Bentham’s Religious Radicalism Revisited: A Response to Schofield

James E Crimmins
BENTHAM'S RELIGIOUS RADICALISM REVISITED:
A RESPONSE TO SCHOFIELD¹

J.E. Crimmins²

In a recent issue of this journal my interpretation of Bentham’s views on religion and religious institutions, mapped out in the book Secular Utilitarianism,³ was subjected to criticism by Philip Schofield.⁴ His main line of attack can be encompassed in two points. First, Schofield says that I argued in Secular Utilitarianism ‘that Bentham’s religious views were as central to his thought as his “metaphysics”, indeed that they were historically and logically the starting point for his thought’.⁵ Schofield’s contrary position is that ‘Bentham’s religious thought was derived from his “metaphysics”, that is his theory of logic and language, and that his religious thought is best interpreted as part of, and not as the foundation of, his political theory’.⁶ Second, Schofield challenges my claim that Bentham viewed atheism as a precondition for the achievement of the perfect utilitarian society and therefore ‘aspired...not only to reduce the influence of organized religion but ultimately...to eliminate the notion of religion itself from the mind’.⁷ By contrast Schofield argues that ‘Bentham’s concern for religious liberty and the related issue of freedom of discussion should be taken seriously’ rather than as mere tactical devices for the achievement of the secular utilitarian society.⁸

In making the first point against me, Schofield places a good deal of stress on my statement that Bentham’s views on religion were ‘integral’ to his thought, which he takes to mean foundational.⁹ This is an unfortunate misreading of my text. What I set out to do in Secular Utilitarianism was to provide an interpretation of Bentham’s thought ‘in which his religious views are located as an integral concern: on the one hand, intimately associated with

¹ An extended version of this response was presented at the triennial meetings of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies, Wake Forest University, 25 March 2000. I am grateful to Douglas Long for his helpful suggestions for improvements to this shorter version of the paper.

² Department of Political Science, Huron University College, 1349 Western Road, London, Ontario, N5X 3C6, Canada. Email: jcrimmin@julian.uwo.ca


⁵ Ibid., pp. 274–5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 275.

⁷ Ibid., quoting Crimmins, Secular Utilitarianism, p. 15.


⁹ Ibid., pp. 274, 276.
the metaphysical, epistemological and psychological principles which gave shape to his system as a whole and, on the other hand, central to the development of his entirely secular view of society. My position on this has not changed.

First, Bentham’s rejection of religion was a vital element in the development of his entirely secular view of society. This is demonstrated (1) by his antagonism towards the influence of religion in morality and moral theory, evident in his earliest writings on ethics and legislation onwards, and (2) in his attacks on natural, revealed and organized religion, especially in the second decade of the nineteenth century, when he launched a comprehensive and scathing challenge to England’s political and ecclesiastical institutions, including the ideas and beliefs upon which they were founded. Bentham’s rejection of religion enabled him to expound a secular variant of the utilitarian doctrine, shorn of any associations with religion, and consciously expounded in contrast to the religious exponents of the doctrine who held sway in England during the period in which his philosophy first developed. In this sense, Bentham’s anti-religious views were an ‘integral’ aspect of his thought, meaning not foundational but a constituent part.

Second, I still maintain that there exists an ‘intimate association’ between Bentham’s religious views and his theory of knowledge, though I admit to less clarity on this issue than was needed. Let me first say what I did not intend. I did not mean that Bentham’s metaphysics derived from his religious views. Thus, in the lengthy first chapter of Secular Utilitarianism, I presented the development of Bentham’s theory of knowledge as a blend of an empiricist epistemology, materialist metaphysics and a nominalist science of meaning, without suggesting that it was dependent on a prior position on religion. What I wrote in Secular Utilitarianism was that ‘Bentham’s views on religion... were developed and worked up towards completion in an intimate relationship with his theory of knowledge’, beginning in the 1770s and culminating in the writings on logic, language and religion of the second decade of the nineteenth century. Nor do I think it could be argued that Bentham’s views

