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Studies in the History of Ethics

Richard Price's Contextualist Rationalism

Susan Purviance (University of Toledo)

The British Moralists of the Eighteenth Century have been divided into rationalists and empiricists on the question of how moral judgments are formed. But this is too simple: there are various sorts of rationalism proposed, as well as Moral Sentimentalists, who believe in some kind of moral sense of approval, and welfarist empiricists, who focus on happiness promotion. None thought that the views of another cast into doubt the existence of moral truth. Their disputes about moral principles evidenced an ability to conduct debates across large divides, their dialoguing with those in the opposite camp a good indication of their hope of convergence on truth. So too, educated persons who followed their debates invoking moral abstractions like "reason" and "happiness" did not doubt that we have well-formed understandings that support moral judgment. And so it is with many of us: theorists do not agree upon the principles, if any, that account for what the competent moral evaluator is doing when producing a sensitive moral judgment. But still, we are able to make competent moral judgments, and to recognize such judgments by others.

But how should one interpret this characteristic confidence in moral judgment despite disagreement on principles? In light of the range of our present views on what moral truth might be, where it might be situated, or even whether it makes sense to posit such a thing, this

supposing that there is such a competence seems risky. I will not attempt a general overview of *all* the possible ways of situating this assumption of competence in contemporary moral philosophy. But I will suggest two current interpretations that I find plausible. First of all, competence in moral judgment is consistent with Moral Particularism. Moral Particularism is the view that what is morally important to judgment is the particular arrangement of features in an instance of moral action. Competence in moral judgment, then, involves being able to take in this particular arrangement and apply moral categories to it in a competent way. Second, competence in moral judgment is consistent with Virtue Contextualism. Virtue Contextualism is the view that what counts as virtuous conduct cannot be expressed solely by general traits of disposition to act. Such general traits of disposition to act, or virtues, require the specification of a social context. Competence in moral judgment thus involves being able to take in the general traits as they are embedded in a particular social context.¹

Yet Moral Particularism and Virtue Contextualism can be situated in a further concern, that of the generality or specificity of moral truth, or, if you prefer, the generality or specificity of truth-aptness. Both views stand in opposition to the claim that moral truths are first and foremost general truths that are independent of the individual and his/her social context. Moral Particularism as regards truth, then, is the view that moral truths are first and foremost particular and not a matter of general categories. Virtue Contextualism as regards truth is the view that moral truths about virtues and vices cannot be grasped outside of the practice context that makes those traits happiness-aptitudes or properly obligatory.

It is possible to detect tendencies toward one or other of these positions not just among contemporary philosophers who explicitly understand the difference and identify their stand, but

also in the earlier debates. At times they even explicitly endorse the claims of one or both current views. That, with reference to Richard Price, is what this paper is about. My concern is with how Richard Price adds to this discussion. I shall argue that Price is not a moral generalist, at least not entirely. Price and his colleagues framed their debates in terms of moral principles, but they did not always intend them as supreme principles of justification. Sometimes it is not easy to decide what each of them took moral principles to be. The place they gave them in their general view of ethical justification is not always clear. Such a claim may seem odd, given that so much of the debate among the British Moralists concerns reason versus sentiment as a source of moral distinctions. I think that one would expect to see moral generalism supported by all rationalists, since they hold that reason alone is the source of moral distinctions. And here indeed we do see extreme principlism in the rationalist William Wollaston, a theorist of universal rightness as a moral fitness of actions to circumstances. But we also see rigid moral generalism in Jeremy Bentham, the welfarist empiricist who rejects feeling as a source of moral justification.²

Even before the influence of Bernard Williams, Hutcheson and Price (and others) debated principles of justification without fear that their lack of agreement would somehow undermine confidence in the practice of moral judgment. Although both the rationalists and sentimentalists have been accused of deductivism in their views, sentimentalists would seem to be more liable to repudiate precepts than rationalists. It then becomes noteworthy and even surprising to see Price evade, and then argue against, a generalist account of moral truth and the deductive means of obtaining it. For this reason, it is Price's rather than Hutcheson's repudiation of deductivism that requires special attention. Since Hutcheson sets the stage for Price's account of reason and sentiment, and Hutcheson is the first to fight the demon of deductivist, we shall take a look at him. Proceeding this way clarifies Price's role in the discussion concerning the grounds of moral

