

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42561-2 - Political Writings
Joseph Priestley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

A N
E S S A Y
O N T H E
F I R S T P R I N C I P L E S
O F
G O V E R N M E N T,
A N D O N T H E N A T U R E O F
Political, Civil, and Religious
L I B E R T Y,
I N C L U D I N G
Remarks on Dr. BROWN'S *Code of Education*,
A N D O N
DR. BALGUY'S Sermon on CHURCH AUTHORITY.

The SECOND EDITION, corrected and enlarged,

BY JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D.F.R.S.

L O N D O N:

Printed for J. JOHNSON, No. 72, in St. Paul's Church-Yard.
M D C C L X X I.

The Contents.

SECTION I.— <i>Of the first principles of government, and the different kinds of liberty</i>	p. 8
II. <i>Of political liberty</i>	13
III. <i>Of civil liberty</i>	28
IV. <i>In what manner an authoritative code of education would affect political and civil liberty</i>	39
V. <i>Of religious liberty, and toleration in general</i>	52
VI. <i>Some distinctions that have been made on the subject of religious liberty, and toleration considered</i>	63
VII. <i>Farther observations concerning the extent of ecclesiastical authority, and the power of civil governors in matters of religion</i>	69
VIII. <i>Of the necessity, or utility, of ecclesiastical establishments</i>	81
IX. <i>A review of some particular positions of Dr Balguy's on the subject of church-authority</i>	91
X. <i>Of the progress of civil societies to a state of greater perfection, showing that it is retarded by encroachments on civil and religious liberty</i>	107

The Preface.

This publication owes its rise to the *Remarks* I wrote on *Dr Brown's proposal for a code of education*. Several persons who were pleased to think favourably of that performance, (in which I was led to mention the subject of civil and religious liberty) were desirous that I should treat of it more at large, and without any immediate view to the Doctor's work. It appeared to them, that some of the views I had given of this important, but difficult subject, were new, and showed it, in a clearer light than any in which they had seen it represented before; and they thought I had placed the foundation of some of the most valuable interests of mankind on a broader and firmer basis¹, than Mr Locke, and others who had formerly written upon this subject. I have endeavoured to answer the wishes of my friends, in the best manner I am able; and, at the same time, I have retained the substance of the former treatise, having distributed the several parts of it into the body of this.

In this *second edition*, I have also introduced what I had written on *Church-authority*, in answer to *Dr Balguy's* sermon on that subject, preached at Lambeth chapel, and published by order of the Archbishop. As I do not mean to republish either the *Remarks on Dr Brown*, or these on *Dr Balguy*, separately, and the subjects of both those pieces have a near relation to the general one on *Civil and Religious Liberty*, I thought there would be a propriety in throwing them into one treatise.

¹In the first edition this was followed by ' . . . in consequence of my availing myself of a more accurate and extensive system of morals and policy, than was adopted by Mr Locke, and others . . . '

Essay on the First Principles

I had no thoughts of animadverting upon Dr Warburton in this work, till I was informed by some intelligent and worthy clergymen of my acquaintance, that his *Alliance* is generally considered as the best defence of the present system of church-authority, and that most other writers took their arguments from it.

In a postscript to this work he informs us, p. 271, that, in it, *the reader will see confuted at large*, what he calls a *puritanical principle*, and also an *absurd assertion of Hooker's*, by which he entangled himself and his cause in *inextricable difficulties*, viz. that *civil and ecclesiastical power are things separated by nature, and more especially by divine institution; and so independent of one another, that they must always continue independent*. Whatever success this writer may have had in pulling up other foundations, I think he had better have left those of the church as he found them: for the difficulties in which the scheme of the *Alliance* is entangled, appear to me to be far more inextricable, than those of any other scheme of church-authority that I have yet seen. All that can be said in its favour is, that, having less of the simplicity of truth, and, consequently, being supported with more art and sophistry, the absurdity of it is not so obvious at first sight, though it be ten times more glaring after it has been sufficiently attended to.

