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Publisher: Routledge

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The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rejh20>

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Version of record first published: 10 Jun 2011.

To cite this article: Geoffrey Poitras (2013): Richard Price, miracles and the origins of Bayesian decision theory, *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 20:1, 29-57

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09672567.2011.565356>

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Richard Price, miracles and the origins of Bayesian decision theory

Geoffrey Poitras

1. Introduction

The treatment of Richard Price (1723 to 1791) in the history of economic thought is an enigma. So much of what Price contributed still resonates today, providing insights into subjects ranging from social security reform to the proper management of insurance companies to the inter-generational implications of government debt issuance. Yet, compared with the voluminous efforts expended on detailing the contributions of contemporaries in political economy such as Adam Smith or David Hume, Price has received scant attention.¹ Most of the notoriety Price has received in modern venues focuses on his subsequent contributions to the subjects of actuarial science and political theory.² The bulk of these contributions came after the appearance of Price (1768) where, in Dissertation IV,

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1 The lack of attention to Price in the history of economic thought can be readily ascertained by examining the name index of any standard textbook on the subject where, typically, no reference to Richard Price is given. This lack of attention extends to other subjects to which Price contributed. For example, on the debate with Hume over miracles, Owen (1987: esp. 196) observes: ‘My main purpose has been to show that Hume’s argument has a larger significance than is generally realized, that Price saw this and has been unjustly neglected, and that their debate is extremely similar to an important modern issue.’ Similarly, also speaking about the miracles debate, Earman (2000: 24) observes: ‘The name of Richard Price is largely unknown to modern readers.’

2 Sources that focus on the political element of Price’s contributions include Thomas (1924), Laboucheix (1970) and Fruchtman (1983). A listing of a number of sources discussing Price’s contributions to political theory is available in Thomas (1991) and Molivas (1997).

Bayes's theorem³ is applied to the important theological quandary raised by Hume's skeptical attack on Christian miracles (Hume's attack).⁴ Recognizing that it was the communication of Bayes's theorem to the Royal Society in 1763 that earned Price election to the Royal Society in 1765, the argument advanced in Dissertation IV is almost certainly the first known contribution to Bayesian decision theory. Although this argument still attracts some modern interest, unanswered questions remain.⁵ After providing a brief overview of some substantive contributions by Richard Price that are of relevance to modern economics, this paper explores a number of questions still surrounding the birth of Bayesian decision theory.

2. Who was Richard Price?

It is an understatement to say that the Revd Richard Price was a remarkable individual; a caricature for English intellectual achievement in the

3 The Reverend Thomas Bayes (1702? to 1761) earned the eponym 'Bayes's theorem' for results appearing posthumously in Bayes (1763). The reproduction available in Deming (1940) contains Molina (1940). Stigler (1983) argues unconvincingly for an earlier beginning for Bayes's theorem. The history of Bayes's theorem is thoughtfully examined in Dale (1991).

4 The full title from Price (1768) is: 'Dissertation IV. On the Importance of Christianity, the Nature of Historical Evidence and Miracles.' Observing that Hume (1751) is a second edition, with the first edition published in 1748, Dissertation IV contains six full pages combining direct quotes and paraphrasing from Hume (1751), so the second edition is the one being used to reference Hume's attack. Subtle changes did appear in 'Of Miracles' in subsequent editions. With the 1758 edition, the title is changed from '*Philosophical Essays ...*' to '*Enquiry ...*,' with the 1777 edition of the *Enquiry* being the most often examined by modern writers. Earman (2000: 77) observes: 'Hume commentators have generally neglected the clues to Hume's intentions offered by these changes.' Given this, the following quotes from Hume (1751: 180–182) serve to identify basic issues in Hume's attack: 'A Miracle is a Violation of the Laws of Nature; and as a firm and unalterable Experience has establish'd these Laws, the Proof against a Miracle, from the very Nature of the Fact, is as entire as any Argument against Experience can possibly be imagin'd ... But 'tis a Miracle, that a dead man should come to Life; because that has never been observ'd in any Age or Country ... The plain Consequence is (and 'tis a general Maxim worthy of our Attention), "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".' The cutting edge of Hume's attack for Christians was the conclusion (Hume 1851: 203): 'we may establish it as a Maxim, that no human Testimony can have such Force as to prove a Miracle, and make it a just Foundation for any such System of Religion.'

5 Recent contributions include Tucker (2005), Earman (2000) and Holder (1998).

eighteenth century. Despite this, basic aspects of his life and contributions are generally unrecognized in modern treatments of classical political economy. This lack of recognition is enigmatic because it is not difficult to identify numerous substantive contributions to economic thought made by Price that still resonate in modern times. Consider the modern difficulties with social security reform (for example, Huggett and Parra 2010). Social mechanisms aimed at providing for the elderly and infirmed have a long and complicated history (for example, Lewin 2003). The Church, the extended family, inheritance practices and charitable organizations have all been important vehicles at one time. However, it was not until Bismark's Germany in the 1880s that a state plan with universal coverage was implemented. Yet, Price (1772) proposed an actuarially sound plan to provide state pensions and allowances for the poor who are elderly or sick. This plan was to be a replacement for the inadequate support provided by the Poor Laws.⁶ With the support of Francis Masères (1731 to 1824), the plan detailed in Masères (1772) and 'publicly approved by the celebrated Dr. Price' was well received by the House of Commons and was passed, only to be rejected by the House of Lords in 1773. In 1786, a similar plan was revived by Revd John Acland (Acland 1786) with the support of Price and passed, once again, the House of Commons, only to be, once again, rejected by the House of Lords in 1789.

Given the contributions in Price (1769, 1770, 1771, 1772), Pearson (1978: 403) identifies Price as the 'Father of Old Age Pensions.' These contributions, especially Price (1771), also provide a significant place for Price in the modern history of actuarial science. Benjamin Franklin, a close personal friend of Price and the conveyor of Price (1769) to the Royal

6 The origins of this contribution are somewhat obscure. The first published statement of the plan appeared in the *Public Advertiser* under the signature 'Eumenes' on 22 July 1771, being reprinted in other sources such as *Lewes Journal* in October 1771. In contrast to Pearson (1979: 403) where the scheme is attributed to Price, the reference to Eumenes is clearly to Masères and his recent experience as attorney general of Quebec (see Arthur 2000). The plan was detailed in Masères (1772) and Price (1772) where the direct contribution of Price can be identified. However, being elected to the Royal Society in 1771, Masères would have known of Price (1769, 1770), which is the theoretical precursor of Price (1771) that dealt with pensions without discussing the extension to replacing the Poor Law. This extension appears in Price (1772) and later editions of Price (1771). Based on this, Masères probably saw the extension and, given the stature that Price had obtained on the subject, enlisted the support of Price to provide the associated Tables required to implement the plan. Pearson (1979: 404) incorrectly suggests that Masères was 'Cursitor Baron of the Exchequer' when the plan was proposed. However, Masères only became cursitor baron in August 1773.

Society, has been quoted as calling Price (1771) ‘the foremost production of human understanding that this century has afforded us’ (Thomas 1977: 139–40). More recently, Pearson (1978: 393) refers to Price (1771) as ‘perhaps the most remarkable textbook ever issued on actuarial science.’ This contribution also had considerable economic importance. The substance of the analysis in Price (1771) was overwhelming and decidedly unexpected: virtually all the life assurance and benevolent societies of the time, founded with noble motives and becoming increasingly popular, faced certain failure to meet future obligations. Within a short period of time, numerous societies either folded or restructured their premium/payout structure to be in conformity with actuarial soundness.⁷ In a few years, Price had risen from being a relatively obscure, if well regarded, dissenting minister to a position of considerable national prominence.