judgement; it shows how Price assesses views that are in conflict with his own. Price's theory is that reason guides moral action through the concept of moral duty, and since Price relies upon contextual features determining moral duty, we need a new characterization of Price's theory that resets the parameters for the moral rationalist project. Let it be said then that Price offers a form of Contextualist Rationalism. I bring forward the contextualism from a number of examples taken from Price's analysis of the right of complaint and rebellion on the part of the American colonists. Finally in this paper I consider the benefits of a socially and developmentally sensitive moral epistemology for such rationalists.

A Moral Sentimentalist Deductivism: Hutcheson

Francis Hutcheson is a moral sentimentalist who argues for knowledge via a moral sense which approves benevolent affection. He advances moral philosophy in a number of ways: first, by his insistence on a distinction between exciting reasons and justifying reasons as a means to distinguish the theoretical goals of explanation and justification in ethics; second, by his arguments to establish that multiple affections excite action; and finally by his defense of the view that the approval a moral sense alone morally justifies acting from such exciting reasons. Hutcheson was driven to adopt this distinction as a means to attack psychological egoism as factually incorrect, and conclude that ethical egoism does not provide the ethical justification for action. For Hutcheson the naturalist, amoralism is a live possibility. One might know via the moral sense that the motive of benevolence is what is morally approved, and by the standard of this sentiment actions motivated by it are morally praiseworthy, and yet, since the motive of benevolence might be lacking in us not just as individuals but as a general feature of human nature, one may have no motive to perform them. Yet the unlikeliness of this strikes him: there

must be something we can normally build upon to motivate those actions which can be morally approved. Such actual approvals of actual other-directed motives play this role. These right sentiments and good motivations that we find commonly in our nature are around to do the job. Both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson say that humans approve of other-directed sentiments which tend toward utility or the general welfare. Character is the primal moral trait, not utility, and the split between the rationalists is over sentiment versus reason as the detector of moral value.

Would this mean that Hutcheson should adopt Virtue Contextualism as Price adopts Contextualist Rationalism? Perhaps he should have, but he did not. He maintained marked tendencies towards generalism. At the start Hutcheson offered a deductivist account of moral virtue. Virtue was of a ratio of virtuous sentiment which could be derived from the tendency of the action and its "motion", or motive force. In "The Manner of Computing the Morality of Action" (*An Inquiry Into Beauty and Virtue*, 1725, Treatise II Section III. xi-xii) Hutcheson introduced his axioms:

1. The moral importance of any agent, or the quantity of public good produced by him, is in a compound ratio of his benevolence and abilities: or (by substituting the initial letters for the words, as M=moment of good, and F =moment of evil) $M = B \times A$.

They are deployed to formalize the relationship of properties in the actions and in the agent's character:

[our looking] upon self-love as another force, sometimes conspiring with benevolence when the good action is any way difficult or painful in the performance, or detrimental in its consequences to the agent. In the former case, $M = (B + S) \times A = BA + SA$; and

therefore $BA = M - SA = M - I$, and $B = [M \text{ minus } I \text{ over } A]$. In the latter case, $M = (B - S) \times A = BA - SA$; therefore $BA = M + SA = M + I$, and $B = [M \text{ plus } I \text{ over } A]$. (*Inquiry, Treatise II* pp.128-129)

In response to Thomas Reid's derision, Hutcheson retracted a 'calculus of virtue'. Writing candidly in the preface to the Fourth Edition of the *Inquiry* (1738) he says "... some mathematical expressions are left out, which, upon second thoughts, appear'd useless, and were disagreeable to some readers." (p.XXI) He removed the computational canon from the Second Edition onward, showing how rapidly he had been persuaded to retract it.

Price on Moral Truth: Neither Natural nor General

So much for Moral Sentimentalist deductivism. Does Price, a rationalist, evade this pitfall of formalism in ethics? Philosophers before him often had Reason allied with mathematical perfection and practiced a reduction of the Good to handy moral axioms of identity: A equals A, treating A as non-A is lying, and all forms of moral wrongdoing involve treating A as non-A. Price does have the benefit of writing after Hutcheson; let's see how he takes advantage of it.

