful scheme, is supposed to have sought nothing else.

These 'tremendous doctrines' of the Trinity, atonement, original sin and predestination may seem 'striking and consistent', he tells us, but his theological endeavours were devoted to exposing them as irrational and unjust. Minor alterations are not enough. Other theologians patch and repair, rejecting election and reprobation while maintaining other equally irrational doctrines. The only way to eradicate error is to dismantle the

²¹⁰ Priestley, *Serious and Candid*, 2, pp.384-385. Priestley, *Differences of Opinion*, 21, pp.315-316. M. Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth", *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 1, (1982), p.5. Fitzpatrick refers to Rational Dissenters in general and not solely to Priestley.

entire edifice of orthodox theology until nothing is left but the pure principles of true Christianity. Priestley asks us to halt the progress of superstition by replacing orthodox beliefs with the rational doctrines actually found in scripture. We are urged to complete the project initiated by the Reformation and eradicate every tincture of the errors inherited from Popery, compounded by Calvinism, and maintained by Anglicanism. As mentioned in Chapter One, in his own life Priestley had undergone a profound doctrinal shift from the Calvinism of his early years to full-blown Unitarianism in his maturity. So too did he envisage a similar theological purge for the whole of Christian society.²¹¹

Having outlined the orthodox scheme in the *Familiar Illustration*, Priestley then contrasted this with his own system:

The merciful Parent of the Universe, who never meant any thing but the happiness of his creatures, sent his well beloved Son, “the Man Christ Jesus”, to reclaim men from their wickedness, and to teach them the way of righteousness; assuring them for their encouragement of the free and unbought pardon of their sins, and promising a life of endless happiness to all that receive and obey the gospel by repenting of their sin, and bringing forth fruits meet for repentance...This is the essence of what is called Socinianism...I believe it to be the sum and substance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the wisdom and power of God.

Priestley expounded the central tenets of his Socinian theology in a number of his theological texts. He conceived of a perfect and benevolent divine creator and dispensed with the notion of a separate principle of evil. In a universe necessitated and determined by God all vice leads to virtue, and all suffering terminates in happiness. Priestley vociferously defended divine unity and rejected the notion of a Trinity. He stated that the Holy Spirit is merely a power of God and emphatically and repeatedly denied the divinity of Christ. Jesus was wholly human, he argued. He was not a mediator between God and Man but brought salvation simply by demonstrating perfect moral behaviour and the truth of a physical resurrection. God’s mercy is freely given, Adam incurred no infinite penalty, and no special redemption is required for his transgression. The atonement is therefore an unjust nonsense. Jesus did not die as a sin-sacrifice to divert God’s wrath, and baptism is a simple rite that does not confer divine supernatural grace. All men have the potential for perfection and no one is predestined to eternal torment.

²¹¹ Priestley, *Familiar Illustration*, 2, pp.487-488. Priestley, *Lord’s Supper*, 21, p.251.

While the immoral will suffer in a future life, we are not doomed to an eternity of suffering and can look forward to a bodily resurrection and the perfect rule of Christ.²¹²

Priestley's unconventional interpretation of scriptural doctrine and the conflict between rationality and orthodoxy may be better understood when examined in relation to his assumptions about the nature of truth in general. We can piece together a picture of Priestley's conception of truth by returning to his definition of the analytic method of investigation. We saw in Chapter One that knowledge is generated by the induction of particulars. The associationist mind is perpetually and mechanically engaged in a process of abstraction whereby particular facts are conjoined in order to generate general knowledge. The mind associates ideas arising from particular instances and observations, but cumulative experience allows us to formulate universal propositions that tell us something about whole classes of ideas and things. We noted in Chapter Four that Priestley was confident that these propositions accurately express real relationships between things in the external world. As the universe is one of necessary regulation, the analytic method of investigation therefore inevitably terminates in harmonious, systematic and coherent principles. In turn this means that truth may be conceived as comprehensive, rational, uniform and unchanging. As truth is marked by its simplicity and permanence, so, too, is prejudice aligned with individual preference and passing whim and therefore cast as changeable and unstable.²¹³

These assumptions about the nature of truth mark Priestley's theology, just as they structure his epistemology and inform his work on the evidences of revelation. Priestley's emphasis on simplicity and unity was not solely directed towards his understanding of the Godhead. He also celebrated the unity of truth. As Martin Fitzpatrick notes in his discussion of Priestley's conception of religious truth, just as the application of reason to the natural world was supposed to uncover truths of simplicity and harmony, so too would the application of reason to scripture allow access to the

²¹² Priestley, *Familiar Illustration*, 2, p.487-488. Another good summary is in, *Corruptions*, 5, p.480. For individual statements of Priestley's position on each of these doctrines, see *Institutes*, Part III, 2, pp.260-371, *Serious and Candid*, 2, pp.385-402 and *Familiar Illustration*, 2, pp.432-480. For helpful summaries of Priestley's creed, see M. Canovan, "The Irony of History, Joseph Priestley's Rational Theology", *The Price-Priestley Newsletter*, 4, (1980) pp.16-17. R. Richey, "Joseph Priestley: Worship and Theology", *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, 15, 2/3, (1972), pp.42-43. Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth", p.11 (refers to Rational Dissenters in general).

²¹³ Priestley's interpretation of scriptural doctrine was unusual in relation to orthodox theology but less so in relation to fellow Rational Dissenters many of whom shared some or all of his views.

plain, rational and timeless truths of God's revelation. Were it not for the widespread abandonment of reason, writes Priestley in the *Considerations on Differences of Opinion Amongst Christians*, 'it would be absolutely impossible that the individuals of mankind, whose intellects are so much alike, should differ so widely in their religious sentiments'. Priestley was confident that a return to reason and scripture would ultimately result in uniformity of opinion as all minds converged on the truth. 'When our minds shall, by this means, have been exposed, for a sufficient time, to the same influences, we shall come to think and feel in the same manner'.²¹⁴

As Margaret Canovan has pointed out, Priestley's belief that revelation was 'once for all in Christ' and his faith in scripture as a repository of divine truth meant that he regarded true Christian doctrine as timeless, unequivocal and unchanging. If truth is uniform and universally applicable, it follows that error is partial, ambiguous and liable to change. This conception, directly founded upon his epistemological assumptions about the nature of judgments and his determinist cosmology, lies at the heart of Priestley's approach to scripture and his theological methodology. Priestley historicised doctrinal error. He explained the superstitions of orthodoxy on historical grounds as mistakes related to specific cultural and linguistic contexts. Priestley's antithesis of rationality and orthodoxy also pitted divine and eternal truth against human, temporal error. For Priestley the story of orthodoxy is a story of corruption. As he saw it, his Socinian doctrine was not only simple and rational, it was also 'pure' in the sense that it had prevailed among the earliest Christians and represented the plain and straightforward principles taught by Christ himself. As Priestley put it in the *Corruptions*, the object of his work was 'not a *progressive religion*, but a *progressive reformation* of a corrupted religion'.²¹⁵

In order to complete our survey of Priestley's rational theology it is useful to return to his story of the 'self' to better understand the relationship he perceived between his theology and proper moral conduct. Chapter Two described the ways in which Priestley's associationist model of the mind provides the theoretical unpinning to his aesthetic theory. Tastes, he tells us, are based on personal associations and experiences and accumulate inevitably as we progress through life. Tastes differ between individuals

²¹⁴ Priestley, *Differences of Opinion*, 21, pp.315-316. Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth", p.12 and p.18.

²¹⁵ Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, p.503. Canovan, "Irony of History", pp.18-19.

only insofar as their experiences and sensibilities differ, and this is enough to account for the wide diversity of tastes that undeniably exist within human cultures. Although Priestley tends to conflate truth with uniformity, his discussion of taste and the pleasures of the imagination loosens these rigid boundaries in order to accommodate some degree of diversity of taste without ascribing it to error. However, Priestley did not have a relativist aesthetic and did not hold that all tastes are equally valid. Chapter Four examined this observation in more depth. We saw that ultimately Priestley located the perfection of personality in the rejection of all desires and aversions; even the highest moral pursuits regulated by rational self interest must be jettisoned in order to achieve spiritual perfection. The gradual refinement of benevolence, sympathy and the moral sense terminates in a comprehension of mind so broad that the consequences of vice and virtue may be properly understood and individual desires relinquished for the common good.