Although Price made later contributions on important economic subjects, such as the debates over the sinking fund and the increasing size of the national debt, his life was overtaken by events beyond his control⁸ – the outbreak of hostilities in America starting in 1775:

alarmed at the fatal consequences of a war in which the resources, the public credit and prosperity of the kingdom were so deeply involved, Dr. Price was anxious that every possible effort should be exerted to oppose the prosecution of it. (Morgan 1815: 54–5)⁹

While Price (1776) was intended to promote peace and harmony between America and England, ‘In proportion to the popularity and admiration which Dr. Price acquired by this invaluable work among the friends of American *freedom*, was the rancorous abuse which he received from the advocates of American *subjection*’ (Morgan 1815: 59). The book was surprisingly popular: ‘In the course of few days several thousands were

7 Following Lewin (2003: 398), Price was joined in this criticism by William Dale who campaigned vigorously against the societies, while being a strong proponent of such societies when established on a sound actuarial basis. Dale published a book on the subject in 1772 that provided considerably more detail on the unsoundness of the various friendship and benevolent societies of the time.

8 Together with Hume (for example, Hume 1751: Essay VIII, Of Public Credit) and others, Price persistently warned of the dangers of unrestricted public borrowing. For Price, ‘each generation should do its utmost to bear its own burdens and resist the temptation of casting them upon their descendants’ (Thomas 1977: ix–x).

9 In light of the public debt crisis currently gripping certain European governments, the general concerns with the public debt and credit expressed by Price, David Hume, Thomas Mortimer and others at the time have unrecognized contemporary relevance (for example, Poitras 2000: ch.11). On this topic, the disparate philosophies of Hume and Price coincided.

sold ... In the course of a few months, by means of a cheap edition, near 60,000 copies of it had been disposed of' (Morgan 1815: 58 and 62). Given the considerable national reputation Price had received since Price (1771), he became the focus of a firestorm of personal and political criticism that included important intellectual attacks by Edmund Burke. His close personal connection to a number of prominent individuals attached to the American side, such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, added fuel to the criticism as the American revolution intensified. The vilification was such that, whatever his contributions, Price was ill-suited to be afforded any recognition within the subsequent texts and pamphlet literature that survives into modern times as 'classical political economy.'

There is even more than these noteworthy contributions to the life of Revd Richard Price, a story that is scattered across sources requiring some effort to assemble. Pearson (1978: 370–421) and Ogborn (1962) have helpful overviews but tend to emphasize information of relevance to statistics and actuarial science. In contrast, the excellent modern biography by the philosopher Thomas (1977) details issues relevant to moral philosophy and theology. Given that Price died before doing substantial work on his memoirs, the most important primary biographical source is Morgan (1815), by his nephew William Morgan. The sum total of these sources still does not capture certain facets of the story.¹⁰ First and foremost, Price was a dissenting minister and theologian. Price was the grandson of Rees Price, head of a prominent dissenting family from county Glamorgan that followed Samuel Jones out of the Anglican Church after the Act of Uniformity (1662).¹¹ Both his father, Rice, and his uncle, Samuel, were dissenting ministers. Throughout his life, Price struggled

10 For example, these sources provide inadequate detail on the personal relationships Price had with important individuals such as Turgot, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Another undetailed thread is the relationship of Price with Mary Wollstonecraft, often identified as a founder of modern feminism. From the early 1780s to 1785, Wollstonecraft ran a children's school in the dissenting community of Newington Green where Revd Price lived from 1758 to 1787. The fascinating connection between Price (1776) and her defining political works *Rights of Men* (Wollstonecraft 1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Wollstonecraft 1792) goes unrecognized.

11 The Act of Uniformity (1662) was one of a number of Acts of Parliament introduced following the Civil War to restore the power and position of the Anglican Church. This Act required strict use of the Book of Common Prayer and associated rites and prayers in church services, episcopal ordination of ministers and the like. Aimed primarily at Roman Catholics, the Act of Uniformity also had a substantive impact on dissenting communities, including the Quakers, Puritans, Presbyterians, Calvinists, Baptists and Unitarians. In the Great Ejection of 1662, over 2000 ministers were ejected from their positions following passage of the Act.

against the religious bigotry embodied in government legislation and actions, as reflected in the Test Act and Corporation Act.¹² Being denied both teaching positions and education in traditional institutions, dissenters established educational institutions ‘to prepare their sons for the Ministry and the professions’ (Thomas 1977: 1).

Being raised and educated as a religious dissenter outside the educational institutions of the Anglican church was fortuitous for Price. At a relatively young age, Price was obliged to make his own way in the world and around 1740, with the help of his uncle in London, came to study at the leading dissenting academy for scientific education where he was instructed by John Eames (1685 to 1744), FRS, a capable mathematician and friend of Isaac Newton.¹³ ‘Thus it came about that Richard got an education of university standard, especially in mathematics and theology, possibly a better education than he would have received at the universities’ (Pearson 1978: 373). In addition to the expected courses on divinity, classics and moral philosophy, Eames lectures on applied mathematics included mechanics, hydrostatics, astronomy and optics (Thomas 1977: 11). Significantly, both Price and Bayes were students of Eames and, although Price was much younger, probably met through this connection. The eventual depth of the relationship between these dissenting ministers is reflected in Price being mentioned in Bayes’s will and requested ‘by the relatives of that truly ingenious man, to examine the papers which he had written on different subjects, and which his own modesty would never suffer him to make public’ (Morgan 1815: 25).

Given that Bayes fell ill around 1755, it was probably the period between Price’s graduation from the academy in 1744 until 1756 that the friendship formed. During this time, Price was absorbed in his religious duties as a family chaplain and, in this position, was able to produce an important contribution to moral philosophy (Price 1758), a companion piece for the

12 Together with the Act of Uniformity (1661), the Quaker Act (1662), the Five Mile Act (1665) and the Conventicle Act (1664), the Test Act (1673, 1678) and the Corporation Act (1661) were legislation – commonly referred to as the Clarendon Code – passed by the royalist dominated Cavalier parliament (1661 to 1679) aimed at restoring the power of the Anglican church. While most of these Acts had been repealed by the end of the seventeenth century, the Test Act and the Corporation Act survived into the nineteenth century.