In *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1757)³ Price asserts

It is the intellect that examines and compares the presented forms, that rises above the individuals to universal and abstract ideas, and thus looks downward upon objects, takes in at one view an infinity of particulars, and is capable of discovering general truths.

(*Principal Questions*, 19-20)

Should this passage make one uneasy? Not at all, since Price is actually describing theoretical reason in its gathering of truths about objects.⁴ The intellect is concerned with "ideas in general". This passage is clearly not about the practice of moral reasoning, since examples of ideas of 'solidity' and 'substance' follow, not ideas of duty. Price concludes this section by reminding the reader that the source of the ideas of objects and their nature, the understanding, is quite different from "the power of reasoning, and ought, by no means, to be confounded with it" (*Principal Questions*, 40). Even the emphasis on reasoning rather than reason helps to mark a difference between the British rationalism, and, say, Continental rationalism in its separate development.

So is moral judgment equally concerned with ideas in general? Is moral judgment a function of intellect alone? Is understanding moral duty different from the rational practice of coming to know what duty one has? Apparently so: the role of the understanding is to determine whatever 'nature' moral duty has. Duty will be *understood* rather than *felt*. Arriving at that understanding may well involve the practice of reasoning. So the question is: what role does reasoning have in the agent's coming to know her moral duty? And under what concept of duty is any particular action known?

First, Price's notion of duty is that of an eternal immutable object not given by sentiment. It is well established that Price held that morality was eternal and immutable. So far as they express the "real characters" of actions, right and wrong are fixed, and this neither by will nor by sentiment (*Principal Questions*, 128). In this he rejects theological voluntarism, the dependence of rightness upon God's will. This would seem to make principles of rationality as such all the more important. But to claim that the essence of duty is immutable is not to claim that the means

by which the actual duty is known involves mere abstraction or consistency with a single rule. Notwithstanding the immutable natures of particular acts, actions and policies might not be right, or wrong, in the same way or in each context. Price chooses not to endorse some one particular principle or ground of right action. Instead he concludes that *none* of the principles of virtuous conduct so far offered by anyone succeeds in capturing the variety of forms of goodness. For example, he rejects Wollaston's derivation of a law of truthfulness as the root of all moral propriety: the evil of ingratitude and cruelty is not the same with that of denying truth, or affirming a lie:

Nor can the *formal ratio and notion* of it (as Wollaston speaks) be justly said to consist in this; because there may be no intention to deny any thing true, nor to produce an assent to any thing false. Ingratitude and cruelty would be wrong, though there were no rational creatures in the world besides the agent, and though he could have no design to declare a falsehood. (*Principal Questions*, 126)

Thus reflection on our moral judgments might reveal that cruelty to animals would still be wrong whether other human beings and any speech with other people existed or not, because the character of cruelty is in the intent to cause suffering.

As yet one does not see much distance between standard moral rationalism and Price's view, but consider the following. In a passage where he had just rejected reductionism in theories of motivation, he goes on to reject reductionism in theories of justification.

In like manner, to assert that our approbation of *beneficence* is to be resolved into our approbation of *veracity*, or that the whole of morality consists in signifying and denying

truth, would not be much more reasonable than the contrary assertion, that our approbation of veracity and all that is denominated virtue, is resolvable into the approbation of beneficence. But why must there be in the human mind approbation only of one sort of actions? Why must all moral good be reduced to one species of it, and kind affections, with the actions flowing from them, be represented, as alone capable of appearing to our moral faculty *virtuous*? (*Principal Questions*, 137)

Virtue for Price is multiple in intent and multiple in relations with others, whether divine, animal, or human. Explaining virtue by saying that it is conforming actions to reason "is yet less proper" than saying that it is conforming to the relations of persons and things, and "it will be no more than saying, that virtue is doing right". (*Principal Questions*, 127)

Price wants to prevent infiltration of deductivism from natural philosophy. It is rationalist deductivism as a whole that is repudiated in his work. He attacks rationalist deductivism in a theory of nature as strongly as he does deductivism in ethics. The attempt to find that *one* principle to explain everything originates in natural philosophy and is spreading to moral philosophy. When moral sentimentalism grounds all moral judgment in a moral sense, as it does with Hutcheson, it is an easy step to thinking that one moral motive imparts moral value to every action—the motive of benevolence. This model of science seeks a law in nature itself. It may be that there is that one principle, but parity between natural science and moral science must not be presupposed.