‘Every set of religious sentiments must have its influence upon the mind, and will produce a particular temper and cast of thought’. In Chapter Four we saw that the conclusions drawn from a study of natural religion are not to be considered as providing a secure foundation for the proper development of the personality. Ultimately the transcendence and annihilation of the self arise only from assent to revelation. While this is not explained in detail in the ‘evidences’ texts, Priestley’s exhaustive elucidation of his theology gave him the space to examine the moral and emotional impact of orthodox principles and compare them to his own rational system. Priestley not only juxtaposed rationality and orthodoxy, reason and enthusiasm, timeless truth and temporal error: he also compared the superiority of mind cultivated by genuine piety to the debased morals and troubled mental state of the orthodox believer.²¹⁶

The doctrines of the atonement and predestination lead people to believe in an ‘arbitrary and capricious Deity’, he explains, and annex ideas of ‘gloom and severity’ to religious life. For instance the simple commemorative sharing of the Lord’s Supper has been corrupted by notions of transubstantiation, and leaves many with a ‘superstitious dread’ that taints this otherwise cheerful rite. Meanwhile, as true Christianity inspires humility, candour and cheerfulness, the idea of a tyrannical deity leads to a ‘gloomy, proud,

²¹⁶ Priestley, *Corruptions of Spirit*, 21, p.374.

uncharitable, and malignant disposition'. Notions of original sin dictate that men are incapable of any moral goodness of their own volition and must be subject to a passive conversion experience in order to be saved. This is a mere feeling, not an act of mind, and is a source of great distress to those who cannot persuade themselves that they have experienced such a new birth. In despair these people may plunge themselves into vice and ruin. Belief in the arbitrary volitions of the Divinity encourages superstition in the minds of many people, 'so that the ideas they annex to *serving God* will be quite different from the practice of moral virtue'. When we consider the love of the man Jesus Christ, we consider him as an 'elder brother' who shared in our infirmities and sacrificed himself for the sake of his deeply held principles. His life acts as a pattern for moral goodness, for we consider him to be a man much like ourselves and hope that we can attain his perfection. This kind of love and esteem, Priestley states, can never be truly felt by a Trinitarian, alienated as they are from God's goodness and unable to identify with their saviour.²¹⁷

'The mind of man can never be wholly barren', Priestley tells us in the *Institutes*,

Through our whole lives we are subject to successive impressions; for, either new ideas are continually flowing in, or traces of old ones are marked deeper. If therefore, you be not acquiring good principles, be assured that you are acquiring bad ones; if you be not forming virtuous habits, you are, how insensibly soever to your selves, forming vicious ones.

As R.K. Webb points out in his work on 'rational piety', Priestley moves rapidly here from 'received impressions, to the acquisition of good principles, to the formation of virtuous habits'. Following Hartley, Priestley distinguished between rational and practical assent and held that rational assent to scriptural doctrine mechanically generates worthy moral behaviour. His point is that actions follow from conviction. There is no need to talk of a separate or innate 'moral sense' when our morality and virtuous actions may be seen to arise mechanically from the perception of truth. Meanwhile the corruption of Christian doctrine has been accompanied by 'a fatal corruption of men's ideas of virtue and moral obligation'. Priestley peppers his texts with references to the moral impact of rational and orthodox beliefs. His discussion of

²¹⁷ Priestley, *Lord's Supper*, 21, p.285. Priestley, *Corruptions of Spirit*, 21, pp.374-387. Priestley, *Infidelity*, 17, p.25. R.K. Webb, "Rational Piety", in Haakonssen (ed.) *Enlightenment and Religion*, pp.298-301.

the atonement in *An Essay...On the Life and Death of Christ* may give us a flavour of his general approach. Those in favour of the doctrine of the atonement tell us that, without such assurance of divine justice, individuals are subject to ‘perpetual alarms’ and fear losing God’s love. Priestley argues the opposite. Mankind naturally inclines towards belief in God’s mercy and consistent principles of justice. When the truly penitent are forgiven and only sinners are punished, good moral behaviour is encouraged. However, when God’s justice seems inconsistent and an innocent man is punished for the sins of others, this must ‘raise in men’s minds such unworthy notions of the Divine Attributes, as will... have an unfriendly aspect upon their virtue’. For Priestley, then, completing the work of the Reformation is as much about altering morals and encouraging virtuous behaviour as it is about eliminating false doctrine and this in turn is a crucial element in the perfection of the individual and of society.²¹⁸

II Scriptural Language

Q. What is the Bible?

A. The Bible is a collection of books, written by good men, containing an account of what God has done for mankind, what he requires of them, and what they may expect from him.²¹⁹

Priestley had a profound and scholarly knowledge of the Christian scriptures. He read biblical Hebrew and Greek and was intimately familiar with both the Old and New Testaments. ‘The Scriptures are too much neglected even by Christians, though we cannot be too well acquainted with them, and there are no books that we can read with so much advantage’. Priestley may have celebrated reason, but this was never in the manner of the Deists. We saw in Chapter Four that revealed truth lies at the heart of Priestley’s theology, and that he believed the scriptures contain a true account of the histories and teachings of those who have been close to God. However, while Priestley insisted that we respect the bible as the source of valuable and well-verified testimony, he denied the verbal plenary inspiration of scripture and did not believe the bible to be the literal word of God. The scriptures, Priestley tells us,

²¹⁸ Priestley, *Institutes*, 2, p.xv. Priestley, *Corruptions of Spirit*, 21, p.376. Priestley, *Lord’s Supper*, 21, pp.290-291. Priestley, “Life and Death”, 7, p.277 and pp.289-291. Richey, “Worship and Theology”, pp.42-44.

²¹⁹ Priestley, *Catechism*, 21, p.564.

Were written without any particular inspiration, by men who wrote according to the best of their knowledge, and who from their circumstances could not be mistaken with respect to the *greater facts*, of which they were proper *witnesses*, but (like any other men, subject to prejudice) might be liable to adopt a hasty or ill-grounded opinion concerning things which did not fall within the compass of their own knowledge.²²⁰

In a series of articles written for the ill-fated *Theological Repository*, under the name of ‘Pamphilus’, Priestley examined the issue of inspiration in detail and established two axioms on which his analysis was to be based. Divine communications are not made when reason alone is sufficient. No messenger from God is to be considered as inspired further than he claims to be so, and further than his mission requires. On this basis Priestley argued that although Moses clearly had a divine mission, this did not make him impeccable. When Moses claims he received divine communication we are obliged to believe him, but this does not mean we are to accept blindly his obviously mythological cosmogony, or to take literally what is plainly ‘truth veiled in allegory’. On the same principles Priestley argued that the apostles experienced limited inspiration, and that Jesus should not be considered as an infallible teacher. Although Jesus knew he was the messiah he also misapplied passages of scripture and was as ignorant about science and nature as the rest of his contemporaries. For Priestley, the great value of Christ as a moral leader stems from his basic humanity, and this is clearly demonstrated in his language as well as in his actions.²²¹

Priestley acknowledged that scripture contains many errors, inconsistencies and examples of ignorance. Rejecting plenary inspiration, while retaining a belief in limited divine communication, therefore strengthens our faith and makes revelation more appealing to those who reject it on the basis of its minor errors. ‘It is certainly a great relief to us, to find that every thing which is really valuable in the system of revelation may be retained without that doctrine of inspiration which we find, by experience, lays it open to so many embarrassing objections’. Priestley’s denial of literal infallibility was

²²⁰ Priestley, *Early Opinions*, 7, p.59. For a definition of plenary inspiration and a discussion of its place in Christian thought see W. J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture*, (Oxford, 1981), in particular pp.3-4.

²²¹ Priestley, “Inspiration”, 7, p.299, p.300, pp.304-312 and pp.346-364. Priestley, *Institutes*, Part III, 2 p.250. Canovan, “Irony of History”, p.17. Schofield, *Enlightened*, pp.203-204. M. Haykin, “A Socinian and a Calvinist Compared: Joseph Priestley and Andrew Fuller on the Propriety of Prayer to Christ”, *Nederlandsch Archief Voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 73, (1993), p.181. Priestley established the Theological Repository in 1768. Three volumes later the journal stopped and was revived in the mid 1780s with another three volumes.

part of his general doctrinal purge of orthodox corruptions. It also made him a particularly radical advocate of a tradition within Protestant dissent that granted authority to the bible based on its status as a sound historical text. 'As to the evidence of the gospel history, it is exactly similar to that of any other credible history'. Priestley had read Locke and Toland, both of whom suggested that there are no separate rules to be followed in the interpretation of scripture. This stance is well illustrated by Priestley's description of the historical genesis of the biblical texts in his *Essay on Church Discipline*. Here Priestley explains that in the early days of the church, 'our Saviour's discourses were carefully recollected and repeated, as containing the best instructions and motives to a good life'. In time these verbal histories of the life of Christ were committed to writing and soon every church came to own a copy and to consider itself in possession of the substance of all the preaching of the apostles and evangelists. Scripture is thus to be considered as the product of a particular set of historical and cultural forces, constructed for a specific group of people and, he tells us, written in a language they would easily understand.²²²