13 It was Newton who introduced Eames to the Royal Society. This connection provides the thread that connects Price to the Newtonians (for example, Stewart 1981). Price was sufficiently ‘Newtonian’ that, around 1762, ‘a proposal was made to him by booksellers to publish a complete edition of all Sir Isaac Newton’s works’ (Morgan 1815: 29). Being at this time intensely devoted to religious studies, Price declined this offer as it would have taken him too far from ‘subjects not immediately connected to his profession.’

important works of David Hume that gathered increasing prominence during this period, especially Hume (1751).¹⁴ In 1756 Price came into a substantial legacy and, with the improvement in fortune, was able to get married and dedicate more time to ‘speculative’ studies. One of the scholarly tasks that Price undertook was to edit and prepare for submission to the Royal Society, the papers of Thomas Bayes, FRS. In a letter dated 10 November 1763, Price communicated to the Royal Society the contents of a theorem unearthed in Bayes’s papers. That letter contained the now famous Bayes’s Theorem. From this, formal academic recognition came to Price in 1765 with election to the Royal Society.¹⁵ It was during this period that Price (1768) was completed for publication:

This work had engaged his attention and occupied his time at intervals for more than seven years; and it was not without great diffidence and hesitation, that he was at last induced to publish it. – The Dissertation on Miracles had been written as early as the year 1760, and read to Mr. Canton, Mr. Rose, and some other friends, who all concurred with the publication of it. (Morgan 1815: 23)

3. The modern Bayesian arguments

In theological studies, Price (1768) – particularly Dissertation IV, *The Importance of Christianity, the Nature of Historical Evidence and Miracles* – established his ‘reputation as a theologian with a new view of morals and religion’ (Pearson 1978: 378).¹⁶ Into modern times, Dissertation IV still has

14 Essential works of David Hume (1711 to 1776) are Hume (1739–1740) and the more influential Hume (1751). Buckle (2007) provides a brief but excellent overview of Hume. Bayes produced two substantive publications in his lifetime, one of which (Bayes *Divine Benevolence, or an Attempt to Prove That the Principal End of the Divine Providence and Government is the Happiness of His Creatures* of 1731) was on moral philosophy and, following Thomas (1977: 81–2), ‘an important influence’ on the third ‘head of virtue’ in Price (1758). In the realm of moral philosophy and ethics, sources on Price in addition to Thomas (1977) include Raphael (1947) and Hudson (1970).

15 At the end of his life, Price also came out in support of the French Revolution, an event that eventually evolved into a blood-bath. However, Price died in 1791 before the French Revolution could take its darkest turns. In the end: ‘Price was a mild and gentle man whose strength of character led him into a position of great authority, yet without any trace of self-seeking. In some ways he was remarkably far-sighted and in others remarkably wrong-headed, but with it all honest and candid’ (Ogborn 1962: 97).

16 Following Morgan (1815: 23), Dissertation IV ‘was intended as an answer to Mr. Hume’s arguments against the credibility of miracles.’ This was probably prompted by the challenge that Hume had given in *On Miracles* (Hume 1751: 204–5): ‘I am better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to

relevance due to the seminal application of Bayesian decision theory.¹⁷ There are a number of facets to this contribution. At least since Molina (1940), it has been recognized that the primary mathematical contribution of the ‘Bayes’s theorem’ that Price communicated to the Royal Society in Bayes (1763) was associated with the use of series solutions to arrive at an expression for the ratio of an incomplete to a complete Beta function as the incomplete sum of the binomial $(q + p)^n$. Following Zabell (1989), modern formulation of this uniform prior result focuses on Laplace’s rule of succession. It was not Bayes that formulated the modern ‘inverse probability’ version of Bayes’s theorem where non-uniform prior probabilities can be combined with the observed likelihood function to obtain the conditional posterior distribution.¹⁸ In both Laplace’s rule of succession and in Price’s version of Bayes’s theorem, the prior distribution is uniform, the same *a priori* probability is attached to each possible random

the *Christian religion* who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason.’ Price (1768) is a second edition, with the first edition appearing in 1767. The first edition contained statements ‘speaking of the *poor sophistry*’ of Hume’s arguments. Price sent a copy of the first edition to Hume in 1767, serving at the time as Under Secretary of State for the Northern Department, together with an apology promising changes in another edition. This produces ‘a very flattering letter from Mr. Hume’ (Morgan 1815: 23). The second edition appeared with Hume referred to as ‘a writer whose genius and abilities are so distinguished, as to be above *my* commendations’ (Price 1768: 382). When Price sent Hume the corrected second edition, Hume replied ‘expressive of [his] *wonder at the scrupulosity in one of Mr. Price’s profession*’ (Morgan 1815: 24). Hume subsequently invited to dinner ‘at Mr. Cadell’s in the Strand’ a small number of ‘divines’ – including Price – that ‘were splendid exceptions to the rudeness and bigotry’ that so many religious individuals had expressed toward him. Those at the dinner, ‘as might be expected, passed their time in utmost harmony and good humour’ (Morgan 1815: 16–17). Following this, Hume made at least one visit to Price at his house in Newington Green.

- 17 The traditional modern interpretation that Dissertation IV is concerned with an application of Bayesian analysis can be traced to the famous statistician Karl Pearson (1857 to 1936). This interpretation (Pearson 1978: 378–80) is contained in Pearson (1978), which consists of a collection of lecture notes from courses Pearson taught at University College London, meticulously prepared from largely hand-written notes and published posthumously by his only son, Egon Pearson (1885 to 1980). The genesis of the material for these lectures stretches back at least to 1887 to 1893 when, shortly after becoming a professor of applied mathematics at University College in 1884, Pearson edited three volumes on the mathematical theory of elasticity for Isaac Todhunter (1820 to 1884). Hacking (1981) is a useful review of Pearson (1978).
- 18 The works of Pierre Simon, Marquis de Laplace (1749 to 1827) on inverse probability start with two minor papers in 1774 and conclude with *Théorie analytique des probabilités* (1820, 3rd ed.). Dale (1991: ch. 6) provides a detailed examination of these contributions.

outcome.¹⁹ The more difficult mathematical problem of combining a non-uniform prior with a particular likelihood is not attempted. It was the uniform prior version of Bayes's theorem that Price used to address a specific logical implication of the skeptical philosophy underpinning Hume's attack.

In the history of probability, references to Price usually focus attention on the connection between Bayes's theorem and Laplace's rule of succession (for example, Zabell 1988). This not surprising given that Price was the person responsible for introducing the 'proposition' and 'scholium' that have risen to such prominence in recent times. While the basic problem of using probability theory to infer causes from effects has survived into modern times (for example, Zabell 2007), the philosophical issues that inspired Bayes to formulate the famous theorem probably originated as a response to Hume (1739–1740, 1751) that, among other contributions, contained the skeptical inductive arguments in Hume's attack (Buckle 2007). As Zabell (1989: 290) observes: 'Hume first stated the problem of induction; Bayes first advanced a solution to it. The chronological link between these two events is much closer than is usually recognized.' The continued use of the rising sun example in various treatments of the inductive problem crystallizes the historical time line, which includes Hume, Price's appendix to Bayes (1763), and Laplace's 'probabilistic solution to the problem of induction' (Zabell 1989: 292).²⁰

Hume's attack continues to attract modern interest due to the fascinating probabilistic complications involved in the argument (for example, Earman 2000, Hajek 2008). In the process of developing these complications within a modern Bayesian framework, the skeptical element in Hume's attack is restricted somewhat to permit close analysis of the chief proposition: it is never justified to accept second-hand testimony to a miraculous event. This proposition is derived from two basic conditions: miracles, such as a dead man coming back to life, are violations of the laws

19 Writing after Laplace, in *Laws of Thought* Boole (1854) refers to this case as 'equal distribution of ignorance' and is able to demonstrate inherent difficulties with this assumption for solving general inverse probability problems.

20 The rising sun example is concerned with the question of whether seemingly certain events such as 'the future rising of the sun can be expressed probabilistically' (Zabell 1988: 173). The solution proposed by Laplace employs Laplace's rule of succession. The specific use of this problem can be found in Hume (1739–1740: 124): 'tis only probable the sun will rise-to-morrow.' Price used the rising sun example in his Appendix to Bayes (1763: 409).

of nature; and, the miraculous events proposed as evidence for the Christian revelation are based on historical second-hand testimony.²¹ While Hume's attack is structured to encompass all forms of miracles reported by second-hand testimony, the strongest logical elements of the attack center on doctrinaire Catholic Christian miracles. This is significant because, being a dissenting Protestant minister and proponent of rational religion, Price did not have to adhere to doctrinaire views on Christian miracles, a faith-based theological position that allows, if not requires, miracles to be interventionist and contemporaneously observable violations of nature.²² As a consequence, much of the theological debate between Price and Hume is tempered, allowing attention to focus on the probabilistic foundations of Hume's skeptical philosophy. The associated non-Bayesian aspects of the debate over miracles, relevant to understanding the theological underpinnings, have attracted limited modern interest and been largely overlooked.