However, Price's account of motives to virtuous action makes use of both reason and affection. For him motives of reason and of affection intertwine and mutually support one another:

...the sentiments and tendencies of our intelligent nature are, in a great degree, mingled with the effects of arbitrary constitution...Rational and dispassionate benevolence would, in us, be a principle much too weak...

And this, perhaps, will afford us a good reason to distinguishing between *affections* and *passions*. The former, which we apply indiscriminately to all reasonable beings, may most properly signify the desires founded on the reasonable nature itself, and essential to it; such as self-love, benevolence, and love of truth.(*Principal Questions*, 74)

Since affections are the source of those desires are "founded on the reasonable nature itself", reason is the judge of the reasonableness of the ends to which those affections move the agent. Reason and affection are not set against each other in moral conduct.

Not just principles, but also rational intuition, count as 'reason'. Intuitionism will later include both G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross, neither of whose views have much in common except a unwillingness to reduce the varieties of right and good action. To be sure, for Price reason is the standard of justification, but it is reason in the widest sense, and not as some limited principle of reason of the sort designed to provide a criterion of right action. Principles can and do mislead us about what actions are in accord with our reasonable nature.⁵ Price's rationalism thus sets him apart from other ethical rationalists who view moral knowledge as a simple process of self-evident principles and easy inferences. In this respect, Kant follows Price. Yet Kant thinks that reason can be systematized in terms of a classification of imperatives and their relation to the will. For Price, the grounding of moral judgment in reason does little to settle the difficulties of correct judgment.

Price on Moral Truth: Not Always Easy to Know

Even if reason is the source of moral distinctions, the concepts of the right and the obligatory differ. Right actions need not be obligatory. In one case, for example, the moral value of right actions depends upon their not being a matter of strict duty. This is the case of gratitude. Here Price discusses the right act of being grateful to those who have helped us:

The nature of gratitude may vary, according to the objects or actions to which it is ascribed. All right actions are not so in precisely the same sense; and it might, with little prejudice to what is above asserted, be granted, that some things are right in such a sense as yet not to be our indispensable duty. (*Principal Questions*, 120)

Further discussion of obligatory and non-obligatory right action shows that a particular act of gratitude will become obligatory while other acts of gratitude remain dispensable. The same is said of an act of returning kindness for cruelty or indifference—sometimes obligatory, sometimes not. Why? The rules for the correct application of moral concepts do not decide the question of whether the right action is in a particular case a matter of duty, or not.

This point about imperfect duties, that there is a right way to perform them but that we are often uncertain whether we have found that right way, recalls Aristotle on the mean: it is relative to us. What is distinctively modern in Price is his sustained application of ethical rationalism to the right treatment of peoples and nations. He applies this contextualist moral philosophy to questions of political judgment, writing about the treatment of the American colonists by the British authorities. He offers a nuanced, careful analysis of who is wronged in the American rebellion, and whose place it is to take action to repair the relationship, if indeed it

can be repaired. While offering his personal advice, he remains cognizant of the need for each British citizen to make his own judgment about the American Conflict, to weigh the facts in the case. He urges fellow Britons to see the provocations from the Americans' point of view, so as to understand their actions and restore a respectful relationship. I do not need to tell you how this story ends, but you may not be aware of the extent of Price's role in it as a sort of ombudsman who sought out means of reconciliation and suggested conciliatory courses of action.⁶ In *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty, The War with America and The Debts and Finances of the Kingdom* (1776) he writes

I am hearing it continually urged—"Are they not our subjects?"—The plain answer is, they are not your subjects. The people of America are no more the subjects of the people of Britain, than the people of Yorkshire are the subjects of the people of Middlesex. They are your fellow-subjects.

"But we are taxed; and why should they not be taxed?"—You are taxed by yourselves. They insist on the same privilege.—They are taxed to support their own governments; and they help also to pay your taxes by purchasing your manufactures, and giving you a monopoly of their trade. Must they maintain two governments?...