One of Priestley's harshest critics on the subject of inspiration was his Birmingham neighbour, the Anglican clergyman Edward Burn. For Burn, Priestley's position on inspiration represented nothing less than the 'total demolition of revealed truth'. The scriptures are infallible, he insisted, their truth stands alone. 'If the New Testament be an authentic document it is profitable and sufficient for doctrine; and when considered in connection with itself, will be found the best interpreter of its own intentions'. If Priestley really found his opinions in the New Testament, Burn argued, he would acknowledge the status of that text as infallible revealed truth. As it is, he removes all certainty from the study of scripture and leaves in its place mere reason and unnecessary appeals to antiquity. Burn argued that we do not require external evidence in order to ascertain the truths of revelation. It appears 'preposterous', he writes, 'to advert *early opinions* in proof of a doctrine which, from its *nature*, can ultimately be determined by the *Scriptures only*'. However, that which Burn regarded as significant criticism and

²²² Priestley, *Church Discipline*, 21, pp.411-412. Priestley, "Inspiration", 7, pp.301-304 and p.354. Brooke, in Schwartz and McEvoy (eds.), *Perfection*, p.33. B. A. Gerrish, "Natural and Revealed Religion", in Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, p.652. J. T. Moore, "Locke's Analysis of Language and the Assent to Scripture", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31, 4, (1976), p.710.

indicative of dangerous impiety, was, for Priestley, the basis of his innovative exegetical method. Priestley's demotion of scripture to the status of an ordinary text granted him the freedom to appeal to the specific historical circumstances in which the books of the bible were first composed, to examine the languages in which they were first written and to analyse the opinions of the earliest Christians from an exhaustive list of secondary sources in order to ascertain their meaning. The denial of inspiration was Priestley's first step towards an understanding of the bible as a historically situated text, an understanding that was unimaginable to Burn and to all those who revered scripture as a literal and infallible divine revelation.²²³

We have already seen that Priestley's work on the nature of judgment and assent has much in common with Locke's *Essay* and the same can be said of Priestley's approach to scriptural language. In an article on the relationship between language and assent, J. T. Moore explains that Locke places 'one absolute restriction' upon assent to revelation. Before assent may be granted, Locke writes, the proposition in question must be understood. This has profound implications. To understand something one must perceive the certain or probable relation between ideas. One of the reasons we may fail to understand something is because it is couched in imperfect language, and we therefore cannot make a rational judgment. According to Locke, although language is generally a good means of communication, it is a very human and a very imperfect creation, open to abuse and liable to create confusion when terms are not used precisely and not shared by speakers. Therefore, even if one knows a proposition to be true, because it appears in scripture, assent must be withheld if the words are obscure or used in an unusual manner. According to Locke, scripture is no different from any other ancient text. It is laced with potential linguistic pitfalls, obscurities and untranslatable terms. Locke suggests that the many interpretations of scripture are 'manifest proofs' of the obscurity of language,

Though every thing said in the Text be infallibly true, yet the Reader may be, nay, cannot chuse but be very fallible in the understanding of it. Nor is it to be wondered, that the Will of GOD, when cloathed in Words should be liable to that doubt and uncertainty, which unavoidably attends that sort of Conveyance.²²⁴

²²³ E. Burn, *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley on the Infallibility of the Apostolic Testimony, concerning the Person of Christ*, (Birmingham, 1790), in particular pp.3-7 p.11 pp.23-25.

²²⁴ Locke, *Essay*, pp.489-490. Moore, "Assent", p.708-710.

According to Priestley, while ‘we cannot entertain a doubt either of the divine knowledge, or the divine veracity...all *men* are necessarily fallible. They may be deceived themselves, and therefore, with the best intentions, they may lead us into error’. There are many echoes of Locke in Priestley’s theological writings, not least in this acknowledgement that language may mislead as often as it brings clarity. We saw in Chapter Three that Priestley was acutely aware of the fallibilities of language and the problems that may arise when different cultures not only have different terms but may also have different underlying sets of ideas or ‘mental conceptions’. It is telling that Priestley intended to construct a general grammar and ended up discussing the rich realities of linguistic diversity. Language labels our reasoning process and this is reflected in the grammatical categories shared by most languages, said Priestley. However, as there are no innate ideas and as associations do not always accurately reflect reality, there is much scope for variation between languages. As tastes vary between people, so do complex congeries of associated ideas vary between cultures based on their different experiences. Words are generated by necessity, languages have no internal rules and no consistent analogies; rather, they are proportioned to the specific needs of their speakers and therefore are liable to constant change, contraction and expansion.²²⁵

Locke suggested that the best remedy for the problems inherent in language is a careful application of reason. He said that it belongs to reason to identify the truth of a revelation ‘and of the signification of the Words, wherein it is delivered’. Priestley’s approach to scripture can be seen as amplification of this method. It reveals a similar emphasis on the importance of determining an accurate meaning for scriptural words in order to mitigate the possibilities of linguistic confusion. A number of commentators have discussed Priestley’s innovative historical approach to biblical exegesis. They note his close attention to early Christianity in order to reconstruct the context in which the scriptures were composed and thereby recover their true meaning. However, Priestley’s work on linguistic context, and in particular his insistence that it is in studying the history of the figurative language of the bible that we reveal the source of orthodox corruptions, has not previously been discussed. Therefore the remainder of this chapter

²²⁵Priestley, “Inspiration”, 7, p.347.

concludes our discussion of Priestley's theory of language by applying it to his observations on the nature of scriptural language.²²⁶

As we noted in Chapter Two Priestley's rhetorical theory distinguishes between arguments addressed to the judgment, and literary devices used to please the imagination. We saw that although Priestley's analysis of figurative language in the *Lectures on Criticism* is complex and innovative, his distinction between the two separate ends of oratory grants figures of speech a merely decorative role and maintains that the cultivation of a pleasing literary style should be secondary to the use of rational arguments in order to inform and persuade. This distinction is made to reinforce the significance of rational argument and to maintain a clear boundary between reason and passion as grounds of assent. An examination of Priestley's theological texts indicates that he maintained a related distinction in his analysis of scriptural language. We have already noted that in the *Lectures on Criticism*, Priestley compares rational language to the muscles and bones of a body and suggests that figurative language represents an external covering that may be regarded as superficial, decorative and insubstantial. In his earliest theological publication Priestley uses a similar comparison when describing the bold figurative language of scripture. He refers to the 'dress the Jews have put upon our religion' and suggests that careful attention to scriptural language is required in order to 'look through' its figurative style and 'discern its true lineaments'. He writes repeatedly of uncovering or penetrating layers of figurative language in order to uncover the 'purity and beautiful simplicity' of true Christian principles. 'Let us preserve it pure and undefiled; nor let us rest satisfied till we have freed it from every ill-judged ornament, that yet remains upon it, and left it as naked as truth'.²²⁷

Priestley was acutely aware that figurative language is 'peculiarly difficult to understand', and that 'too free' a use of figures 'may embarrass the sense, and render the speaker or writer's meaning very dubious or obscure'. He attempted to maintain a clear distinction between the rational and figurative language of scripture for the same reasons that he distinguished between argument and ornament in his rhetorical theory. Linguistic functions can be easily conflated, and the literal and figurative uses of a word

²²⁶ Priestley, "Inspiration", 7, p.335. Priestley, *Lord's Supper*, 21, p.298. Locke, *Essay*, pp.489-490 and p.694. The articles cited in this chapter by Canovan, Fitzpatrick and Hoecker, are good examples of those who examine rational theology.

²²⁷ Priestley, *Remission*, pp.v-ix and pp.89-94.

are not always easy to discern. Priestley set up a dichotomy between the plain sense of scripture and its ornamental disguise, because he recognised the fluid nature of the boundary between literalism and figuration. For this reason Priestley did not only regard figurative language as an ornamental addition to the rational language of scripture: he also described it as deceptive, ambiguous and liable to mislead the reader. Priestley frequently compares the ‘true form and substance’ of Christian doctrine to the ‘disguise in which this simple religion appears’. This contrast informs his opposition of rationality and orthodoxy and his polemical distinction between purity and corruption.²²⁸

Priestley’s fundamental premise when it comes to the analysis of scripture is that doctrinal error originates in the conflation of literal and figurative language. When Priestley wrote to Richard Price as part of the *Defences of Unitarianism* series, he criticised his friend for confounding literal and figurative language and explained that this was the source of his Arian mistakes concerning the pre-existence of Christ. In answer to Price’s ‘principle, of literal interpretation’, Priestley argued that, ‘if we will allow of no figures of speech in such books as those of scripture, we must admit the greatest absurdities’. For Priestley it is, specifically, the literal reading of figurative language that is the source of theological corruption and the means by which it is perpetuated. A recurring theme in his theological work is the notion that moving from the figurative to the literal is a process of adding or supplementing meaning, a way of heaping ideas onto ornamental terms or placing undue stress on phrases intended simply as illuminating comparisons. Priestley appreciated and enjoyed figurative language; he often spoke of the bold and pleasing nature of biblical comparisons. That which he regarded with suspicion was not figurative language itself, but the ways in which a literal reading of a figurative comparison can confuse and mislead the reader by supplying meanings that were never originally intended. On less amicable terms, Priestley criticised the Rev. Venn for the same oversights demonstrated by Price. He accused him of making ‘much cry, over little wool’ by emphasising a disparate and unconnected set of figurative expressions to support his orthodoxy. ‘How much *hay* and *stubble* has been built upon this *foundation of the apostles*’?²²⁹

²²⁸ Priestley, *Remission*, pp.v-ix and pp.89-94. Priestley, *Familiar Illustration*, 2, p.432.