Expressing Hume's attack in modern Bayesian terms 'renders his reasoning perspicuous, and the issue easier to grapple with' (Weintraub 1996: 360). This requires some definitions. Let M be the event that a miracle happened and $T[M]$ be the event that testimony to the occurrence of a miracle was given. Letting \sim indicate negation, this produces two 'prior' probabilities that are relevant: $P[M]$ and $P[\sim M]$, the probabilities of a miracle occurring and not occurring, $P[T[M]]$ and $P[\sim T[M]]$, the prior probabilities of testimony to a miracle being given and not being given, are not used directly. Bayesian analysis is about conditional or posterior probabilities, and the most important of these to Hume's attack is: $P[M | T[M]]$, the probability that a miracle occurred, given that there was testimony for a miracle. Using the inverse probability form of Bayes's theorem, this conditional probability can be solved as:²³

21 This follows Harrison (1999: esp. 241–2). The statement of Hume's attack can be made stronger by observing that the evidence for second-hand testimony of Christian miracles was written by individuals not known to the actual witnesses to the miracles. This complication to Hume's attack was not addressed by Price or Hume, although Bible scholars such as Newton or Price would have known this.

22 'The great end [Price] always had in view was, to convey to his hearers right notions of the Deity as the foundation of all rational religion, and to instill in their minds the necessity of a virtuous course as the only means of securing his favour' (Morgan 1815: 186). As discussed in Section 6, Price continued the Newtonian project of rationally integrating Newton's natural philosophy with Christian theology.

23 Dale (1991: 113) traces this discrete version of Bayes's theorem to M. Condorcet, *Mémoire sur le calcul des probabilités*, 1781, pt. 5.

$$P[M|T[M]] = \frac{P[M]P[T[M]|M]}{P[M]P[T[M]|M] + P[\sim M]P[T[M]|\sim M]}$$

where $P[T[M] | M]$ and $P[T[M] | \sim M]$ are the conditional probabilities for the truthfulness of the testimony; for example, $P[T[M] | \sim M]$, the probability of testimony to a miracle given that there was no miracle, would be high when liars are the source of testimony.

To evaluate the $P[M | T[M]]$ relevant to Hume's attack using this formula, it is necessary to take all relevant prior and conditional probabilities to be strictly positive to avoid indeterminate or trivial solutions. This step requires closer attention. For Hume (1739–1740: 124): 'One wou'd appear ridiculous, who wou'd say, that 'tis only probable the sun will rise tomorrow, or that all men myst dye; tho' 'tis plain we have no further assurance of these facts, than what experience affords us.' In referencing the rising sun or the certainty of death 'Hume was arguing that there are degrees of belief which, while not demonstratively certain, exceed all probability' (Zabell 1989: 293). While Hume's attack sees a miracle to be much more than a rare occurrence, the modern approach is consistent with Laplace where $P[M]$ is a remotely small number. In particular, using the rule of succession solution, Laplace provides a best odds estimate of 1,826,214:1 for the sun rising tomorrow based on the length of human experience. Without loss of content, it is sufficient for the modern argument to take, say, $P[M] = 0.000001 = 1 - P[\sim M]$. Similarly, regarding second-hand testimony: 'The many instances of forged miracles ... begat a suspicion against all relations of this kind' (Hume 1751: 186). Hence, let $P[T[M] | M] = 0.5 = P[T[M] | \sim M]$. In this case, the conditional probabilities in the numerator and denominator cancel leaving $P[M | T[M]] = 0.000001$. Attributing a very high probability weighting of, say, $P[T[M] | M] = 0.999$ to the truthfulness of the testimony does not change much; this still only gives a conditional probability: $P[M | T[M]] = 0.0998\%$. In effect, because a miracle is a virtually impossible event, a violation of the laws of nature, it is effectively never possible for the reliability of witness testimony to overcome this hurdle. As Hume (1715: 182) observes: '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 endeavors to establish.'

Given the role Price played in communicating Bayes's theorem, it is not surprising that attention given to Dissertation IV has emphasized that part associated with Price's application of Bayes's theorem to determine the validity of second-hand testimony. Yet, it is conventional in modern studies to situate Hume's attack within the inverse probability framework initially introduced by Laplace and applied to the specific problem of assessing the reliability of testimony. Only a few modern sources recognize the specific

details of Price's contribution on the use of prior probabilities.²⁴ Even those sources that do recognize the contribution either fail to examine why Price was concerned with situating probabilities within intervals rather than obtaining specific point estimates, or fail to recognize that miracles had a different inductive interpretation for Price. As a mathematical contribution, it is the impact of increasing sample size on the length of the confidence interval that is explicitly discussed. In this there is a hint of the problem that motivated the development of sequential analysis in the twentieth century, albeit without any recognition of the restrictions imposed by combining a fixed confidence level and interval length (for example, Klein 2000).

4. Price's Bayesian argument

Following Buckle (2007: esp. xiii–xviii), the general philosophical issues arising in Hume's attack can be traced through the works of Cicero – an essential component of university-level education at the time of Hume and Price – to the ancient Greek schools of Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism. Of these, only Stoicism was consistent with the benevolent god of Christian belief, both doctrinaire and dissenting. In contrast, Hume's philosophy can be characterized as 'Scepticism with Epicurean sympathies' (Buckle 2007: xiv). Elements of Price's Bayesian argument against Hume's attack resemble the ancient Stoics arguing against the Sceptics: 'But let them not pretend they are able to prove *a priori*, that no accounts of miracles *can* be true' (Price 1768: 452). While Stoics and Epicureans made claims to certain knowledge about the gods and the character of human beings, Sceptics maintained that 'no claims to certain knowledge can be justified.' Building on ancient skepticism, Hume presented a philosophy based on empirical observation as the source of knowledge, but that also admitted, in a fashion, the *a priori* physical laws uncovered in the natural philosophy detailed in the mathematical and experimental discoveries of Isaac Newton.

Protestant Christian theology evolved considerably during the Enlightenment, providing a backdrop for the anti-Catholic, British intellectual

24 Zabell (1988, 1989) and Dale (1991) are exceptions. Some sources make references to Price's contribution without much detail (for example, Owen 1987: 195): '[Price's] point entirely undermines Hume's use of prior probabilities in his discussion of rationality of belief in miracles based on testimony.' Some relevant sources for the contributions of Laplace and Condorcet on this issue are Sobel (1987: esp. n.2) and Dale (1991: esp. n.8 and ch. 5–6).

climate at the time of Hume's attack. Miracles provided a fundamental demarcation point between Protestant and Catholic theology. In particular, while 'Catholics hold miracles to be a permanent feature of the world ... evidence of ongoing divine engagement,' Protestants conventionally maintained that miracles 'occurred only in a past apostolic age, a special period of divine activity in the world' (Buckle 2007: xviii). This allowed Protestants to pursue arguments for unobservable miracles not available to doctrinaire Christians. In particular, it is well known that the version of Bayes's theorem presented by Price to the Royal Society assumed equality of unknown prior probabilities (i.e. a uniform prior distribution). Applied directly to the Protestant definition of unobservable miracles, uniformity arguably requires $P[M] = P[\sim M]$ and the prior distributions cancel when solving $P[M | T[M]]$, leaving the conditional probability to be determined by the truthfulness of the testimony that, for Protestant Christian miracles, was attributed mainly to the Apostles. Price observes (1768: 447): 'Let them shew, that Christ and his Apostles were either *enthusiasts* or *imposters*, and account for their conduct and writings on one of those suppositions.'