"But they will not obey Parliament and the Laws."—Say rather, they will not obey *your* Parliament and *your* laws. Their reason is: they have no voice in your Parliament. They have no share in making your laws.—"Neither have most of us."—Then you so far want liberty; and your language is, "We are not free, why will they be free?"—But many of you have a voice in Parliament; none of them have. (*Civil Liberty*, 99-100)

In such a time of social upheaval moral judgments have to be made especially carefully. For this a general account of political obligation and a calculus of virtue are out of the question. The political situation is fluid and the rhetoric of obedience is stagnant. In Price's judgment the political relationship had deteriorated rapidly, perhaps beyond repair. The key question still remaining was whether America could be separated from Britain in a way that would allow for good relations afterwards—or whether America would ally itself with states hostile to Britain.

Even in the case of the general duty to worship, the interpretation of which was especially conducive to social strife if not worse, Price insists that the duty merely sets the bounds of a range of discretion in practice that is fairly extensive.

If it is *wrong*, obligation to forbear is implied.—If *right*, this may be true only of such *kind* of actions, as relieving the miserable, or worshipping the Deity in general; and then, it is only these *general duties* that are obligatory, which may be consistent with complete liberty and perfect indifference, in regard to the *particular action* in view. (*Principal Questions*, 122)

It is not just that Price wants to preserve a space for social context to determine choice; he insists upon complete liberty of conscience for the individual as a morally necessary right. Other duties such as duties to protect life and limb not being implicated, politically one should almost always remain indifferent to the particular form that worship takes. Like Bernard Williams, Price maintains a certain respect for the scope of personal projects and conscience. This seems to underlie his resistance to principles determining choice of action all the way down. Perhaps he detects their hegemonic tendency.

To be sure, Price does not arrive at moral particularism. When he appeals to a formal principle of impartialism, it is unclear whether he applies it only to types, or to both action types and tokens. He writes "[i]f a particular treatment of *one* nature is right; it is impossible that the same treatment of a *different* nature, or of *all* natures, should be right." This statement leaves it unclear whether he rejects the particularist dictum that what is a reason for action in one case may not be a reason for action in another case, or even a reason for action against it. But one should recall that no one had put forward such a view. It is therefore best to term his theory contextualist rather than particularist, since the general moral properties and relations of any situation in question do not settle the question of which action is morally right.

This negative conclusion, a rejection of reduction, still leaves Price with a thin positive definition of virtue and vice. Aware that others may be troubled by this, he points out that ground of virtue rests in same knowable world as that of science. It is apprehended by means of the same core faculty that knows the world of scientific truths.

‘The language we are considering them expressing neither *definitions* nor *proper criteria* of virtue, of what use is it? and what is designed by it?’—I answer, that it is evidently designed to show, that morality is *founded* in truth and reason; or that it is equally necessary and immutable, and perceived by the same power, with the natural proportions and essential differences of things. (*Principal Questions*, 128)

Science and ethics are thus parallel projects of reason and judgment. Reason and not sense judges the natural proportions of the length of two pieces of lumber is an equality—but this is an equality for some purpose to which they may be put. Reason allows one to consider how one piece spans exactly the same length between fence poles as the other would. This is not

revealed through a special sense of Equality, nor through a special sense of Fitness, any more than virtue is revealed through a special moral sense of moral approval (Hutcheson), or an intuition of moral fitness (Clarke). But reason does reveal moral qualities—for example, the moral quality of a promise made is that of a defeasible duty to perform it.

Such defeasible duty to perform promises made comes to bear in the case of the American Conflict. Even if principle is not to be given up, policy can change. Price supports the words of the Earl of Shelburne, here quoted as presented to the House of Lords, and follows them with his own assessment.

