Bentham’s Metaphysics and the Science of Divinity

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Bentham’s Metaphysics and the Science of Divinity*

J.E. Crimmins


The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) has long been recognized as an exponent of a new science of society. However, scholars of his thought have given scant attention to at least one important aspect of that science: the relationship between the metaphysical presuppositions of his social science and his view on religion. Rarely is it considered that Bentham’s aspiration to create a science of society in emulation of physical science was fundamental to his critique of religion just as it was to all other aspects of his thought. This critique of religion was set out principally in a series of works written between the years 1809 and 1823. Swear Not at All by Church-of-Englandism and its Catechisms Examined, The Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind appeared in 1822 and Not Paul, But Jesus in 1823. It was not merely a coincidence that in the very period when Bentham devoted so much of his time to religion his work on metaphysics and logic substantially reached fruition. The “Book on Logic,” on which Bentham worked at intervals between 1811 and 1821, was intended to give a full description of his “method.” The work was never completed but was eventually edited and included in several fragments in John Bowring’s A Fragment on Ontology, the Essay on Language,” and the “Fragments on Universal Grammar.” The metaphysics described in these essays by Bentham was initially developed by him during the formative years of his intellectual life in the early 1770s, and he was always aware of its particular consequences in the field of religion.

Almost from the first time he put pen to paper he made known his distant for the common notion of “metaphysics,” understood as abstract thinking or the science of things transcending what is physical or belonging to Nature, though he was later to employ the term to describe his own speculations in the field of linguistics. These speculations fostered a descriptive view of language and a nominalist understanding of the world, both of which were central features of his approach in all fields of knowledge. For Bentham words, ideas, and propositions must represent, be signs for, or describe perceptible discrete physical entities. If they do not then they are abstractions or general terms which must be reduced to “real entities” before they can be correctly understood. Where ontological analysis fails to establish physical referents for a “fiction,” to use Bentham’s term, it can be assumed that it does not exist in any tangible form and so cannot be “known” in any certain or scientific sense of that term. These, in brief, are the presuppositions upon which he based his theory of knowledge. The ramifications of this theory for a religion which assumes that man’s nature has its spiritual as well as its physiological side, and that there exists a reality beyond the perceptible material world, are perhaps not difficult to discover, but the peculiar nature of Bentham’s critique of religion has been consistently overlooked by scholars of his thought and by those interested in secular trends in the nineteenth century.

Drawing upon his early unpublished manuscripts as well as his later published work, it is my intention in this essay to trace the intimate relationship that exists between Bentham’s metaphysics and his critique of religion. Though it is true, as many have pointed out, that he harbored doubts regarding the manner in which official religion was administered even as a youth at Oxford, my interest here is with the systematic presentation of these and other doubts about religious beliefs. In short, I am concerned with the specific terms in which he came to express his unbelief. It was not his “religious upbringing” or “the religious training he suffered as a boy” which lay at the root of his utilitarianism, as Mary Mack has argued. The history of his disaffection, first with the Church and later with religion itself, is one of a gradual process, and it is difficult to say with precision when it took the form of a definitive stance in his mind. What can be said, however, is that the emergence of the metaphysical principles upon which his theory of knowledge is grounded were crucial to this development and are, therefore, a necessary component of the attempt to explain it.

The Foundations of Bentham’s Critique of Religion

An unpublished manuscript from the year 1773 speaks characteristically of Bentham’s aspiration to follow in the footsteps of Newton and Locke, but is also indicative of the subsequent direction of his thoughts on religion. In
the process of eulogizing the achievements of "those heroes of the intellectual world, whose mortal works have placed their country on the summit of the scale of nations," he paused to reflect that both men were religious heretics. "Fire is not more at variance with water, than was Locke religious heretic. Newton was heretic: the few lost hours which that with orthodoxy... Newton was an heretic: the few lost hours which that great man stole from the region of certainty to waste upon the region of unintelligibles led him into Heresy" (UC v. 23). But neither Newton nor Locke is to be lauded for their religious opinions, heretical or otherwise. Locke is to be lauded for their religious opinions, heretical or otherwise, since it is in this respect that they left "the region of certainty" to inhabit science as "the region of unintelligibles." Even from this early date, the science of science as "the region of unintelligibles." 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which must be "either one or several corporeal objects considered in some particular point of view."  