While maintaining $P[M] = P[\sim M]$ could provide sufficient support for miracles among Stoic dissenting Christians, this does not deal with the skeptical argument advanced by Hume: '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 endeavors to establish.' Recognizing that miracles for a dissenting theologian such as Price did not involve contemporaneously observable violations of nature, it is understandable that Price made a number of arguments implicitly employing a prior belief that $P[M] = P[\sim M]$.²⁵ Throughout Dissertation IV, traditional Stoic criticisms of Scepticism are mingled with Bayesian arguments with the overall aim of undermining of Hume's attack. Significantly, the Bayesian arguments are found mostly in a few lengthy footnotes in Dissertation IV and follow much the same line as the 'Appendix' to Bayes (1763) written by Price. For example, consider the following demonstration from Dissertation IV that samples of very large size and constancy are required before any validity can be given to a probabilistic statement:

If we know no more of an event than that it has happened ten times in eleven trials, and failed once, and we should conclude from hence, that the probability of its

25 The closest Price comes to directly identifying the condition $P[M] = P[\sim M]$ is the following: 'the improbability of event here mentioned, must mean the improbability which we should have seen there was of its happening independently of any evidence for it, or, previously to the evidence of testimony informing us that it *has* happened' (Price 1768: 405).

happening in a single trial lies between the odds of nine to one and eleven to one, there would be twelve to one *against* being right. – If it has happened a hundred times, and failed ten times, there would be odds of near three to one *against* being right in such a conclusion. – If it happened a thousand times and failed a hundred, there would be an odds *for* being right of a little more than two to one. And supposing the same *ratio* preserved of the number of happenings to the number of failures, and the same guess made, this odds will go on increasing for ever, as the number of trials increases. (Price 1768: 397)

The relatively complicated procedure for calculating these specific odds ‘is proved by mathematical demonstration’ (Price 1768: 411–12) in the Appendix. Unfortunately, the general case deals with events that have both succeeded and failed a number of times and, as a consequence, is not directly applicable to miracles that are more ‘unusual.’²⁶

The connection between the Bayesian argument made in Dissertation IV and Bayes’s theorem is apparent in the statement of the main problem being examined in Bayes (1763: 376):

Given the number of times in which an unknown event has happened and failed:
Required the chance that the probability of its happening in a single trial lies somewhere between any two degrees of probability that can be named.

This speaks only to the general inductive problem of calculating the degree of probability from a finite number of trials. The Bayesian intuition that Price extended to Hume’s attack is seen by considering the various worked examples given in the Appendix. Following Dale (1991), let x denote the probability associated with the next occurrence of an event S , where S_i is the occurrence of S on trial i , then in modern notation Price initially gives results for:

$$P\left[\frac{1}{2} < x < 1 | S_1\right] = \frac{3}{4} \quad P\left[\frac{1}{2} < x < 1 | S_1, S_2\right] = \frac{7}{8}$$

$$P\left[\frac{1}{2} < x < 1 | S_1, S_2, S_3\right] = \frac{15}{16}$$

$$P\left[\frac{1}{2} < x < 1 | m \text{ successes}\right] = \frac{2^{m+1} - 1}{2^{m+1}}$$

As Zabell (1989: 294) observes, although closely connected, this result is not Laplace’s rule of succession where the probability of success on the $m + 1$ trial, given that all m trials to that point had been successful, is given as $(m + 1) / (m + 2)$.

26 In attributing the ‘principle of relative likelihood’ to Hume, Hambourger (1980) seeks to define the limits of Hume’s argument to a specific concern with the probabilistic implications of laws of nature, not of probabilistic judgments in general. Coleman (1988) and Langtry (1990) further examine this issue.

While these types of calculations are supposed to support statements made about skeptical probabilities in Dissertation IV, the implications for Hume's attack are not immediately apparent. Expressed as Laplace's rule of succession, such calculations suggest that the odds for continued successes without failure in a sequence increases with the number of individual successes. Because Hume's skepticism permits degrees of belief that, while not demonstratively certain, exceed all probability, as the number of successes increases – that is, observed instances where rules of nature are not violated – Laplace's rule of succession provides some support for Hume's *a priori* skeptical probability for a miracle. To avoid this, Price uses a Bayesian argument to 'mathematically demonstrate' that, even though a particular event has never been seen to occur in 10 previous trials, 'the probability of its happening in a single trial lies somewhere between any two degrees of probability that can be named.' This produces an unexpected result:

$$P\left[\frac{2}{3} < x < \frac{16}{17} \mid 10 \text{ successes, no failures}\right] = 0.513$$

Price (1768: 397) observes: 'The specimen now given is enough to show how very inaccurately we are apt to speak and judge on this subject, previously to calculation.'

The Bayesian argument being made by Price concerns the general use of inductive probabilities to support skeptical conclusions, rather than with specific elements of Hume's attack. For this purpose, Price falls back on more traditional theological arguments. Although Hume's attack was particularly sharp, the empirical or materialist Enlightenment debate on miracles had generated intense interest going back at least to Spinoza and Locke. Development of the metaphysical and theological properties of miracles given by Clarke in the dispute with Leibnitz provided sufficient traditional firepower for Price to counter Hume's attack without employing a Bayesian argument. As such, the text of Dissertation IV is more about the evolution of dissenting Protestant theology on miracles, rather than the first application of Bayesian decision theory to the practical problem of evaluating the credibility of testimony. The Bayesian argument, given largely in lengthy footnotes, was added after the bulk of the text of Dissertation IV was completed around 1760 (Morgan 1815: 23).

Price recognized that a Bayesian argument could be used to undermine the skeptical claims to *a priori* probability about miracles that appeared in Hume's attack. Although Price was attracted by the logical possibility of refuting Hume's attack mathematically, the actual Bayesian argument presented was decidedly incidental to the overall objective. The heavy

lifting in Dissertation IV is achieved by Price defining a miracle as an unusual event guided by divine intent. Armed with this definition, Price (1768: 413 and 419) observes ‘improbabilities *as such* do not lessen the capacity of testimony to report truth’ and ‘between *impossibilities* and *improbabilities*, however apt we may be to confound them, there is an infinite difference.’ Newspapers, for example, are in the business of reporting testimony concerning unusual events and there is general acceptance of the truth of stories in credible newspapers. Directly addressing Hume’s attack, Price (1768: 419) observes that improbabilities ‘have no *direct* and necessary operation upon [truth of testimony], and should not be considered as a *counter-evidence* invalidating, in proportion to their degree, its reports.’ In terms of a Bayesian calculation, Price argues that the prior probability for a non-doctrinaire miracle does not impact the truthfulness of testimony due to the equal prior probabilities $P[M] = P[\sim M]$.