²²⁹ Priestley, *Defences*, 18, p.459. Priestley, *Differences of Opinion*, 21, p.317 and p.323.

In Priestley's distinction between ornamental figurative language and simple, literal speech we perceive echoes of his linguistic texts. These similarities extend further when we examine the mechanism at work behind the collapse of the schematic distinction between argument and ornament in Priestley's rhetorical theory. In the *Examination* Priestley described words as arbitrary signs that act as labels for pre-linguistic ideas. However, in the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* and *Lectures on Language and Grammar*, he frequently complicated this atomistic paradigm and explored the ways in which figurative words have a functional role in the expansion of vocabulary and knowledge. Priestley's departure from atomism begins with his definition of figurative language as a process of renaming our ideas of things. Figurative comparisons transfer the ideas of qualities associated with one object onto the idea of another. Comparisons are based on perceived analogies, and the boundless order and reciprocity of nature furnish us with abundant material for the perception of resemblance. A good comparison does not deceive or confuse, Priestley insists, it brings us closer to the truth by illuminating shared qualities and thereby revealing something new about the object that has been renamed.

Comparisons are pleasing in a discourse because they entertain the imagination, exercise the 'faculties', and paint a vivid and lively picture. However, Priestley's work on the function of figurative language reveals that simile, metaphor and other figures that operate by transferring ideas are not merely pleasing ornaments. They are 'natural' and integral to language and related to the basic associationist reasoning process. Our knowledge progresses as a process of induction; the general categories we construct by comparing particulars are based on comparing ideas of things that have shared properties and the perception of their resemblance. Therefore, the analytic process by which we attain general truths or construct universal propositions may be called figurative. It is a process that tells us something new about an object by describing it using a general term applicable because of its analogy to other objects. Priestley describes this analytic or figurative extension of knowledge as akin to the algebraic method in mathematics. As universal propositions are predictive in the sense that they generalise from many to all and from same to similar, so too can figurative analogies be described as predictive as they identify previously unknown quantities based on recognised resemblance. Priestley says this method is convenient; it abbreviates or abstracts our knowledge and makes it easier to categorise and compare ideas. He also

tells us that this method is the process by which we progress in truth; it is the basis for an ever broadening comprehension of the natural world. Unlike Hartley, Priestley was not absolutely clear whether this process of the figurative extension of knowledge is pre-linguistic or is reliant on language. However, he consistently commented on the intimate relationship between our ideas and our words. He remarked that figurative language helps in the construction of general terms and suggested that the figures chosen by people tell us something directly about the analogies they perceive in nature.

In Priestley's linguistic texts we learn that while plain literal speech may be aligned with the expression of rational ideas, it is actually figurative language, or the figurative extension of ideas, that lies at the heart of the reasoning process. Priestley acknowledges that pleasing comparisons can decorate a discourse but his absolute distinction between rational and ornamental language cannot be maintained once figuration is granted a functional role. Priestley re-described this problem in his earliest theological publication, and in doing so weighed anchor on a long theological career devoted to the difficult process of navigating between figuration and literalism in the books of scripture. *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission* was published anonymously in 1761, around the same time that Priestley took up his teaching position at Warrington, published the *Rudiments of English Grammar* and began composing his other linguistic texts. Priestley opened his examination of the scriptural figures commonly thought to refer to the atonement with a discussion based on his theory of language. Given the time of composition, it is probably no coincidence that *Remission* is one of Priestley's most explicit expressions of the relationship between his linguistic philosophy and his rational theology.

Figurative words have two separate functions relating to the progress and expansion of language, Priestley explains in *Remission*. It is of utmost importance that these are not confused with plain speech as such mistakes are the source of falsehood and error. Some figurative comparisons arise from the need to categorise similar things using a general term. In these cases analogous ideas are given shared names based on perceived resemblance, and this occurs in particular when abstract ideas are derived from sensible things.

‘By reason of the poverty of all languages, the use of figurative expressions, or the affixing of the same term to things that are only analogous to another cannot be avoided; especially, in treating of moral or religious subjects, in which our ideas themselves, must, necessarily, be much compounded, and borrowed from sensible things’.

Alongside the use of figuration in the description of analogous things, Priestley tells us that a second use of figurative language may be identified that further contributes to fill sparse languages with ‘artificial forms of speech’. ‘When necessity had first introduced such an use of words, the ingenuity of men, as in other similar cases, presently worked it into a beauty’. Figurative language can therefore also be regarded as having a purely decorative or ornamental role. Priestley’s discussion is intended as a warning about the difficulties of identifying and interpreting figurative expressions. He highlights the complex nature of figures and hints these should be ‘reduced to their simple component parts’ before they may be properly understood. Some figures may ‘enliven a discourse’ he says, while others ‘facilitate the discovery of truth’; both are ‘factitious’ and should not be mistaken for simple, literal truth. It is our job to understand both these functions, to distinguish between them and also to differentiate carefully between ‘artificial and compounded’ terms and plain, simple language.²³⁰

Priestley returns to this theme in his series of articles *On the Reasoning of the Apostle Paul*. Here Priestley relies on his theory of language in order to examine a selection of Paul’s ‘boldest figures, allusions and allegories’. Priestley argues that in order to understand Paul’s writing properly we must first understand the peculiar manner in which he reasoned. The best way to determine this is to attend to his use of figuration and his use of rational and ornamental figures.

For since reasoning is conducted by an attention to the *real* and strict analogies of things, just as figures of speech are formed upon the most beautiful and striking, though looser analogies; with respect to which, however, rules of propriety and correctness are observed by judicious writers, and a negligence in the one case is generally attended with a like negligence in the other; the liberties that a man gives himself, even with respect to his figures and allusions, may contribute something towards giving us an insight into his character as a reasoner.

Priestley argues that if a man is to be deemed ‘a cautious, or a *bold*, a *clear* or a *confused* reasoner’, this will be mirrored in the figures of his speech. When we attend to

²³⁰Priestley, *Remission*, pp. v-viii.

these characteristics of speech we are better able to judge the clarity of his reasoning. Paul is a particularly interesting case in point. ‘It is almost peculiar to him to have his arguments, allusions, and figures of speech slide insensibly into one another’. The result is that it is hard to determine the moments at which Paul uses rational language and those when he ornaments his discourse, and in turn this is the source of many significant corruptions. Paul’s use of figures becomes easily conflated, Priestley explains, and it is difficult to know ‘whether he really means to argue seriously, and demonstrate upon solid principles, or only to draw out a figure, and pursue an allegory or allusion’. ²³¹

Priestley likens instances of Paul’s confused reasoning to ‘spots on the face of the sun’ and analyses the ways in which his peculiar style makes it difficult to negotiate between rational and ornamental uses of figurative language. His discussion is particularly illuminating because he clearly links his analysis to the question of plenary inspiration. Some ask whether the inspiration of the apostles influenced their character as writers, says Priestley. A careful study of Paul allows us to conclude that it is very likely the apostles were divinely instructed in the principles of Christianity but were left to take their own measures in its propagation. Scriptural writings therefore follow the ‘natural bent of their own minds’. We may say that, for Priestley, scriptural language is a speech-act that embodies human reason rather than directly mirroring the divine mind. Paul’s confused reasoning is useful as evidence that scriptural language is not inspired. In the language of the apostles and authors of scripture, ‘we may expect to discern true human characters, attended with natural human failings and human excesses’. ²³²

Priestley’s denial of inspiration allowed him to consider instances in which Paul’s language was expressive of his own state of mind and not the direct or infallible word of God. To some extent Priestley also held that scriptural passages, and in particular figurative words, express the emotional states of their authors. We saw in Chapter Two that in some cases Priestley considered figures to be the language of the passions. In a heightened emotional state an individual is more likely to grasp at figurative language to articulate their pain or joy. As a good comparison illuminates the unrecognised qualities of an object, so this in turn may be considered another manner in which figurative language sheds light on our ideas. In the *Lectures on Criticism*, Priestley’s examination

²³¹ Priestley, “Paul”, 7, pp.407-408.

