

Akihito Matsumoto's Understanding of Priestley's Theological Utilitarianism

Despite being firmly rooted in the classical tradition, Akihito Matsumoto's presentation of his paper 'Happiness and Religion: Joseph Priestley's Theological Utilitarianism' was one of the most interesting delivered at the 2009 HETSA Conference. Matsumoto's focused study of utilitarianism is reflected in the clarity and precision of his paper, and further brings about attention despite its relative irrelevance in regards to contemporary issues. His writing style must be mentioned – there is a logical coherence to his argument, and his conceptualisation of abstract theory is very easy to follow. The fact that English is Matsumoto's second language lends to its accessibility, however some further editing may be required.

The general aim of the paper is to distinguish Priestley's form of theological utilitarianism from that of Jeremy Bentham's more widely known utilitarianism, which is based around secular foundations. It is noted that previous studies, including those by the revered historian Joseph Schumpeter, do not fully articulate this important distinction. Matsumoto uses the view by Crimmins, who suggests that theology dominated utilitarian ethics in pre-Bentham England, as a stepping stone into his general argument. What seemed to be a vital and interesting point was that of the extent to which Bentham was influenced by Priestley and his contemporary William Paley – despite a rather direct quote from Schumpeter, Matsumoto unfortunately does not provide further elaboration.

Following the introductory first pages, the paper is separated into several sections – Bentham's secular utilitarianism, Priestley's theological utilitarianism, the influence that the philosopher David Hartley had on Priestley, the governmental implication of Priestley's utilitarianism and finally a brief conclusion. What is significant regarding the first two mentioned sections is its differentiation of the concept of happiness; what one defines as happiness naturally would affect a contentment-driven philosophy such as utilitarianism. Matsumoto shows that where Bentham regards happiness as simply the maximum of pleasures, Priestley advocates the utilitarianism philosophy in the pursuit of perfection, or in Matsumoto's words, 'the greatest happiness in this world is to pursue charity and the love of God'. Furthermore, Matsumoto summarises the entirety of Priestley's logical base by mentioning his understanding of happiness comes from the Bible.

The subtlety of Matsumoto's analysis can be seen in his unsaid comparison between Bentham's idea of creating artificial laws through utilitarian scrutiny, thus creating a harmonious society, and Priestley's view that utilitarianism follows a natural order as defined by God, for the same aim. In other words, the former requires the creation of laws that furthers society's happiness (under the strictly secular 'legislator'), whereas the latter is simply derived from God's natural law - a fundamental contrast which Matsumoto delicately suggests without cluttering his paper. An association between Priestley and an earlier theological utilitarian,

Francis Hutcheson, is made in order to further express this separation from Bentham – whether this was necessary is questionable, as it does little to supplement Matsumoto's initial thesis.

Despite the inherent similarities between Bentham and Priestley, it is appropriate to say that Matsumoto clearly separates them on the most contentious issues, such as the definition of happiness. He logically proceeds through his argument in such a way as to not only find resolution to his thesis, but also to provide an interesting and thoughtful piece of writing.