5. Price, miracles and dissenting theology

Price makes a number of arguments in Dissertation IV concerning miracles. The Bayesian argument is only introduced to undermine the inductive probabilities used to define a miracle in Hume’s attack. The primary argument is theological, using ‘rational intuition’ to determine that the virtuous nature of Christian teaching provides reasonable evidence for the truth of Christian miracles. In opposition to modern interpretations that reference only the Bayesian element, it is theology not Bayesian analysis that is the essence of Dissertation IV. Being a dissenting minister, Price was not compelled to adhere to the doctrinaire Christian miracle that was the immediate target of Hume’s attack. As such, Dissertation IV permits Price to be situated within the evolution of Protestant theology going back, at least, to Newton. Earlier contributors to this evolution, such as Samuel Clarke, were significantly impacted by doctrinaire restrictions.²⁷ Instead of recognizing Price (1768) for the relatively small component related to the Bayesian argument, this paper argues that it is more appropriate to view Dissertation IV as the last of four religious dissertations where the role of ‘rational intuition’ in the dissenting Protestant theology of Richard Price is detailed.

The enigma posed by the treatment of Richard Price in eighteenth-century intellectual history has theological roots. Price (1768) represented

27 Various sources identify Voltaire’s arrival in London in 1726 as a symbolic demarcation in the types of intellectual and political problems faced by Enlightenment thinkers in England (for example, Jacob 1977: 4).

the culmination of a century-long evolution of religious dissent that began with the natural philosophy discoveries of Isaac Newton and his tracing the ancient roots of dissenting Christian theology to the Arians, an anti-Trinitarian early Christian sect that denied Jesus was co-eternal with God. Immediate followers of Newton – William Whiston (1667 to 1752) and Samuel Clarke (1675 to 1729) – also felt Arianism was the doctrine of the early Christian church. Following Harrison (1995) and Pfizenmaier (1997b), while the prototypical Newtonian view on the divinity of Jesus was Arian, simple descriptions of this theological position are illusive. The general position differed from that of ‘free thinking’ religious dissenters, represented in Newton’s time by the Socinians, that denied the divinity of Jesus and emphasized Jesus as a prophet and conveyor of God’s word. Being a prolific Bible scholar, Newton developed an involved dissenting theology based on detailed study of Scripture and early Church history. Newton’s important intellectual stature and professional positions prevented his personal variant of anti-Trinitarian dissenting theology from being publicly displayed in order to avoid violating the Test Act. Consequentially, the Boyle lectures provided the venue for the development and presentation of Newton’s natural philosophy and, indirectly, his theology. Over the course of a series of lectures and writings, considerable evolution in both dissenting Protestant and liberal Anglican theology was inspired by Newton and his followers.

Although relatively close in historical time, the religious and social environment of Newton, Whiston (Boyle lecturer 1707) and Clarke (Boyle lecturer 1704/05) differed significantly from that of Price.²⁸ The collapse of the divine right of kings, followed by the Revolution Settlement with milestones stretching from the Bill of Rights in 1689 to the Act of Settlement in 1701, marked a period of turmoil for the ‘High Church.’ The persecution of orthodox Anglican beliefs and practices under the Commonwealth was still fresh in the minds of many. The return of the Anglican party to power in the Cavalier Parliament marked the revival of the High Church position in the English political structure. However, the Revolution Settlement eroded the legal and political powers of the Church and marked the political emergence of a landed Whig oligarchy that was populated by ‘freethinkers, materialists, atheists and deists.’ After a generation of struggle, there was a need to renew the Anglican theology

28 See Dobbs and Jacob (1995) and Jacob (1976, 1977: 1–25). These lectures were created in 1691 by an endowment in the will of Robert Boyle and were given continuously from 1692 to 1714, with occasional breaks until 1732. The lectures were given sporadically during the nineteenth century and were revived in 2004.

of the Church of England. This social, political and religious initiative coincided with the dissemination of the natural philosophy contained in Newton's marvelous contributions. During this period, there emerged an uneasy alliance between the Anglican church and the loose collection of intellectuals that composed the early beginnings of 'the Newtonians' (for example, Jacob 1976, 1977; Dobbs and Jacob 1995).

The reign of Queen Anne (1702 to 1714) was marked by the High Church alarm of 'Church in Danger' (Stewart 1981). It was during this reign that Newtonian experimental science emerged into the public conscience. At the same time, under the Test Act adherence to the Trinitarian doctrine was still a required litmus test for Anglican orthodoxy, a prerequisite for important political and university positions. The Newtonian struggle with the metaphysics of natural philosophy is evident in the Boyle lectures of Clarke and Whiston. While these lectures were at least superficially consistent with orthodox Anglican teaching, both Clarke and Whiston subsequently published a number of works that were clearly of Arian persuasion – with Clarke's *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) and Whiston's *Primitive Christianity Revived* (1711–1712) being especially significant efforts. Following Newton, this evolution was based primarily on scriptural interpretation and examination of early Church documents. The inherent metaphysical conflicts between Trinitarianism and Newtonian natural philosophy that were raised in early writings were no longer a central concern. Fears of such unorthodox scriptural interpretations by such prominent Newtonians fueled the persecution of Clarke and Whiston. In 1710, Whiston was removed as Lucasian professor at Cambridge, a position he obtained on Newton's retirement in 1703, and was expelled from the university after a well-publicized hearing. The controversy culminated two years later in Clarke's humiliating promise to the Upper House of Convocation not to preach or write any further on the topic.

By the appearance of Price (1768) the character of religious orthodoxy in England had softened considerably. While Whiston was denied entry into the Royal Society, ostensibly for publishing scriptural interpretations that denied Trinitarian doctrine, Price suffered no such sanction, despite publicly detailing a particular interpretation of Arian theology.²⁹ Between Newton and Price there was considerable evolution in British Christian theology away from Trinitarian Anglican orthodoxy and towards those of religious dissenters.³⁰ Price (1787) identifies common beliefs held by all

29 The most accessible source for these views is Price (1787), a collection of sermons, many of which were delivered well prior to 1787.

30 Following Pfitzenmaier (1997b), there is some disagreement over whether Newton was an Arian and even some support for the position that, in later life,

Christians, which he identifies with Socinian, Trinitarian and Arian theologies. Included in these common beliefs are: 'That Christ was sent of God; that he is the true Messiah; that he worked miracles, and suffered and died and rose again as related in the four Gospels.' Given this common ground, on the specific issue of miracles, there was considerable divergence. Clarke's theology, for example, has been classified as Trinitarian, not Arian as in most historical accounts (for example, Pfizenmaier 1997a). There was also divergence within each general theological approach; for example, not all Arians accepted a non-interventionist view of miracles. Finally, some dissenting Christians could not be classified as either Socinian or Arian.

Confronted by Hume's attack, the problem for Price was how to rationally reconcile this common Christian belief in miracles with Newton's mechanical universe governed by the immutable laws of nature? Maintaining that miracles were observable and interventionist, orthodox Catholic doctrine was indefensible against such a skeptical attack. Some alternative approach to defining miracles was needed to provide a rational defense. The most apologetic Christian approach to Hume's attack was to avoid defining a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature, and Price (1768) follows Clarke in proposing this solution at certain points. However, as the only response to Hume's attack, such a definition would only satisfy those with Socinian inclinations. Those of Arian persuasion, such as Price, would be unwilling to reduce the resurrection of Jesus to being little more than a myth or story. Price needed the more common Protestant claim that Christian miracles only happened in ancient times, at a particular place. This approach was a considerable evolution from the interventionist miracles that were observable violations of nature proposed in the nineteenth century by dissenting Christians writing prior to Clarke, such as Robert Boyle and Thomas Sprat, who went so far as claim superior ability to judge whether a miracle had happened due to deeper knowledge of the Newtonian natural philosophy (Harrison 1995: 536).