²³² Priestley, “Paul”, 7, pp.407-415. A similar observation, in “Inspiration”, 7, pp.340-341.

of the close relationship between figurative speech and emotional expression contributed to the break down of his flimsy polarisation of rational and ornamental language and led him to cast figuration as natural and far from being calculated to deceive. In a similar way, in his theological texts, Priestley departs from his categorisation of figures as a superficial or decorative disguise, when he examines instances of the figurative expression of emotion. For instance, Priestley explains in his *Essay on the Life and Death of Christ* that the most remarkable figurative representations are used alongside plain speech when describing the execution of Jesus. This is hardly surprising, remarks Priestley, when it was an event so interesting and important to the apostles, an event that had ‘astonished and disappointed’ them and was a stumbling block for unbelievers.

Accordingly, we find that their imaginations were proportionably struck with it, and that they not only describe the manner, the causes, and the operation of it in plain language, but likewise have recourse to a variety of comparisons and strong metaphors, such as were naturally prompted by their own strong feelings, and were calculated to impress the minds of those to whom they addressed themselves.²³³

‘We ought not to interpret the figurative expressions of Hebrew poetry too literally, or to expect it in the rigid accuracy of expression of our Western prose’. Priestley directly links Paul’s fluid transitions between figurative and rational analogies to the Jewish taste. Paul knew that the most effective means by which to convert the Jews was to speak in a language and style that suited his audience. Almost all of Priestley’s theological publications devote time to a consideration of the difficulties involved in translating ancient texts, particularly when it comes to the highly compounded nature of figurative language.²³⁴

The linguistic and stylistic differences that exist between modern European languages and the languages of scripture may be regarded as another way in which the task of negotiating between literal and figurative meanings is made considerably more difficult. ‘To those who lived in the times in which these books were published, they were, no doubt very intelligible...but what was easy to them, a long course of time has rendered

²³³ The instances in which Priestley explores the relationship between scriptural figures and emotional expression are scattered. It is not as explicit as the way in which he considers the relationship between reason and figuration. Quotation is from “Life and Death”, 7, p.222. See also *Familiar Illustration*, 2, pp.472-473.

²³⁴ Priestley, *Familiar Illustration*, 2, p.438. Priestley, “Paul”, 7, p.407.

extremely difficult to us'. Like all languages, Priestley held that ancient Hebrew and Greek reflected the tastes and customs of their speakers and are peculiarly adapted to their audience and this makes the style of these languages unsuited to the modern ear. According to Priestley the 'Asiatic' languages 'go far beyond us in the boldness and freedom of their figures'. In turn this means that we may be apt to mistake the nature of figurative phrases, conflate rational language with ornamental, and in doing so corrupt the plain sense of scripture:

This is one cloud that hangs over the true meaning of the writers of the books of scripture; which, at this distance of time and manners, it is exceeding difficult for us to see through; and hath led their readers into very widely different apprehensions of their sense; some resting in the most obvious and gross meaning of the words they use; while others, suspecting this to be falling short of their true meaning, wander many different ways in quest of it.²³⁵

In defence of his Socinian theology Priestley argued that orthodox thinkers had, for generations, failed to maintain the distinction between rational and ornamental language and had been misled by the dual functions of figurative language and the peculiar Hebrew style. Priestley unfavourably compared the orthodox stress on mere figurative 'hints and inferences' to his own method of determining the meaning of biblical language by examining all passages in relation to the 'general tenor' of scripture. This method of scriptural exposition was a conventional one and no different from that recommended by critics such as Edward Burn. Priestley frequently began a theological treatise by collecting relevant passages and phrases and ascertaining their general meaning. He interpreted words, phrases and statements in relation to their use in other similar passages of scripture and attempted to harmonise meaning by accepting the interpretation that seemed consonant with the most conventional usage. However, as he engaged in this traditional exegetic method, he described it in characteristically Priestleyan terms. The method, he tells us in the *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, is fundamentally a matter of the induction of particulars. Theological inquiry is an investigation of truth much like any other. It is founded on the 'plain sense' of scripture as a geometrician appeals to self-evidence. A theological argument is conducted 'in a method nearly *analytical*', writes Priestley. Particular passages are quoted with accuracy, grouped under general heads and the doctrine is deduced 'as an inference fairly drawn from the texts thus collected and compared'. Priestley was in no doubt that

²³⁵Priestley, *Remission*, pp.v-ix. Priestley, *Familiar Illustration*, 2, p.430.

this analytic method brings with it certainty and precision, and an analysis of the general tenor of scripture forms the bulk of many of his theological texts.²³⁶

‘A few obscure expressions and passages ought to be explained by other numerous, plain, striking texts, relating to the subject’. Priestley’s rejection of the doctrine of the atonement is based on his analytic method of generating general scriptural principles from collections of particular passages. In a number of his texts he pits the general tenor of scripture against the false meaning heaped upon scattered figurative descriptions of the death of Christ. He marshals every available passage in order to establish the general, rational and simple principles of ‘true’ Christianity and devotes page after page to expounding these collected quotations. The plain sense of scripture leaves us in no doubt of God’s free mercy, argues Priestley. The pardon of sin is clearly and repeatedly represented as dispensed solely on account of personal virtue, repentance and moral reformation. Meanwhile, by contrast, ‘it is only from the literal interpretation of a few figurative expressions in the Scriptures, that this doctrine of atonement...has been derived’. The strongest figures of speech are manifested in scripture, Priestley explains. Given the bold metaphorical style of the Jews, it is unreasonable to suppose that the literal reading should be the best. We must always be on our guard in order to avoid mistaking complex figures for plain speech and augmenting the truth of our religion. Figurative descriptions of Jesus as a ‘sacrifice’, a ‘curse’, a ‘paschal lamb’ and numerous other allusions are bold, vivid and entertaining comparisons when read figuratively. Moreover, they are based on real resemblances and usefully tell us something about Christ, but when read literally their truth becomes a nonsense, and their meaning irrational and inconsistent.

If there be a resemblance to the death of Christ in those things to which they compare it, the writers are sufficiently justified, as such *figures of speech* are adapted to give a strong view of what they wish to describe; but if no figure be intended, they are chargeable with real inconsistency, in calling the same thing by different names.

To call Jesus a ‘sacrifice’ is an illuminating analogy to other sacrifices as he gave up his life for the sake of others. Likewise he may be described as ‘bearing away’ our sins, as he died in order to confirm the gospel. His death may even appropriately be referred to as a ‘curse’, because he died in a manner that the Jews associated with God’s

²³⁶ Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, p.97 and pp.154-155. Priestley, *LOC*, p.46 and pp.63-64.

reprobation. These are ‘just and beautiful’ comparisons, but cannot be stressed and strained to communicate more meaning than was intended. Figurative expressions are therefore dangerous, misleading all those who lack ‘a portion of common sense, sufficient to enable them to distinguish the true and proper meaning through this close covering of a figure’.²³⁷

In many of his publications Priestley uses the terms ‘general tenor’ and ‘plain sense’ nearly synonymously. In his argumentative *Defences of Unitarianism* he deliberately attempts to reduce his opponents’ doctrines to nothing more than a series of fleeting, scattered and ambiguous figurative references, while maintaining that his own doctrine is founded solely on the most rational, explicit and consistent interpretation available. The Unitarians, he writes to long-term antagonist Samuel Horsley, claim ‘that the *general tenor, and plain literal sense of Scripture* is in our favour; that they are only *particular texts*, and those ill-understood, that you avail yourselves of’. Passages of scripture do not require twisting or altering in order to make them ‘speak the language’ of Unitarianism, he writes to Price; complete divine unity is the ‘only sense that can be put upon them without torture’. Priestley accounts for his emphasis on the ‘leading doctrines’ of scripture in a particularly illuminating passage in the *Corruptions*. Recalling his work on plenary inspiration and on the evidences of Christianity, Priestley insists that the facts of Christian history may be regarded separately from the mere words in which they happen to have been recorded. It is the general sense of scripture, the leading facts or the ‘bare face of history’, and not the words in which it is described, upon which our faith in Christ is to be based:

Now the principal design of the life, as well as the death of Christ, seems to be not so much what we may expect to find in any particular texts, or single passages of the evangelists, or other writers of the New Testament, as what is suggested by a view of the history itself, what may be called the *language of the naked facts*, and what cannot but be understood wherever they are known. What has been written by Christians may assist us to conceive more accurately concerning some particulars relating to Christianity, but that must be of more importance, which does not require to be written, what the facts themselves necessarily speak, without any interpretation. Let us, therefore, examine what it is that may be clearly deduced from the history, and how much of Christianity could but have