10 Crimmins, Secular Utilitarianism, p. 1.
11 Ibid., Ch. 2.
12 Ibid., Chs. 5–8.
13 The writings of William Paley (1743–1805), the Anglican divine, were especially significant in this context; other religious advocates of the utility principle during this period were John Gay (1699–1745), John Brown (1715–66), Soame Jenyns (1704–87), Edmund Law (1703–87) and Abraham Tucker (1705–74). See the introductions and texts in Utilitarians and Religion, ed. J.E. Crimmins (Bristol, 1998).
14 Crimmins, Secular Utilitarianism, p. 15.
on religion were necessarily derived from his metaphysics, which is Schofield’s position.\footnote{Schofield, ‘Political and Religious Radicalism in the Thought of Jeremy Bentham’, p. 275.} He states that ‘whether or not one concludes that Bentham was an atheist of some sort’ what is clear ‘is that Bentham’s views in relation to the existence of God were derived from his theory of logic and language’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 280.} But, if this means that Bentham was not or could not have been an unbeliever until he had crafted his theory of logic and language, then it is questionable. The relationship between his views on religion and his metaphysics is a good deal murkier than is suggested by Schofield, at least in the 1770s when Bentham made his first stab at both subjects.\footnote{Unpublished manuscripts in the Bentham Papers at University College London, including manuscripts on the subject of subscriptions to articles of faith probably written in late 1773 or early 1774 (UC v.1–32, and xcvi. 263–341), and manuscripts headed ‘Preparatory Principles’ (UC lxix) and ‘Critical Jurisprudence Criminal’ (UC cxi). In the latter groups of manuscripts Bentham explored the theoretical principles that underpinned his legal philosophy and which he brought to the study of religious questions, as to all other areas of his thought.} For example, he already held substantial doubts about the veracity of fundamental articles of Christian belief before he contemplated directly questions of logic and language. Bentham’s extensive unpublished manuscripts on ‘Subscriptions’ to articles of faith (c.1773/74) provide sufficient evidence to support this proposition.\footnote{UC v.1–32, and xcvi. 263–341; for a discussion see Crimmins, Secular Utilitarianism, Ch. 3.} What is clear, however, is that Bentham’s investigations in logic and language provided the tools of precision by which he could sharpen his ideas and according to which he could best describe his views on religion in a reasoned manner. This is manifestly evident in his later (posthumously published) examinations of the term ‘church’ in the ‘Essay on Logic’ and the concepts of soul and God in ‘A Fragment on Ontology’,\footnote{The Works of Jeremy Bentham, ed. Bowring, Vol. VIII, pp. 249–51, and 196–8 (including note on p. 196).} his dissection of the fictions contained in the Anglican catechism in Church-of-Englandism and its Catechism Examined (1818),\footnote{Bentham, ‘The Church of England Catechism Examined’, in Church-of-Englandism, pp. 1–86.} and the searching empirical test he applied to the belief in the Deity’s benevolence in An Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind (1822) and to the belief in Paul’s miracles in Not Paul, but Jesus (1823). There can be little doubt that Bentham well understood the ramifications of his approach for questions of divinity, and much of Secular Utilitarianism is taken up with demonstrating this fact. Hence, I have no
difficulty in agreeing with Schofield that Bentham’s theory of logic and theory of language were ‘central’ to his thought,\(^{22}\) and point out that in the first chapter of *Secular Utilitarianism* it is argued that his critique of religion (and especially the implicit atheism) cannot be fully comprehended without recourse to the principles of his theory of knowledge.\(^{23}\)