Naturally, Bentham had not fully formulated his ontological ideas in the early writings. The culmination of his thoughts in this area of investigation came about in the years 1813-15 when he prepared the manuscripts later used for "A Fragment on Ontology." The dichotomy between real and fictitious entities was at the heart of Bentham's work on language at this time. In the "Essay on Logic" he informs us that the subjects of linguistic analysis are real and fictitious entities, and the task of this analysis is to be understood as "psychical arrangement," that is to say, the distinction and arrangement of "the names" and, through the names the "ideas" of the discourse of such subjects as come to view (Works, 8. 262). In "A Fragment on Ontology" he described the field of ontology as "the field of supremely abstract entities." Entities, he writes, may be "perceptible" (made known by the immediate testimony of our senses) or "inherent" (the product of a chain of reasoning). A real entity is an entity "belonging to the essence of reality"; its qualities are "solidity" and "permanence." Those real entities which are perceptible are corporeal substances; those which are inherent are incorporeal and belong to the world of ideas. Fictitious entities, the primary focus of Bentham's analysis, are entities to which existence is ascribed by the grammatical form of expression, but to which "in truth and reality existence is not meant to be ascribed" (Ibid., 195-96).

But fictitious entities are not to be condemned because of their transcendent character, since they are necessary to the possibility of discourse, at least at a refined level, taking place. We speak of them and use them (words like "motion," "relation," "facial," and "power") as if they really exist without meaning that they do, but we do it to facilitate conversation and to exchange ideas (Ibid., 197-98). Nevertheless, implicit in what Bentham says here is an outright denial of the notion of an incorporeal reality; it is an impossibility, since incorporeal substances belong only to the world of ideas and cannot be reduced to real entities. The main aim of Bentham's analysis, however, is to point out that linguistic confusions are often caused by taking a fictitious entity to have a real existence. Nor is this a difficult mistake to make, since every fictitious entity is spoken of as if it were real:

Of nothing that has place, or passes, in our minds can we give any account, any otherwise than by speaking of it as if it were a portion of space, with portions of matter, some of them at rest, others moving in it. Of nothing, therefore, that has place or passes in our mind, can we speak, or so much as think, otherwise than in the way of a fiction (Ibid., 199)
The purpose of distinguishing between real and fictitious entities is to limit the confusion that can be caused by the use of fictions by attaching clear ideas to terms in general use, and thereby to obviate errors and disputes which arise from want of clarity (ibid., 198). Bentham had no doubts about the consequences which arise from the lack of clarity in the language of religion. In a manuscript dating from 1773 he wrote of the pernicious effects on the human character of insculpting incomprehensible tenets of belief:

That state of prepared insobriety which is necessary to a mind for the tranquil reception of one parcel of Nonsense, fits it for another. . . . A man who after reading the scriptures can bring himself to fancy the doctrines of the Athenian Creed . . . his mind if not already blotted over with hieroglyphical chimeras is a sheet of blank paper, on which any one who will press hard enough may write what scrabbles he pleases. (UC xcvii. 48)

Bentham was to return to this theme on many occasions in the future, but it was clear from the outset that his theory of knowledge entailed an obvious bias against the claims of religion. The only objects which have a real existence are those which are corporeal, single and entire of themselves. Sense impressions provide us with the data of the external world and these are translated into mental images and abstractions for the purpose of discourse. Convinced that the reality of the world of appearances is a matter of sense experience, Bentham argued that when all the characteristics of the evidence observed by a man are noted, belief and disbelief are no longer at his discretion; one or the other is the necessary consequence of the preponderance of evidence on the one side or the other. The business of knowing, he writes in the “Essay on Logic,” is simply a matter of observation, inference, and verification: “Experience, Observation, Experiment, Reflection, or the results of each, and all together; these are the means, these are the instruments by which knowledge—such as is within the reach of the mind—can be picked up, put together, and treasured up” (Works, 8.
dy power of man—is picked up, put together, and treasured up” (Works, 8.

Essays on Metaphysics and Logic

Given this analysis of the use and meaning of words and of the confusion they may produce, it is not such a curious phenomenon as might first appear that we should find Bentham’s definitive statements about the

nature of the soul and the supposed existence of God, not in any of his writings on religion but in one of his essays on metaphysics—“A Fragment on Ontology.” The belief in the soul’s immortal nature and in the existence of an all-powerful and omnipresent God must have appeared to Bentham as obvious and attractive subjects for linguistic analysis. Not surprisingly he found that the soul could not be classified as anything other than an infernal entity (Works, 8. 196). Lest there be any doubt as to his meaning Bentham adds in a footnote that those who do not believe in the reality of the soul as an independently existing phenomenon, must conclude that it is a fictitious entity, in which case it might be considered as “that whole, of which so many other psychological entities, none of which have ever been considered any otherwise than fictitious, such as the understanding, and the will, the perceptive faculty, the memory, and the imagination, are so many parts” (ibid., 196 n.). That this is his own conception of the soul, stripped of all mysticism and superstition, there is no question. With reference to the existence of God his position is no less clear:

Should there be a person who, incapable of drawing those inferences by which the Creator and Preserver of all other entities, is referred to the class of real ones, . . . the class to which such person would find himself in a manner, compelled to refer that invisible and mysterious being would be, not as in the case of the human soul to that of fictitious entities, but that of non-entities. (ibid.)