²³⁷Priestley, *Remission*, in particular pp.v-ix, p.17 and pp.89-94. Priestley, *Familiar Illustration*, 2, p.432 and pp.472-480. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, p.97-111. Priestley, “Life and Death”, 7, pp.221-222 and p.259. Priestley, *Serious and Candid*, 2, p.401 and p.409.

been known, if nothing had been written, provided a general idea of the life and death of Christ could have been transmitted to us in any other way.²³⁸

Priestley's recurring appeal to naked facts, the bare truth, and the general tenor of scripture acts to minimise the fallible nature of scriptural language and is perhaps the origin of his repeated allusions to figurative language as a covering, a dress or a disguise. It is not about what has been written down, Priestley insists, it is about the essential historical facts of the life of Christ that the scriptures happen to have recorded. A group of Christians, stranded on a remote island, without a bible between them, would soon forget the particulars of the epistles and the exact wording of scriptural passages. They would, however, indelibly remember Christ's moral lesson and the truth of his resurrection. In order to consolidate his own doctrinal position Priestley implies that generating general principles from scriptural passages transcends the problems of the linguistic medium in which they are couched. This is a deliberate and powerful technique that serves to reinforce his dichotomy between reason and prejudice and between rationality and orthodoxy. It is a means by which Priestley aligns his own ideas with all that is stable, uniform, rational and objective about truth, assigning his opponents' opinions to the vagaries and ambiguities of scriptural language.²³⁹

Over the course of his life Priestley devoted himself to the examination of scriptural language and developed increasingly sophisticated exegetical methods. Alongside his progressively complex and detailed appeals to the general tenor of scripture, Priestley cultivated the historical approach to biblical criticism for which he would become well known. We have seen that Priestley's adversary Edward Burn insisted that the scriptures be interpreted solely in light of their internal consistency. Priestley profoundly disagreed. He argued instead that the most useful and accurate means to determine the meaning of a scriptural passage is to establish the way in which it was first received. He puts this succinctly in his *Defences of Unitarianism*: 'the proper object of my work is to ascertain what must have been the sense of the books of Scripture, from the sense in which they were actually understood by those for whose use they were composed'. Priestley was confident that examination of the historical circumstances in which the books of the bible were produced would uncover the 'pristine' doctrine of the very first

²³⁸ Priestley, *Defences*, 18, p.239 and p.456. Priestley, *Early Opinions*, 6, p.13. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, pp.100-106. Priestley, "Life and Death", 7, pp.205-206.

²³⁹ Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, pp.100-106. Priestley, "Life and Death", 7, pp.205-206.

Christians and establish a guide to an otherwise complex and ambiguous text. As with his work on the general tenor of scripture and his analysis of the evidences of revelation, Priestley cast bare historical fact as a firm foundation upon which to base his Socinian system. He pitted sound historical truth against the fallibilities of language and aimed to reduce the difficulties surrounding the proper interpretation of scriptural words by supplying a reliable external source. 'Christians are not agreed in the interpretation of *scripture language*: but as all men are agreed with respect to the nature of *historical evidence*, I thought that we might perhaps better determine by history what was the faith of Christians in early times'.²⁴⁰

Priestley did not only attempt to reconstruct the earliest principles of Christianity in order to determine the true nature of revelation. Running parallel to this project, Priestley also attempted to trace the history of the development of those doctrines he regarded as orthodox departures from the truth. It will be seen, writes Priestley in the preface to the *Corruptions*, 'that every thing which I deem to be a *corruption of Christianity* has been a departure from the original scheme, or an *innovation*'. He continues:

It will also be seen that I have generally been able to trace every such corruption to its proper source, and to shew what circumstances in the state of things, and especially prevailing opinions and prejudices, made the alteration, in doctrine or practice, sufficiently natural, and the introduction and establishment of it easy. And if I have succeeded in this investigation, this *historical method* will be found to be one of the most satisfactory modes of argumentation, in order to prove that what I object to is really a corruption of genuine Christianity, and no part of the original scheme.

Priestley hoped to reveal that doctrines such as the Trinity, the atonement and original sin were not part of an original divine communication but were instead notions imported from foreign sources that served to complicate and augment the nature of the original and pristine truth. As previously noted in this chapter, Priestley held truth to be timeless and unchanging while he frequently aligned falsehood with changeable passion and passing fancy. In his theological texts he aimed to extricate divine and eternal truth from human error by revealing falsehood to be temporal, culturally conditioned and with identifiable historical beginnings.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Priestley, *Defences*, 18, p.417 and, *Defences*, 19, p.56.

²⁴¹ Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, p.8. Canovan, "Irony of History", pp.17-19.

According to Priestley, the misreading of scripture occurs when ideas are removed from their original cultural and historical contexts. The corrupt doctrines of orthodox Roman Catholicism, Calvinism and Anglicanism may appear to be great departures from the ‘simplicity and truth’ of primitive Christianity and it may seem surprising that this most pure and rational of religions could have become so ‘grossly perverted’. However, as Priestley writes in his *History of the Christian Church*, ‘the history of the gradual deviation makes every step in the process perfectly intelligible’. As we saw in Chapter Four, Priestley’s notion that all ideas have an adequate and explicable cause forms an integral part of his argument in favour of revelation. So, too, does it structure his work on the corruptions of Christianity. ‘An opinion, and especially an opinion adopted by great numbers of mankind, is to be considered as any other *fact in history*, for it cannot be produced without an *adequate cause*, and is therefore a proper object of philosophical inquiry’. Priestley has been celebrated for his ‘pronounced historical sensibilities’ and he is deserving of such high praise. In order to separate the strands of revelation from the tangled mess of orthodoxy, Priestley became adept at identifying subtle alterations in ideas and words in parallel to shifts in historical circumstances and in relation to specific cultural pressures. As he writes of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the best we can do is to trace corruptions ‘accounting for them as well as we can, and assigning reasons for the present prevailing opinions’.²⁴²

It is useful to look at Priestley’s historical picture of the gradual growth of corrupt theological doctrine alongside his progressive theory of language. We saw in Chapter Two that Priestley’s linguistic theory characterised language as a human development that grows increasingly complex over time and is fundamentally tied to specific social and cultural situations. We compared this to the a-temporal and static picture of language that emerges when it is regarded as the expression of innate human reason or the eternal human soul. Priestley’s theology and his linguistic theory are intimately related and this is nowhere more evident than in his many discussions of the highly figurative nature of scriptural language. In the *Lectures on Language and Grammar*

²⁴² Priestley, *General History*, 10, p.532. Priestley, *Lord’s Supper*, 21, p.252. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, p.15. M. Fitzpatrick, “In the Glass of History”: The Nature and Purpose of Historical Knowledge in the Thought of Joseph Priestley”, *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 17, (1998), p.178. J. J. Hoecker, “Joseph Priestley as an Historian and the Idea of Progress”, *The Price-Priestley Newsletter*, 3, (1979), p.29. A. Kennedy, “Historical Perspectives in the Mind of Joseph Priestley, in Rivers and Wykes (eds.), *Joseph Priestley*, pp.190-192. Brooke, in Schwartz and McEvoy (eds.), *Perfection*, p.37. Canovan, “Irony of History”, pp.17-19.

Priestley notes that figurative expressions are particularly liable to shift and alter meaning over time. Used first to illustrate analogies and to label, or to lead us in the investigation of truth, their primary function may be gradually forgotten. Priestley talks of a slow process whereby figurative comparisons become ‘evanescent’, we conflate the two functions of language, figures collapse into literalism and the partial analogies they previously communicated become completely associated ideas. In Priestley’s theory, figures become the scaffolding used to construct general propositions and as such are only useful while the building process is underway; like outgrown skins, they are discarded as we ascend nature’s analogies and expand our comprehension.

In the introduction to *Remission*, Priestley revisits the problem of evanescence and describes the process with clarity when he succinctly charts the collapse of figures into literalism. In particular he highlights that analogies are compounded or conjoined ideas that may be mistaken for simple ideas if their component parts become perfectly identified over time.

Such is the nature both of our ideas and words, and such the power of association, that what was at first evidently compounded or figurative, by frequent use ceases to be conceived to be so: compound ideas and expressions in time pass for simple ones, till, after a vigorous scrutiny, their derivation be seen and they appear to be factitious. In like manner, it is very possible to call one thing by the name of another by way of allusion only, till at last, the allusion be forgotten, and the nature of the thing itself be mistaken.