Sorry I am to be under the necessity of troubling my reader with the repetition of any thing that has been said before on this subject, in my remarks on those writers; but when the same arguments are urged again and again, it is impossible always to find new, or better answers. I flatter myself, however, that several of the observations in this treatise will appear to be new, at least, that some things will appear to be set in a new or clearer point of light. But whenever the interests of truth and liberty are attacked, it is to be wished that some would stand up in their defence, whether they acquit themselves better than their predecessors in the same *good old cause*, or not. *New books* in defence of any principles whatever, will be read by many persons, who will not look into *old books*, for the proper answers to them.

Considerable advantage cannot but accrue to the cause of religious, as well as civil liberty, from keeping the important subject continually in view. We are under great obligation, therefore, to all the advocates for church-authority, whenever they are pleased to write in its defence.

Every attempt that has hitherto been made to shake, or undermine the foundations of the christian faith, hath ended in the firmer

Essay on the First Principles

establishment of it. Also, every attempt to support the unjust claims of churchmen over their fellow christians, hath been equally impotent, and hath recoiled upon themselves; and, I make no doubt, that this will be the issue of all the future efforts of interested or misguided men, in so weak and unworthy a cause.

It will be seen, that I have taken no notice of any thing that has been written in the controversy about the *Confessional*. I would only observe, and I cannot help observing, that the violent opposition that has been made to the modest attempts, both of the *candid disquisitors*, and those of the author of the *Confessional*, and his respectable friends, to procure a redress of only a few of the more intolerable grievances the clergy labour under, and a removal of some of the most obvious and capital defects in the established church, has more weight than a hundred arguments drawn from *theory* only, in demonstrating the folly of erecting such complicated and unwieldy systems of policy, and in showing the mischiefs that attend them.

Little did the founders of church establishments consider, of what unspeakable importance it is to the interests of religion, that the ambition of christian ministers be circumscribed within narrow limits, when they left them such unbounded scope for courting preferment. But the interests of religion have been very little considered by the founders of church establishments. Indeed if they had considered them, how little were they qualified to make provision for them? I need not say what I feel, when I find so much in the writings of ingenious men concerning *the wisdom* of these constitutions. It always brings to my mind what St Paul says of *the wisdom of this world* in other respects.

Such, however, is the virtue of some men, that it is proof against all the bad influence of the constitution of which they are members. Without flattering, or tormenting themselves with a *vain ambition*, many excellent clergymen, worthy of a better situation, contentedly sit down to the proper duty of their station. Their only object is *to do good to the souls of men*, and their only hope of reward is in that world, where *they who have been wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they who have turned many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever*. Such characters as these I truly revere; and it is chiefly for the sake of forming more such, that I wish the establishment of the church of England might be reformed in some essential points. The powers of reason and conscience plead for such a reformation, but, alas! the

Essay on the First Principles

powers of this world are against it. This unnatural *ally* of religion (or rather her imperious *master*) without whose permission nothing can be done, will not admit of it.

But at the same time that, from a love of truth, and a just regard for the purity of a divine religion, we bear a public testimony against those abuses which men have introduced into it; let us, as becomes christians, have the candour to make proper allowances for the prejudices and prepossessions, even of the founders, promoters, and abettors of these anti-christian systems; and still farther let us be from indulging a thought to the prejudice of those, who have been educated in a reverence for these modes of religion, and have not strength of mind to separate their ideas of these *forms*, from those of the *power* of it. In this case, let us be particularly careful how we give offence to any serious and well-disposed minds, and patiently bear with the wheat and the tares growing together till the harvest.

Such is my belief in the doctrine of an over-ruling providence, that I have no doubt, but that every thing in the whole system of nature, how noxious soever it may be in some respects, has real, though unknown uses; and also that every thing, even the grossest abuses in the civil or ecclesiastical constitutions of particular states, is subservient to the wise and gracious designs of him, who, notwithstanding these appearances, still *rules in the kingdoms of men*.