Whereas Bentham can envisage that the soul may exist as the sum of the human psyche, he cannot transform “God” into anything reminiscent of the common understanding of that term. The mysticism that is stripped from the idea of the soul cannot be banished from the idea of God to leave anything remotely acceptable in its place. That the notion of God is a source of fictions and that God is a non-entity are conclusions to which Bentham’s metaphysics inextricably leads, and it was these principal ideas which lay at the heart of all his thoughts on religious beliefs. If you do not have good, that is to say “scientific,” grounds to suppose or infer the existence of God, what is there left to say for a religion which merely assumes his reality? Over forty years earlier Bentham had intimated that the Science of Divinity might be a barren field of inquiry: “Either Divinity is an important science,” he wrote, “or it is important to know that it is not. It is of importance, and of the last importance to know whether any of it is of importance, and how much and what, if any” (UC v. 18, 1773). The fruit of the metaphysical investigations he began in the early 1770s and continued into his later years, was to show that Divinity served the entirely negative function of revealing the absurdities fostered by the superstitions which have their source in religious beliefs. Yet if Bentham did not always conduct his investigations with the same
kind of scientific open-mindedness that he preached, the supposed infallibility of science made it more than merely a useful propaganda weapon in his attack on religion. Disaffected with the overbearing authority of organized religion while still a youth at Oxford, his animosity increased throughout his middle years as the Bishops in the House of Lords reverted one progressive reform after another (or so it seemed to Bentham), until in later life he became openly and vehemently hostile to the political influence of the Church of England. The original source of Bentham's distaste for the established religion, therefore, could not be said to derive from the preconceived notion of his social science. In the "Essay on Logic," however, he proposes a very calmed and pointed conjectural history of the term "church" and its significant, applying in mastery fashion the lessons of logic and linguistic analysis which together form the theoretical principles of his social science. The hyperbole and vitriolic language which all too frequently mar Bentham's criticism in the works on religion of the same period are not to be found here. Instead his exposition is both instructive and thoughtfully crafted.

The genesis of the term "church" from its Greek form ecclesia, signifying an assembly of persons for any purpose, to its early Christian usage, intended to refer to an assembly of those of a particular faith, was accompanied, Bentham claims, by the evolution of the role of the instructor or teacher of that faith. Instead of the Latin servus, meaning "servant," the English noun "minister" came to be employed to designate these instructors, and later episcop, signifying "overseer of the behavior of the faithful," was replaced by the epithet "bishop." This gradual transformation was accompanied by a transformation in the role of the officials of the faithful: instead of being their servants they were now the rulers. Largely as a result of this transformation the term "church" came to mean different things to different people: 1. The whole body of the persons thus governed; 2. The whole body of the persons thus employed in the government of the rest; and 3. The all comprehensive body, or grand total, composed of governed and governors taken together (Works, 8, 249). Added to this fourth meaning soon emerged indicating the place of assembly itself, and God, "although present at all times in all places, was regarded as being in a more particular manner present at and in all places of this sort" (ibid., 250). These places of worship soon became objects of veneration themselves. In one word, says Bentham, they became "holiness.

At this point an "inseparable transition" took place by which the terror and respect that the members of the congregation held for their holy place of worship "came to extend itself to, upon, and to the benefit of, the class of persons in whose hands the management of whatsoever was done in these holy places: holy functions, holy offices, holy persons, holy places and holy functions made holy persons." Bentham's antireligiousism is introduced with a certain irony: "contemplating themselves altogether in the mirror of rhetoric, it was found that all these males put together ... composed one beautiful, and worthy objects of the associated affections of admiration, love, and respect—the Holy Mother Church." But the important consideration here is that Bentham's nominalist view of the world dictated that the whole could never be greater than the sum of its components. Here, however, the Church was laying claim to a holiness which far outstripped "the aggregate mass of holiness" of the several "holy males" of which it was composed. The consequence was the elevation of the Church to infallibility even though its holy men remain fallible: "Her title to implicit confidence, and ... implicit obedience, became at once placed upon the firmest ground, and raised to the highest pitch" (ibid.). It was but a short step to the opinion that an infallible Church could not suffer disobedience and the demand that her enemies be punished; it came to be feared that a Church capable of being disobeied was capable of violation and destruction. The willingness of the "servants" of the Church to sanction the punishment of heretics and recalcitrant members, further secured the position and advantage of their rulers (ibid., 250-51).