I believe I am more vulnerable on the second of the points Schofield has made against me: that I interpreted Bentham as illiberal on religious matters, willing to use the power of the state to eliminate religion from the minds of its citizens. Here I admit to pushing the argument too far. Certainly, Bentham argued for the ‘euthanasia’ of the established Church in the pages of *Church-of-Englandism*.\(^{24}\) But as virulently opposed as he was to religion as a system of ideas and as a set of social and political institutions, he did not propose that government play a continuing role in religious affairs, other than upholding freedom of expression and ensuring that no religion or religious sect gained a privileged position in the state or society. On the other hand, exercising his own right to freedom of expression meant for Bentham being at liberty to challenge the validity and utility of religious ideas, practices and institutions, which he did in uncompromising fashion in his published writings on religion and their related manuscripts. Moreover, his evident disgust at the Church’s use of the fiction-riddled Catechism in the schools it sponsored, led him to recommend a syllabus for the education of England’s middling ranks (in *Chrestomathia*, 1816–17) which pointedly omitted any instruction on religion.\(^{25}\) By such means, convinced that this would assist individuals to better perceive their interests, Bentham sought to diminish significantly the moral and political influence of religious beliefs and institutions. His secular view of society was one in which notions of fear of God and belief in divine benevolence were not required for social order. Morality was to be based solely on a regard for the well-being of humankind in the present life. The implicit desirability of this secular objective led Bentham not only to call for the separation of Church and State, but to envision a society in which individuals might be free from the inhibiting psychological constraints of Christian theology. The latter was a significant impediment to the maximization of personal happiness and to the sorts of social and political improvements that would

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\(^{24}\) Bentham, *Church-of-Englandism*, p. 197.

otherwise enhance general happiness. Nonetheless, Schofield is right to say that Bentham’s anti-religiosity did not manifest itself in the advocacy of a government programme to stamp out religion.

There are two other issues contained in Schofield’s critique which bear further scrutiny in the attempt to clarify the nature of Bentham’s religious radicalism. First, there is the argument that my interpretation of Bentham is much like J.C.D. Clark’s view that religious radicalism was a prerequisite to political radicalism. Second, whether or not Bentham was an atheist is left undecided by Schofield.

I do not feel any particular affiliation with Clark’s generalizations about the relationship between religion and politics in the eighteenth century, and did not employ Clark’s thesis in contextualizing Bentham’s religious radicalism in Secular Utilitarianism. Even so, I must own that in Bentham’s case I was persuaded that his early religious radicalism led him into a more radical political direction. As I wrote then: ‘It seems more than an idle speculation to suggest that it was his early radical stand on religious matters that not only permitted, but served to draw him into more extreme positions on political questions.’ However, I did not say that ‘religious radicalism was a prerequisite for his political radicalism’. Bentham did not become a political radical because he was a religious radical. Rather, my argument in Secular Utilitarianism was that

Bentham had early in life fathomed the corruption and the reactionary characteristics implicit in the relationship between the ecclesiastical and secular arms of government, and this served to ease the path to his agitation for a complete overhaul of the system. In this sense irreligion both chronologically and logically preceded political radicalism.

My reasoning here was that in the writings on ethics and legal theory of the 1770s Bentham began to lay the groundwork for his ‘radically secular view of society’ — essentially, a social vision without religion. Because he had dispensed with the need for religion, both as an explanatory model and on the grounds of its general disutility, there could be no constraints on Bentham

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27 Crimmins, Secular Utilitarianism, p. 18.

28 Schofield, ‘Political and Religious Radicalism in the Thought of Jeremy Bentham’, p. 281. The closest I came to such a statement was in summarizing the content of the opening chapters of Secular Utilitarianism, in the process suggesting ‘that Bentham sought to supply the deficiencies of a philosophy of society based on religion by means of an entirely secular morality which looked to legislation as the central agency of social harmony, and that this was a necessary prerequisite to the emergence of his radically secular view of the state’. Crimmins, Secular Utilitarianism, pp. 97–8.