I make no apology for the *freedom* with which I have written. The subject is, in the highest degree, interesting to humanity, it is open to philosophical discussion, and I have taken no greater liberties than becomes a philosopher, a man, and an Englishman. Having no other views than to promote a thorough knowledge of this important subject, not being sensible of any bias to mislead me in my inquiries, and conscious of the uprightness of my intentions, I freely submit my thoughts to the examination of all impartial judges, and the friends of their country and of mankind. They who know the fervour of generous feelings will be sensible, that I have expressed myself with no more warmth than the importance of the subject necessarily prompted, in a breast not naturally the coldest; and that to have appeared more indifferent, I could not have been sincere.

Besides the freedom with which I have made this defence of civil and religious liberty, is sufficiently justified by the freedom with which they have been attacked; and though the advocates for church power are very ready to accuse the Dissenters of *indecenty*, when, in

Essay on the First Principles

defending themselves, they reflect upon the established church; yet I do not see why, in a judgment of equity, the same civility and decency should not be observed on both sides; or why insolence on one side should not be answered by contempt on the other.

Notwithstanding the ardour of mind with which, it will be evident, some parts of the following treatise were written, the warmth with which I have espoused the cause of liberty, and the severity with which I have animadverted upon whatever I apprehend to be unfavourable to it; I think I cannot be justly accused of *party zeal*, because it will be found, that I have treated all parties with equal freedom. Indeed, such is the usual violence of human passions, when any thing interesting to them is contended for, that the best cause in the world is not sufficient to prevent intemperance and excess; so that it is easy to see too much to blame in all parties: and it by no means follows, that, because a man disapproves of the conduct of one, that he must, therefore, approve of that of its opposite. The greatest enemy of popery may see something he dislikes in the conduct of the first reformers, the warmest zeal against episcopacy is consistent with the just sense of the faults of the puritans, and much more may an enemy of Charles the first, be an enemy of Cromwell also.

N. B. Let it be observed, that, in this treatise, I propose no more than to consider the *first principles* of civil and religious liberty, and to explain some leading ideas upon the subject. For a more extensive view of it, as affecting a greater variety of particulars in the system of government, I refer to *the course of lectures on history and civil policy*; a *syllabus* of which is printed in the *Essay on a course of liberal education for civil and active life*, and the whole of which, with enlargements, I propose to publish in due time.

SECTION I

Of the First Principles of Government, and the different kinds of Liberty.

Man derives two capital advantages from the superiority of his intellectual powers. The first is, that, as an individual, he possesses a certain comprehension of mind, whereby he contemplates and enjoys the past and the future, as well as the present. This comprehension is enlarged with the experience of every day; and by this means the happiness of man, as he advances in intellect, is continually less dependent on temporary circumstances and sensations.²

²In the first edition, this was followed by 'Ideas collected from a certain limited space, on each side of the present moment, are always ready to crowd upon his mind, and to temper, and exalt his feelings.

'This space, which is the sphere of a man's comprehension, of which he has the enjoyment, and which may be called the extent of his *present time*, is greater or less, in proportion to the progress he has made in intellect, and his advancement above mere animal nature; and it is generally growing larger during the whole course of our lives. A child is sensible of nothing beyond the present moment, being little more than a brute animal; though the actual feelings of persons advanced in life never depend wholly upon the present moment, but are greatly influenced both by the remembrance of what is past, and the expectation of what is future.

'These intellectual pleasures and pains, in many cases, wholly overpower all temporary sensations; whereby some men, of great and superior minds, enjoy a state of permanent and equable felicity, in a great measure independent of the uncertain accidents of life. In such minds the ideas of things that are seen to be the cause and effect of one another, perfectly coalesce into one, and present but one common image. Thus all the ideas of evil absolutely vanish, in the idea of the greater good with which it is connected, or of which it is productive.