We have seen that Priestley’s theological work was based on the notion that doctrinal error arises from the literal reading of figurative language. We are now in a position to see that this misreading of figures does not occur as a one-off phenomenon but as a gradual historical process. Orthodox mistakes are perpetuated every time a modern reader reads a figurative expression literally, and the corruption of Christianity is based on a gradual process of forgetting figures as they become evanescent. As he identified this problem, so he instructed us of the remedy. ‘Vigorous scrutiny’ is required. Language is a repository of knowledge, as we learn from his linguistic texts and the lectures on history. The comparisons our ancestors chose to make are fossilised in our language as evanescent metaphors. If we can uncover these and see that they are ‘factitious’, it will tell us something about the analogies they chose to draw and the way in which they saw the world. In essence this is Priestley’s historical task in the

Corruptions and in his other theological texts, and it is the mechanism that drives his disavowal of orthodox doctrines as historical innovations.²⁴³

Priestley's historical method is most clearly illustrated by once more taking up his treatment of the doctrine of atonement:

The doctrine of *atonement*, or of the necessity of *satisfaction* being made to the justice of God by the death of Christ, in order to his remitting the sins of men, arose from an abuse of the figurative language of Scripture...But for several centuries these figurative expressions were understood and applied in a manner very different from what they now are.

The opinions of the earliest Christians are our best guide to determining the meaning of scripture, Priestley tells us. Nowhere in the bible is the principle of atonement expounded and nowhere does Jesus refer to his death as a satisfaction for human sin. There is nothing in the writings of the earliest Christians or the Apostolical Fathers that suggests that they thought Christ's death was necessary for the justification of fallen humanity. Therefore the descriptions of Jesus as a 'sacrifice' must have been intended as a figurative allusion and ought to be read as such today. The analogy chosen would have been recognised by the Jews as a meaningful comparison, serving to unite the Old and New Testaments by conjoining ideas of Christ's death to the ancient and familiar practice of blood-sacrifice for ceremonial uncleanness. As an analogy it reveals something about the way in which the Hebrew people understood the crucifixion and is tightly bound to their cultural practices. However, Priestley writes, over the following centuries the idea of God's natural equity was gradually debased, as the just and beautiful figures used to illustrate Christ's death lost their meaning in new historical circumstances and were recast as literal descriptions of the remittance of sin. The atonement is thus 'a departure from the primitive and genuine doctrine of Christianity'.²⁴⁴

Priestley explains that we can trace the steps of this departure from early doctrine, and that this tale of corruption is a story of creeping evanescence. 'When any mode of speech may be understood either in a *literal* or in a *figurative* sense, there must be some

²⁴³ Priestley, *Remission*, p.vii.

²⁴⁴ Priestley, *Serious and Candid*, 2, pp.409-410. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, pp.91-155. Priestley, "Life and Death", 7, pp.295-296.

difficulty in ascertaining the real meaning...it is the same thing as if the word was properly ambiguous'. According to Priestley, in the centuries before the death of Augustine, many thinkers forgot or altered the meaning of figurative allusions to Christ's sacrifice. Theologians such as Origen suggested that sinful humanity were redeemed to God by the ransom of his son. In these early instances of 'too literal interpretation of the figurative language of scripture' the sin-sacrifice was thought to have been paid to the Devil. Long after the time of Augustine, we see another shift in ideas. The ransom paid by the blood of Christ was now regarded as made to God himself. However, obscurity reigned and thinkers applied this principle inconsistently. Scripture was made to speak both of atonement and of free mercy as the language wavered uncertainly between the figurative and the literal. The atonement is a modern innovation, Priestley insists. It was not until Luther that it was 'reduced to a regular system, grounded on certain principles', and today, 'the only hold it has on the minds of many Protestants, is by means of...a literal interpretation of single texts of Scripture'.²⁴⁵

Priestley's most controversial application of his historical method and his most complex and detailed corruption narrative is that of the gradual debasement of divine unity in favour of the Trinitarian doctrine. According to Priestley there is substantial historical evidence that the early church was Unitarian and this is reason enough to regulate our reading of scripture:

It will be an unanswerable argument, *a priori*, against any particular doctrine being contained in the Scriptures, that it was never understood to be so by those persons for whose immediate use the Scriptures were written, and who must have been much better qualified to understand them, in that respect at least, than we can pretend to be at this day.

Priestley's story begins not with words, but with silence. The lack of Trinitarian language within scripture, the silence of John the Baptist, Christ, and the Apostles on this important matter, the absence of any Jewish writers inveighing in opposition to the principle: these are all indications that the early church was Unitarian. When groups of people expound heresies they are much talked of, 'and thence will arise the necessity of giving them some name'. The early Unitarians remained unlabelled and unnamed; theirs was therefore the majority opinion. However, Priestley explains, it happened very

²⁴⁵Priestley, *Serious and Candid*, 2, pp.409-410. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, pp.91-155.

quickly that these pure and primitive doctrines became corrupted and opinions departed from the truth. False notions of God have concrete human causes and arise from prejudice, vanity and pride. Gentile believers struggled with the ‘stumbling-block’ of a suffering saviour and could not celebrate a crucified malefactor as their God. In order to exalt the personal dignity of Christ, Gnostic philosophers imported philosophical ideas into Christianity and entwined their false doctrines with the truth. Believing in the existence of immaterial intelligent emanations from the divine mind they held that a high ranking soul had descended into human flesh and animated the body of Jesus. Some Gnostics went a step further and, holding matter to be the source of all evil, maintained that Christ had a body in appearance only and claimed he had suffered nothing during his tortuous death. ‘Their object was to do honour to Christ, as the most illustrious messenger of God.’²⁴⁶

The Gnostics were condemned as heretics, Priestley explains, but the corruption of primitive Unitarianism was not easily halted. Familiar with Greek philosophy, the gentile Christians gradually augmented pure Christian doctrine with the introduction of Platonic principles. The ‘philosophising Christians’ had learnt from Plato that there are three principles in nature: God, his ‘logos’, and the ‘soul of the world’. Some Jews had already embraced these ideas and suggested that the logos was an emanation from the divine mind, the cause of all incidents in the Old Testament when God speaks to man and the means by which God created the world. Familiar with these ideas, the Christian philosophers held that the logos, the image of God and his only begotten son, was united with the man Jesus Christ. The Platonists had probably used the term ‘logos’ figuratively, Priestley explains. However, the Christians expounded a Platonism ‘stripped of all figures’. The logos, previously a ‘mere figure of speech’, became a ‘substantial *second God*’. According to Priestley this is a story of gradual evanescence. John had written of the ‘logos’ in his gospel, but his reference gradually collapsed into literalism. While he had referred figuratively to a power of God ‘afterwards, that very attribute was personified in a different manner, and not as a figure of speech, and consequently his language was made to convey a very different meaning from that which he affixed to it’. As with the doctrine of the atonement, for many years opinions

²⁴⁶ Priestley, *Serious and Candid*, 2, p.405. Priestley, *General History*, 8, pp.94-99 and pp.161-165. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, pp.13-23. Priestley, *Early Opinions*, 6, pp.3-151. The whole of Book III in *Early Opinions* is devoted to this subject. It is summarised pp.472-473 and re-stated in *Early Opinions*, 7, p.3, pp.175-181 and pp.187-194

were inconsistent and language wavered between the figurative and the literal. Debates and controversies raged as to the exact nature and substance of Christ. It was not until after the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 that the Trinity was properly established, the equal divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was maintained, and the figurative use of the word 'logos' was forgotten by all but a handful of simple, unlearned Unitarians who resisted the unnecessary philosophising of their social superiors.²⁴⁷

Priestley's nuanced appreciation that historical contexts are also linguistic contexts, and that the history of an idea is also the history of a word, deserves considerably more attention than it has yet received. In atomistic terms Priestley tells us that words are labels for ideas and that the ideas they stand for can alter drastically over time. Once corrupt principles are formed, he writes in *Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*, the language of scripture can be accommodated to them. However, careful attention to this problem will 'bring us back to the original use of the words, and to the ideas originally annexed to them'. A constant theme in Priestley's theological texts is that once words are made to express an irrational doctrine they become meaningless. One cannot express a logical impossibility, therefore words employed to describe a Triune God are empty and communicate nothing. For instance, the terms settled in debates about the substance and nature of Christ, writes Priestley, 'were applied to a subject concerning which men could not pretend to have any ideas, they were no more than mere *sounds*'. Any terms used to express the manner of the union of Christ and God, he adds elsewhere, 'must be equally destitute of ideas'. For Priestley the 'plain sense' of scripture is sometimes complex and figurative but it is also rational and straightforward. The words of scripture may be ambiguous and hard to understand but the ideas they are intended to express are pure, simple and timeless truths. Priestley's theological project to trace the collapse of figures into literalism may therefore be regarded as driven by the intention to restore original meanings to scriptural language, to restore rationality to language itself, and in doing so to reinstate the Unitarian creed to its rightful place in Christianity.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Priestley, *Serious and Candid*, 2, p.404-407. Priestley, *Corruptions*, 5, p.19, and is summarised pp.13-90. Priestley, *Early Opinions*, 6, pp.201-204 and in *Early Opinions*, 7, pp.175-181.