"Meet the Colonies on their own ground, in the last petition from the [Continental] Congress to the King. The surest, as well as the most dignified mode of proceeding in this country.—Suspend all hostilities.—Repeal the acts which immediately distress America, namely, the last restraining act,—the charter act,—the act for the more impartial administration of justice;—and the Quebec Act.—All other acts (the custom house act, the post office act, etc.) leave to a temperate revisal. There will be found much matter which both countries may wish repealed. Some which can never be given up. The principle being the regulation of trade for the common good of the Empire, which forms our Palladium. Other matter which is subject of fair accommodation..." (*Civil Liberty*, 105)

Had such a plan as that now proposed been adopted a few months ago, I have little doubt but that a pacification would have taken place, on terms highly advantageous to this kingdom. (*Civil Liberty*, 108)

Price brings together his account of moral judgment and his demonstration of it in the context of the complexities of group relationships. He does not think that being able to make a good moral judgment depends especially on the sort of character one has, except to the extent that one is a scientific-minded person committed to knowing the real nature of things. One might question his stance. Consider the project of John McDowell. McDowell updates virtue theory by describing the process of discernment as one of cultivated dispositions of perception and feeling. Instead, Price's position appears to be more like Jonathan Dancy's in *Moral Reasons*.⁷ Like Dancy, Price asserts that if we pay attention to the proper shape of things, we are most likely to judge well. Those who can tell the story of the thing in a way that presents crucial details about it in a perspicacious order are at an advantage in moral judgment. Price relies more upon the traditional duties and one's station in life than Dancy does, but that makes sense, because good citizenship is his particular focus. Still, as in moral particularism more generally, social role and social duty are never an excuse for not taking care to judge for oneself what one ought to do:

It is by attending to the different relations, circumstances, and qualifications of beings, and the natures and tendencies of objects, and by examining the whole truth of every case, that we judge what *is* or *is not* to be done. And as there is an endless variety of cases, and the situations of agents and objects are ever changing; the universal law of rectitude, though in the abstract idea of it always invariably the same, must be continually varying in its *particular* demands and obligations. (*Principal Questions*, 128)

What then are the particular demands and obligations at play in the American Conflict? And what particular means would best address them? To be exact, if the Americans were to be

made such a reasonable offer as previously described, and if they were to accept it, the need for excessive taxation could be removed by a cooperative fund.

It is probable, that the Colonies would have consented to grant an annual supply, which increased by a saving of the money now spent in maintaining troops among them, and by contributions which might have been gained from other parts of the Empire, would have formed a fund considerable enough, if unalienably applied, to redeem the public debt; in consequence of which, agreeably to Lord Shelburne's ideas, some of our worst taxes might be taken off, and the Colonies receive our manufactures cheaper... (*Civil Liberty*, 108)

Thus, though Price was lured by the exactness of geometrical demonstration as a model for philosophically cogent proof, a lure to which Hutcheson had succumbed, Price resists. Price does not equate the heuristics of reasoning with the cogency of the final presentation of the geometrical model. For him, the ideal of deductivism applies only to that perfect understanding available from the perspective of an omniscient being.

In reality, before we can be capable of deducing demonstrably, accurately and particularly, the whole rule of *right* in every instance, we must possess universal and unerring knowledge. It must be above the power of any finite understanding to do this. He only who knows all truth, is acquainted with the whole law of truth in all its importance, perfection, and extent. (*Principal Questions*, 170)

Contextualism with theism? It is interesting to see how Price articulates one with the other. Price the clergyman still invokes such a standpoint of divine perfection in knowing but

distances it from the human project of moral reasoning. Here again deductivism is criticized because it would claim to know the whole law of truth above the power of any finite understanding. To appreciate divine understanding in this way is not to seek to emulate it. But notice that it is the "whole rule of right", the divine formula for right action in every instance, that is set beyond human ken. Ordinary moral judgment is not—the situation of the knower does not prevent a person from finding a best available moral position.

Thus Price's science of nature and Price's science of morals is of one piece. He endorses a view about the complete essence of a thing that is the unknowable being that corresponds to what is ideally knowable. The assertions of moral truth made by humans depend upon the existence of such a standard but do not claim complete knowledge of it. Each person decides what to do according to his or her knowledge of things. Where joint decision-making takes place, in the congress or the parliament of peoples, each proposes their interpretation of the fact and their solution to the moral problem.

It is at least implied by Price that the exchange and debate of views contributes to one's seeing the moral problem more fully, more completely. It is implied that one should similarly seek the meta-theoretical truths about science and ethics in the same way, through joint examination of their claims and results. Deductivism is a human error that impedes good and practical moral judgment. Contextualist rationalism is his preferred alternative, since perfect knowledge is outside of the human limitations of time and place, and outside of the crucial factor of urgency. One must take action, and soon.