29 Ibid., p. 17, emphasis added.

30 Ibid.
from this quarter in his general campaign against the political institutions of
the state. More importantly for my thesis, in his unpublished manuscripts on
subscription to articles of faith, Bentham argued that intolerance was the
inevitable result of protecting an established religion. Not surprisingly, then,
a state prepared to use the sanctions at its disposal to defend an ecclesiastical
establishment could not itself escape criticism. Opposition to Anglican domi-
nance meant also a repudiation of those aspects of the political and social
framework by which the religious establishment was maintained.

The issue of Bentham’s atheism is not resolved by Schofield. David
Berman, in his *History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell*, did not
think that Bentham was an atheist. Unfortunately, Berman’s analysis is
unhelpful, since it takes no account of Bentham’s writings on logic and lan-
guage. Moreover, Berman attributes principal authorship of *An Analysis of the
Influence of Natural Religion*, with its systematic and uncompromising dis-
mantling of the beliefs in the supposed attributes of God and existence of an
afterlife, to George Grote (1794–1861) rather than to Bentham. Schofield
focused his discussion of the issue on the relevant passages of ‘A Fragment on
Ontology’, in which Bentham commented on the factual status of the soul
and God as ‘inferential incorporeal substances’. However, he resisted the con-
clusion that Bentham was an atheist on the grounds that the assumption that
‘all knowledge was founded upon the experience of the senses’ does not rule
out the possibility that ‘God might still have some sort of existence not acces-

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31 See esp. UC v. 5.
32 I am not persuaded that Bentham’s critique of religion can or should only be
viewed as a part of his political theory, as Schofield suggests in ‘Political and Religious
Radicalism in the Thought of Jeremy Bentham’, p. 275. Certainly, the writings on
religion, from the aborted critique of subscriptions to articles of faith of c.1773/74
through to the later published works and their related manuscripts, served a political
function, and none more so than Church-of-Englandism. However, the intellectual
context and thrust of Bentham’s views on religion is far broader in scope than is conveyed
by focusing on them simply as a feature of his general attack on the political establishment.
His detailed examination of natural and revealed religion went far beyond the ‘political’
to encompass questions of metaphysics, doctrine, church history and ecclesiastical
government.

33 David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain from Hobbes to Russell* (London

34 The precise role Grote played in the production of the *Analysis* has still to be
determined, but there is no reason to doubt that the substance of the work was Bentham’s.
Schofield appears to concur: see ‘Political and Religious Radicalism in the Thought of

quotes from the manuscripts used for the modern edition, *De l’ontologie et autres textes
sible to human perception’. 36 Strictly speaking, this is of course true. But it would also appear to be unreasonable then to subscribe to a belief in a God about whom we cannot know anything. Much of what Bentham had to say in ‘A Fragment on Ontology’ and in the Analysis underscores the irrationality of the belief in God. When referring to God in ‘A Fragment on Ontology’ as an ‘inferential incorporeal substance’, he explicitly described the process by which individuals may come to understand or believe in God’s existence, while remaining circumspect about the status of the understanding or belief itself. However, when he concluded that those who are not prepared to consider God a ‘real’ entity must therefore describe him as a ‘non-entity’, 37 he recognized that this was implicitly contradictory, 38 since the name ‘God’ would then indicate an entity bereft of meaning — a concept emptied of all content. Reasonably enough, Schofield acknowledged that in the ontological discussion of God, Bentham ‘set down a rationale for atheism’. 39 Quite so, but the telling point is that Bentham knew he had done this and did not attempt to mitigate the fact. It may be true that he did not expressly acknowledge his atheism (few in Bentham’s day did), but to this I submit that the absence of an admission of atheism should not carry much weight when the evidence pulling us in a different direction is so compelling. It should carry still less weight when the writer is sufficiently indifferent to the implications of his investigations not to add a clarification that might make us think differently about his own personal beliefs in the matter.

James E. Crimmins
HURON UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

38 Ibid., p. 198.