²⁴⁸ Priestley, *Early Opinions*, 6, p.22. A similar statement can be found in "Socinian Hypothesis", 7, p.459. Priestley, *Defences*, 18, p.93. Priestley, *General History*, 8, p.535. Priestley, *Early Opinions*, 6, pp.333-337.

Conclusion

A Comet in the System

We are to understand, no doubt, that he believed The Resurrection of Jesus, some of his Miracles. His Inspiration, but in what degree? He did not believe in the Inspiration of the Writings that contain his History. Yet he believed as much as he pleased in the writings of Daniel and John. This great, excellent, and extraordinary Man, whom I sincerely loved, esteemed and respected, was really a Phenomenon; a Comet in the System...²⁴⁹

Priestley's unique theological project, his reputation as a political radical, and his controversial work on the nature of matter, made for an explosive combination. From the 1770s Priestley engaged in a series of debates stridently defending his Socinian theology, liberal political philosophy and materialist metaphysics against critics of any stripe. He often came in for heated and vitriolic attack. Equating religious heterodoxy with radicalism, many commentators condemned him as a dangerous and seditious heretic. For instance, Priestley tells us of an anonymous answer to *Serious and Candid* that accused him of 'hypocrisy', 'blasphemy', and 'low pitiful cunning', while reactions to the *Corruptions* were even more extreme. Of particular interest here are those opponents who directed their criticism towards Priestley's linguistic methods and attempted to reclaim reason and scriptural language for their own cause. One anonymous detractor accused Priestley of a 'childish playing upon words', and of twisting and torturing scripture in order to fit his meaning. Another unreserved critic, Edward Sheppard, condemned Priestley's unnecessary emphasis on figurative language: 'like other false reasoners on scripture premises, you fly to figure and metaphor'. Biblical lexicographer, John Parkhurst, marshalled numerous scriptural passages in order to argue that by the 'natural use of words' Jesus Christ is God, while the Methodist and medic William Hey concluded that if the scriptures do not speak of Christ's divinity, 'words can convey no meaning, but upon all language rests impenetrable darkness and confusion.'²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ John Adams, *Letter to Jefferson*, describing Priestley, quoted by Hoecker, "Reification", p.44.

²⁵⁰ Priestley, *Letters and Queries*, 21, p.6. Believer of the Gospel, *An answer to the Appeal to serious and candid professors of Christianity. Extracted from several epistles to a young lady. Containing A plenary Refutation of all the Books that ever were or ever will be wrote on that Subject*, (Dublin, 1772), pp.11-12 and p.16. E. Sheppard, *A letter to Dr. Priestley: occasioned by his History of the corruptions of Christianity; wherein his Socinian errors are fully confuted, by arguments drawn from the Holy Scriptures*. (Bath, 1783), p.30. W. Hey, *A short defence of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ; with some remarks upon a late Appeal to the serious and candid professors of Christianity*. The second edition. To which is added, a supplement, *Containing Observations upon a late Familiar Illustration of certain*

Priestley was repeatedly charged with deliberately misrepresenting scriptural passages, peddling a thinly-veiled atheism and attempting to subvert society. Rather aptly it was the literal reading of a miscalculated metaphor that led to Priestley being nicknamed ‘Gunpowder Joe’ and helped to ignite popular opinion against him. The ill-founded arguments of the establishment are, Priestley suggested, ‘assisting me in the proper disposal of those grains of gunpowder, which have been some time accumulating...and which will certainly blow it up at length’. His gunpowder consisted of nothing but arguments, but, as Priestley was well aware, figures may become evanescent and, when set free from their original contexts may be given dangerous and unintended meanings. In July 1791 Priestley’s Birmingham home, his manuscripts and his ‘philosophical instruments’ were destroyed by a ‘Church and King’ mob probably urged on by local Anglican magistrates to exterminate treasonous heresy and to douse Priestley’s explosive opinions.²⁵¹

Caricatures typecast Priestley as a trouble-maker, and pamphlets blamed him for the outburst of violence in Birmingham, but these representations seem far removed from the man known to his friends and family. Far from seeing the atheist who perverted scripture for his own ends, those who knew him appreciated Priestley’s candour and deeply-held religious beliefs. When his enemies met him in person, they were disarmed by his mild and friendly manner. Reading Priestley’s exhaustive theological work leaves one in little doubt of his sincerity and his earnest hope that his labour uncovering the corruptions of Christianity would lead to conversion, a moral and spiritual

Passages of Scripture, (Oxford, 1772), p.11. J. Parkhurst, *The divinity and pre-existence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, demonstrated from scripture; in answer to the first section of Dr. Priestley's introduction to his History of early opinions concerning Jesus Christ: Together with Strictures on some other Parts of that Work; and a Postscript, Relative to a late Publication of Mr: Gilbert Wakefield*, (London, 1787), p.127. For portrayals of Priestley see R Clay, “Riotous Images: Representations of Joseph Priestley in British prints during the French Revolution”, *History of Education*, 37, 4, (2008) and M. Fitzpatrick, “Priestley Caricatured”, in Schwartz and McEvoy (eds.), *Perfection*. Schofield, *Enlightenment*, Ch. VIII and *Enlightened*, Ch. XI for reactions to these texts in detail. Schofield describes Priestley’s acquaintance with Hey in Leeds, *Enlightenment*, pp.261-262.

²⁵¹ Priestley’s gunpowder reference is from his preface to J. Priestley, *Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn, Of St Mary’s Chapel, Birmingham, In answer to his Letters on the Infallibility of the Apostolical Testimony concerning the Person of Christ*, (Birmingham, 1790), Works 2, p.311. Schofield’s work includes a small number of anecdotes attesting to Priestley’s friendly manner. Including *Enlightened*, p.181. *Enlightenment*, p.7. Schofield explains how Priestley’s metaphor gained attention when it was circulated around Parliament before the Test and Corporation Repeal Debate, *Enlightenment*, p.273 and explains the build up to the riots in that chapter. Clay, on Priestley as Gunpowder Joe, quotes a different extract referring to gunpowder, “Riotous Images”, pp.589-590. See also Brooke, in Schwartz and McEvoy (eds.), *Perfection*, p.23.

reformation, and contribute to the ultimate perfection of society. In print Priestley was also a private and reserved character; his memoirs lack any real emotional exploration and his rational religion has been called a cold ‘Socinian moonlight’. On rare occasions, however, Priestley communicates the depth of his religious faith with uncharacteristic warmth:

I wish it were possible for me to convey to my philosophical unbelieving friends, the feeling I have of the value of Christianity, a value which is enhanced by the experience of a pretty long and various life, in which Christian principles have been of the most substantial use to me, both in prosperity and adversity; and as they have supported me through life, they will, I doubt not, afford consolation in the hour of death. But it is not in the power of language to express all that I feel on this subject. Such complex feelings as I wish to communicate, have been formed by associations that have been accumulating in a long series of events and reflections; in reading, thinking, and conversation, &c.; so that a man must have lived in a great measure as I have lived, and consequently felt what I have felt, before he can be impressed as I am, with the language appropriated to religion, and especially the language of the Scriptures. What impresses me with the deepest reverence, would be heard by many with indifference or contempt.

A notable expression of his faith, this passage from *Infidelity* also tells us much about Priestley’s understanding of language. Words are heaped with personal associations, he suggests; the words we use mean something only to us, as they label complex congeries of ideas formed by our unique life experiences. Subtle communication is hard, meanings easily slip away and arbitrary signs may be conscripted to label different ideas.²⁵²

However, Priestley also believed that scriptural language tells only one story; its truth is uniform and timeless. The ‘indifference and contempt’ with which others read scriptural language is thus borne of prejudice and misinformation, as all who use their reason will see through its linguistic ambiguities and uncover its true principles. It is the job of the unbiased to uncover the true meaning of revelation and reclaim the original language of the biblical texts. This is the basis of Priestley’s exegetical method, and from his inflexible and sometimes dogmatic conception of truth emerges a subtle and nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural and personal meanings expressed in language. For his innovative work on theology and linguistics and his brave historical approach to

²⁵² Priestley, *Infidelity*, Works 17, p.5. ‘Socinian Moonlight’ is Basil Willey’s phrase taken from a poem by Coleridge in B. Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background, Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period*, (Harmondsworth, 1962), p.162.

scriptural language Priestley deserves a figurative analogy of his own, a conjunction of ideas that expands our comprehension and illuminates his qualities as a thinker whose independent mind charted a singular course and unsettled the intellectual universe of his contemporaries. John Adam's words do him justice: Priestley really was 'a comet in the system'.

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