Yet this moral contextualism requires more than Price seems to realize. More empirical work is needed to ground the moral psychology; it also needs a social theory of moral

development which would account for how the moral evaluator improves his or her moral understanding. Rudiments which could be built up can be seen in his discussion of habits of mind :

Every improvement of the speculative knowledge of a good being; every advance in the discovery of truth, and addition to the strength of his reason, and the extent and clearness of its perceptions, must be attended with views of moral good proportionably more enlarged and extensive...This, joined with the growing effects of habit and constant exercise, may by degrees so strengthen and exalt the practical principle of rectitude, as to cause it to absorb every other principle, and annihilate every contrary tendency.

(Principal Questions, 225)

Progress of theoretical reason leads to a progress of virtue and good will. But how should society be shaped into order to attain it? Here both the moral sentimentalists, like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and the moral particularists working now have something to offer contextualist rationalism. Hutcheson embraced a social epistemology that relied upon shared judgments.⁸ Lord Shaftesbury directly influenced Hutcheson's views on society, which led moral sentimentalism to focus on sociability as a tool for cultivating moral sensibility. So Price, having modeled listening to others, ought to have taken up these features into his moral theory.

The world of the North American colonial experience struggled with elements of opposed interests and shared culture. With shared aspirations for political legitimacy, self-governance, and equal rights, those who received Price's contribution to moral philosophy benefited from its responsiveness to the moment and to the problems of the day. The abstractions of "reason", "happiness", and "right" required setting in context and hearing from a different perspective.

Given this complexity one should expect that philosophers took on the challenge of developing a reasonable framework for the airing of grievances and for the pursuit of mutual advantage. Price accomplishes, but also more. He situates moral inquiry in the broader framework of scientific inquiry and legitimates moral truth with scientific truth. Although rationalism would seem to cast mistaken judgment as a flaw of intellect, perhaps encouraged by emotion, contextualist rationalism puts the emphasis on the harder task of suiting a process of moral judgment to more than some broad principles and a few select salient facts. The British North Atlantic empire strained justice and tested moral discernment. One sees now that it also called forth subtle and powerful ethical theorizing.

NOTES

¹ See for example Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action*, Oxford, 1999, Chapter 6 “Notes on Value and Objectivity” pp.146-149.

² For more on this, see my paper, “What Makes Utility the Moral Quality of Actions?”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 11:2 (April 1994), pp. 191-203.

³ Richard Price, *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, ed. D. D. Raphael, Oxford, 1974. All references will be to this edition.

⁴ It also presages a line of reasoning later advanced by Kant. Kant distinguished between what is of value regardless of willing, that is, persons as ends in themselves, and what is of value consequent to its election, that is, things and plans and projects.

⁵ Even in Kant’s criterial, nomological approach to ethics in terms of a critique of practical reason there is room for casuistical reasoning. See Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Harvard, 1996. Price also has doubts about the project of deriving moral duty from the will of anyone, deity, rational being, or human:

“If we consider [will] as denoting either the general *power* of producing effects, or the actual exertion of this power; it is most manifest that it implies nothing of a *rule*, *direction*, or *motive*, but is entirely ministerial to these, and supposes them” (*Principal Questions*, 148). This instrumentalist theory of will is then challenged by Kant’s theory of an end internal to the practice of willing itself, or the end in itself conception of a rational being.

⁶ For primary works, see *The Correspondence of Richard Price*, three volumes, edited by W. Bernard Peach and D. O. Thomas, Duke University and University of Wales Press, 1983; Richard Price, *Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the National Debt* (1772) and *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty, The War with America and The Debts and Finances of the Kingdom* (1776), De Capo Press, New York, 1974. See also Carl B. Cone, *Torchbearer of Freedom: The Influence of Richard Price on Eighteenth Century Thought*, University of Kentucky Press, 1952, Chapters VII-IX.

⁷ Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, Blackwell, 1993, Chapter 7 Section 2 “Salience and Shape”.

⁸ Susan M. Purviance, “Intersubjectivity and Sociable Relations in the Philosophy of Francis Hutcheson”, *Eighteenth Century Life* Vol.15:1 & 2 (February and May), 1991.