In the period between Newton and Price, the use of different approaches to defining miracles was common in Christian writings. In the Boyle lectures, Clarke concludes about miracles: 'Tis not therefore a right Distinction; to define a *Miracle* to be That which is against the *Course of Nature*.' Writing long before Newton proposed his version of the laws of nature, St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas both emphasized the 'unusual' character of miracles and that approach is adopted by Clarke, both in the

Newton came to support Trinitarian doctrine. Whatever the case, there is no disagreement that Newton was a dissenting theologian with an individually determined religious perspective.

Boyle lectures and in the dispute with Leibnitz over miracles.³¹ It is apparent from Dissertation IV that Price also recognizes that miracles need not be defined as violations of laws of nature:

a miracle, according to common opinion, implies a *violation* or *suspension* of the laws of nature. But, in reality, this is by no means necessarily included in the idea of a miracle. A sensible and *extraordinary effect* produced by a *superior power*, no more implies that a law of nature is *violated*, than any *common effect* produced by *human power*. (Price 1768: 436–7)

Arguments involving different definitions of miracles are interwoven with arguments from prophesy. As a rational basis for Christianity, prophesy is based on scriptural interpretation, especially the book of Revelation (Fruchtman 1983, Harrison 1999): ‘in any instance, a scripture prophesy is fulfilled, an unprejudiced person must be impressed. It affords, not only a demonstration of the credibility of miracles, but, in some degree, an *actual exhibition* of them’ (Price 1768: 381). Absent the Bayesian element, the overall approach of Price’s reply to Hume’s attack follows lines similar to previous efforts aimed at countering materialist, empiricist, deist and atheist attacks on miracles dating back at least to Clarke.

6. Miracles and rational intuition

Karl Pearson (1978: 373) attributes much of Price’s doctrine on miracles to Samuel Chandler (1693 to 1766).³² Although the source of this claim is not provided and the voracity not supported by other biographical sources, the Stoic characterization of Price’s ‘doctrine of miracles’ is accurate: miracles are to be believed if support is given to a messenger of God, such as a prophet, who is a teacher of just and rational views that lead to the practice of virtue and goodness. In Price’s words: ‘A revelation to instruct and reform a sinful and degenerate world is so far from implying any absurdity, that it is an effect of divine goodness which might reasonably be hoped for’ (1768: 438). In a similar statement, Price observes:

31 On Clarke versus Leibnitz, see Vailati (1995). On the Newtonian definition of miracles, see Harrison (1995).

32 Following Morgan (1815: 11), while serving as family chaplain in Stoke Newington after his graduation from the dissenting education academy, Price ‘occasionally officiated in different congregations, particularly at Dr. Chandler’s meetinghouse in the Old Jewry.’ Thomas (1977: 15) claims ‘the development of Price’s thought on freedom of worship was probably influenced by his *History of Persecution*’ (Chandler 1736).

If we reject the miracles mentioned in the New Testament, it will not be possible to give any tolerable account of the establishment of such a religion as the christian among mankind, by a few persons of no education or learning, in opposition to all the prejudices and powers of the world. (1768: 439)

Unlike the Bayesian argument, these are not words submerged in a footnote. Rather, these and other similar statements are contained in the body of the text. As such, despite some Bayesian tendencies to the contrary, Dissertation IV was written more as a contribution to moral philosophy and theology than as an application of Bayesian analysis to Hume's attack.

The doctrine of miracles proposed by Price depends on accurate identification of 'virtue and goodness,' a problem that is central to moral philosophy. For Price (1768: 459–60), the primary source of teaching on 'divine goodness' is the New Testament:

It is not conceivable, that any one can read the New Testament, and observe with what a force and purity, before unknown, it teaches morality and natural religion; the sublime and singular character it has drawn, without the least appearance of art and effort, in the history it gives of the life, discourses and Miracles of Jesus Christ; and the spirit of piety, goodness, love and heavenly mindedness which breathes through all its parts

The connection between the divine mind and the human mind being revealed through miraculous works is a key element in the Stoicism Price shared with other dissenting Protestants (for example, Craig 1987). Stoics maintained the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of reason was a duty owed to 'the Deity.' While free thinkers of this period applauded Newton's scientific achievements as evidence for the use of reason alone to decide philosophical issues, this approach was actively opposed by dissenting Christians such as Price. Precisely how this opposition was expressed differed across individual adherents to dissenting theology.

Given the miraculous revelation of the New Testament, Price's rationalist moral philosophy maintained that being patient and virtuous will be rewarded by the just and benevolent divine Spirit (Thomas 1977: 40). Contrary to empiricists and skeptics such as Hume, moral judgments involve a non-arbitrary intuition about necessary truth. While this moral philosophy created some difficulties with respect to Arian theology,³³ Price was convinced of the need to be open to the rational consideration of alternative moral and theological arguments:

33 On the conflict between rationalism and Arian theology, see Thomas (1977: 38–40).

It would be much better, if christians . . . would take care that their own faith is the result of honest enquiry, and at the same time study to demonstrate the excellence of their religion by the excellence of their tempers and lives. (Price 1768: 463)

Continuing the Newtonian tradition, for Price honest enquiry included the active study of natural science, which is of great assistance in revealing the divine mind.³⁴ Price compares the miraculous discoveries in natural science with the ‘improbability’ of a miracle defined as a ‘sensible and *extraordinary effect* produced by a *superior power*’:³⁵

there is nothing of the improbability in miracles which some have imagined. I may even venture to say, that they have in them a much less degree of improbability, than there was, antecedently to observations and experiments, in such *phenomena* as *comets*, or such powers as those of *magnetism* and *electricity*. (Price 1768: 437)

The reference to comets extends the scientific enterprise well beyond the scope of the contributions of Newton.

Starting with his first book (Price 1758), Price presents an evolution of moral philosophy that has been described as ‘rational intuitionism’ (for example, Thomas 1977: vii). This reference is intriguing because of the connection to modern ‘rational intuitionists,’ a loosely defined group that, almost certainly, includes the ‘ethical intuitionists’ such as H.A. Prichard and W.D. Ross. Contrary to the utilitarians, ethical intuitionists proposed a different answer to the question: which action is right? While utilitarians would choose the action that produces the most good, ethical intuitionists identify ‘a number of distinct and irreducible basic duties or moral principles, all of which can be relevant in determining whether some action is right’ (McNaughton 1996). This debate, which took place mostly between World War I and World War II, prompted H. Joseph to observe of the ethical intuitionists that ‘our obligations are not a heap of unrelated obligations’ (Joseph 1931: 92). While the likes of Prichard and Ross were not able to deal with this type of criticism, Price can address such criticisms theologically with the revelation of virtuous and good actions in the New Testament. There is direct connection between moral philosophy and theology that is not available to modern rational intuitionists.