'To this comprehension of mind, which is extending with the experience of every day, no bounds can be set. Nay, it should seem, that while our faculties of perception and action remain in the same vigour, our progress towards perfection must be continually accelerated; and that nothing but a future existence, in advantageous circumstances, is requisite to advance a mere man above every thing we can now conceive of excellence and perfection. This train of thought may, in some measure, enable us to conceive wherein consists the superiority of angelic beings, whose sphere of comprehension, that is, whose *present time* may be of proportionately greater extent than ours, owing to the greater extent of their recollection and foresight; and even give us some faint idea of the

Essay on the First Principles

The next advantage resulting from the same principle, and which is, in many respects, both the cause and effect of the former, is, that the human species itself is capable of a similar and unbounded improvement; whereby mankind in a later age are greatly superior to mankind in a former age, the individuals being taken at the same time of life. Of this progress of the species, brute animals are more incapable than they are of that relating to individuals. No horse of this age seems to have any advantage over other horses of former ages; and if there be any improvement in the species, it is owing to our manner of breeding and training them. But a man at this time, who has been tolerably well educated, in an improved christian country, is a being possessed of much greater power, to be, and to make happy, than a person of the same age, in the same, or any other country, some centuries ago. And, for this reason, I make no doubt, that a person some centuries hence will, at the same age, be as much superior to us.

The great instrument in the hand of divine providence, of this progress of the species towards perfection, is *society*, and consequently *government*. In a state of nature the powers of any individual are dissipated by an attention to a multiplicity of objects. The employments of all are similar. From generation to generation every man does the same that every other does, or has done, and no person begins where another ends; at least, general improvements are exceedingly slow, and uncertain. This we see exemplified in all barbarous nations, and especially in countries thinly inhabited, where the connections of the people are slight, and consequently society and government very imperfect; and it may be seen more particularly in North America, and Greenland. Whereas a state of more perfect society admits of a proper distribution and division of the objects of human attention. In such a state, men are connected with and subservient to one another; so that, while one man confines himself to one single object, another may give the same undivided attention to another object.

Thus the powers of all have their full effect; and hence arise

incomprehensible excellence and happiness of the Divine Being, in whose view nothing is past or future, but to whom the whole compass of duration is, to every real purpose, without distinction present.

Who fills his own eternal NOW,
 And sees our ages waste.
 —[Isaac] Watts'

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42561-2 - Political Writings
Joseph Priestley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Essay on the First Principles

improvements in all the conveniences of life, and in every branch of knowledge. In this state of things, it requires but a few years to comprehend the whole preceding progress of any one art or science; and the rest of a man's life, in which his faculties are the most perfect, may be given to the extension of it. If, by this means, one art or science should grow too large for an easy comprehension, in a moderate space of time, a commodious subdivision will be made. Thus all knowledge will be subdivided and extended; and *knowledge*, as Lord Bacon observes, being *power*, the human powers will, in fact, be enlarged; nature, including both its materials, and its laws, will be more at our command; men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable; they will probably prolong their existence in it, and will grow daily more happy, each in himself, and more able (and, I believe, more disposed) to communicate happiness to others. Thus, whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisaical, beyond what our imaginations can now conceive. Extravagant as some may suppose these views to be, I think I could show them to be fairly suggested by the true theory of human nature, and to arise from the natural course of human affairs. But, for the present, I wave this subject, the contemplation of which always makes me happy.

Government being the great instrument of this progress of the human species towards this glorious state, that form of government will have a just claim to our approbation which favours this progress, and that must be condemned in which it is retarded. Let us then, my fellow citizens, consider the business of government with these enlarged views, and trace some of the fundamental principles of it, by an attention to what is most conducive to the happiness of mankind at present, and most favourable to the increase of this happiness in futurity; and, perhaps, we may understand this intricate subject, with some of its most important circumstances, better than we have done; at least we may see some of them in a clearer and stronger point of light.

To begin with first principles, we must, for the sake of gaining clear ideas on the subject, do what almost all political writers have done before us; that is, we must suppose a number of people existing, who experience the inconvenience of living independent and unconnected; who are exposed, without redress, to insults and wrongs of every kind, and are too weak to procure themselves many of the advantages,