Since the positivist onslaught initiated by Comte in the early nineteenth century, theological and metaphysical solutions to problems in moral philosophy and epistemology have been generally disregarded, especially by the scientific community. The predictable reaction is to disregard all philosophical solutions that depend inherently on theological or

34 In relation to prayer, Price discusses this point in Dissertation III (Price 1768: 255).

35 The process of the Deity producing these effects is detailed in Dissertation I.

metaphysical foundations, even though there may be elements of a particular philosophy that do not depend substantively on theology. It is often too frustrating to disentangle the various threads of the argument to focus on those elements with theological underpinnings that have modern relevance outside religious studies. In this process, some debates on topics of modern relevance have been ignored. The debate in moral philosophy between Price, the rational intuitionist, and Frances Hutcheson, the pre-classical utilitarian, on whether benevolence was the whole of virtue, is one such debate. Translated into modern times, this has relevance to the debate between Ross and Pritchard, on the one side, and the consequentialist utilitarians, represented by G.E. Moore, on the other.³⁶ This debate was concerned with the question: is there more than one fundamental moral principle? Utilitarians argue for a single rule: choose that action which produces the most good for the greatest number. Rational intuitionists argue that moral judgment is more complex. Intuition is required to balance the claims of different, and irreducible, moral principles (Thomas 1977: 74–5).

Contrasting these two debates is revealing. The central issue is the same: is the utilitarian formula a valid guide for making moral decisions? The statement of the utilitarian rule by Hutcheson is much the same in both debates: ‘*that action is best which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers*’ (for example, Raphael 1969; and Hutcheson 1738: 181). In a theological context, this implies that the providence of God depends only on the happiness of his subjects. In an individual context, it implies that virtue flows only from the consequences of actions. Price did not agree with either of these positions (Thomas 1977: 74–5). Although beneficence may be the most important virtue, it does not necessarily take precedence. Some individual actions are undertaken without considerations of immediate beneficial consequences. For Price, such actions have a religious basis. The duty of prayer, the obligation to worship and be faithful to God, the

³⁶ These classifications of utilitarianism are given in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2009). Classical utilitarianism begins with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and proposes the hedonistic utilitarian decision rule of maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number. Echoes of this rule in the form of the theological utilitarianism can be found as early as Richard Cumberland (1631 to 1718). Both Hume and Hutcheson contributed to establishing the early empiricist foundations of utilitarianism. In opposition to the arbitrary character of moral judgments associated with empiricism, Price proposed rational and objective standards of moral judgment. G.E. Moore marks a significant break with the hedonism of the classical utilitarians; for example, by questioning whether pleasure alone was intrinsically good. The designation of ‘consequentialist’ is intended to differentiate between these different approaches to utilitarianism.

obligation to keep promises and the duty to ‘think rightly about disputed points of Christianity’ are all actions that are not undertaken for immediate beneficial consequences. In contrast, Ross has a list of duties involving fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement and non-maleficence (McNaughton 1996: 435–6). While Hutcheson takes an empiricist’s approach to the utilitarian rule, Moore recognizes that apprehension of natural properties is insufficient to determine ‘good’ activities and actions, intuition is also required (Lang 1964: esp. 295–6).

Unlike the modern rational intuitionists, Price is able to make sense of the ‘unconnected heap of duties’ by referencing the necessary truths of Christian teaching. In addition, the failings of moral philosophy derived from reason alone have provided a more general recognition of the role of intuition in determining whether an action is good or right. As such, the connection between modern ‘rational intuitionism’ and the ‘rational intuition’ of Price is muted. As a rationalist, Price maintains that rational and objective moral judgments can be made independently of sensory perceptions; as an intuitionist Price holds that reason alone cannot provide sufficient guidance for moral judgment. The epistemology associated with the moral order implied by the rational intuitionism of Price features prominently in the response to Hume’s attack. The counterattack on the skeptical empiricism of Hume is evident:

it is necessary first to consider the nature and foundation of that assurance which experience gives us of the laws of nature. This assurance is nothing but the conviction we have, that future events will be agreeable to what we have hitherto found to be the course of nature, or the *expectation* arising in us, upon having observed that an event has happened in former experiments, that it will happen again in *future* experiments. This expectation has been represented as one of the greatest mysteries, and the result of an ingenious and elaborate disquisition about it is, that it cannot be founded on any reason, and consists only in an association of ideas derived from habit, or a disposition in our imagination to pass from the idea of one object to the idea of another which we have found to be its usual attendant. (Price 1768: 390)

Intuition is required to determine the laws of nature from observation: ‘An experiment which has often succeeded, we expect to succeed again, because we perceive intuitively, that such a constancy of event must proceed from something in the constitution of natural causes’ (Price 1768: 391). For Price, such arguments extend naturally to assessment of testimony because: ‘Testimony is truly no more than sense at second-hand’ (1768: 416).

Even though the concept is not generally accepted in modern academic discussion, situating the human mind within the divine mind is still a powerful method of resolving the confusion arising from the use of intuition to produce both empirical and moral judgments (Craig 1987). For Christians, divine teaching revealed in the New Testament is intuitively true

and good; key problems in epistemology and ethics are transformed into problems in theology. In supporting the Stoic and Newtonian goal of establishing a rational foundation for Christian religion, throughout his life Price stressed the importance of thinking rightly about the disputed points of Christianity between the primary Protestant theological viewpoints of his time: Trinitarian, Arian and Socinian. Although the essence of a rational Christian response to Hume's attack can be found in earlier sources, such as the Boyle lectures by Clarke, there were significant institutional restrictions on the ability to make such non-doctrinaire theological arguments clearly and forcefully early in the eighteenth century. A similar comment applies to Hume's attack. Miracles are an essential motivation for Christian teaching and Price was subject to considerably less restriction in launching a response than historical precursors such as Newton, Clarke and Whiston.

7. Conclusion

The lack of attention given to Richard Price in the history of classical political economy is a useful example of *Das Adam Smith Irrelevanzproblem* (Poitras and Jovanovic 2010: 11–12). So much of what Price contributed still resonates today, providing insights into subjects ranging from social security reform to the proper management of insurance companies to the inter-generational implications of government debt issuance. It is due to the modern significance of Bayesian analysis that Dissertation IV of Price (1768) is still remembered for one of its varied and interesting insights. The bulk of this largely theological contribution is usually ignored; the other arguments against Hume's attack go unrecognized. An integral part of a much larger philosophical project, Hume's attack is about the use of inductive empiricism to infer causes from effects, a problem that inspired Bayes (1763) and still generates intellectual debate. This paper situates the theological arguments made in Price (1768) in the evolution of dissenting Christian theology after the discoveries in natural philosophy by Isaac Newton. By carefully addressing the character of miracles, Price was able to avert the devastating skeptical implications of Hume's attack for doctrinaire Christian miracles, which were required to be both contemporaneously observable and interventionist. In the process, Price was able to sustain a basis for rational theology using 'rational intuition' to resolve moral questions. The lack of such an *a priori* basis to resolve normative questions is a problem that has plagued both modern moral philosophy, in general, and the consequential utilitarianism underpinning modern economics, in particular.

Acknowledgements

The helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers on an earlier version of this paper are gratefully acknowledged.

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Abstract

Following a brief overview of the contributions that Richard Price (1723 to 1791) made to the history of economic thought and related subjects, this paper examines the earliest known contribution to Bayesian decision theory: the reply that Price made to David Hume's skeptical argument against Christian miracles. Contrary to conventional presentations, this paper demonstrates that essential issues in the debate with Hume need to be properly situated within the broader philosophical and theological debates of those times. Price's primary application of Bayes's theorem to Hume's argument against miracles is also shown to be distinct from the conventional Bayesian approach to the interpretation of testimony. The 'rational intuition' used to motivate Price's prior distribution is compared with modern intuitionism and substantive differences are identified.

Keywords

miracles debate, Bayes's theorem history, rational intuition