One assumes at this point that Bentham has brought the history of the Church up to its present condition. It is clear that any linguistic analysis based on the potted history he presents here will throw up problems of an insuperable nature. The attempt categorically to define "church" is doomed to fail; no one exposition, complete and correct, can be given of it. For the same reason that he denied any real existence to groups or collectivities beyond the existence of their individual parts, and any real existence to universals or abstract terms, Bentham's favorite analytical tool, for which he claimed to be indebted to D'Alembert, was the decomposi- tion or breaking up of the complex into the simple. This exhaustive analytic method entailed the classifying of phenomena by a dichotomous or bipartite divisions of generic terms. By repeating the operation indefinitely, the aim is to ensure that each class is genuinely exclusive and that nothing is left out of the account or ever counted twice. "God," of course, is uniquely resistant to such analytic procedure, but "church" provided Bentham with a suitable subject. In the attempt to define "church" he had recourse to logical or bipartite division as the necessary preliminary or accompaniment to definition, but this division made any further exposition in the shape of definition redundant. Linguistic analysis shows that its several senses are easily mistaken for each other such that the word invariably produces confusion. "In all matters relative to the Church," writes Bentham, in so far as concerns the interests of the members of the Church, the good of the Church ought to be the object pursued in preference to any other. By each of two persons this proposition may, with perfect sincerity, have been subscribed. But according as to the word Church,
Jeremy Bentham

the one or other of two very different, and in respect of practical consequences, opposite imports, has been annexed, their conduct may, on every occasion, be with perfect consistency exactly opposite; one meaning by the word church the subject many,—the other, by the same word, the ruling few. (ibid., 251)

The snigle at the clerics is again barely disguised, but the linguistic analysis can hardly be faulted. What is meant by "church" by one man may not be what is meant by another, and thus what is meant by "the good of the Church" becomes a contentious issue. The consequence is confusion, and the confused mind is a mind easily deceived and manipulated. It is Bentham's claim that the clergy very often employ ambiguous terminology to serve precisely this purpose. In Church-of-Englandism the manner of such deception is not left for the reader to infer but is plainly stated. Often what looks to be petty carping and trivial criticism (though Bentham was prone to this in his writings on religion, it is really the outcome of a process of thought, the detail of which does not appear in these texts. For his early work on ethics and legislation Bentham had mounted a forceful case to prove the uncertain nature of the belief in a future state of rewards and punishments; the experiential and linguistic considerations which characterized the earlier analysis produced similar results in the pages of Swear Not at All.

The Later Writings on Religion

Throughout Bentham's later speculations on religious matters the metaphysical principles he had developed in earlier life are clearly in evidence. Religious beliefs, he argued, are consequences of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the world by men, a misunderstanding exacerbated by the usage of language unavoidably fraught with the terminology of fictions. Yet throughout his life Bentham advocated the universal toleration of all religions. His first unpublished work on religion in 1773 was upon this theme (UC v. 1-32; xxi. 263-341). Even at this early date Bentham was certain that subscription to articles of faith and the imposition of compulsory oaths (the traditional methods employed by the ecclesiastical establishment to exclude non-Anglicans from positions in public life) entailed a perversion of both a man's moral understanding and his intellect. They lead us, he argued, to mistrust our own reason and to accept belief in that which we plainly cannot comprehend and even that which can be shown to be false. Bentham's message in these early manuscripts is clear: what religious truth, like all other truths, needs is "the liberty of making itself heard" (UC xiv. 14, xx. 1774).

Returning to the same theme forty years later in Swear Not at All Bentham, in a more deliberate manner than Hilderto, sought to expose the tenuous foundations upon which such practices as subscription and compulsory oaths were founded. The text for this practice is taken from Matt 5:34. Ten years after its publication Bentham remarked to his constant companion and library executor John Bowring: "Was ever text more clear than that, 'Swear not at all'—but it has been cavilled away by glosses and meanings which in no other case would be listened to for a minute" (Works, 10. 582, Memoranda 1827-28). In writing Swear Not at All Bentham set out to strike a blow at the system of oath-taking by stripping the biblical text of all its "glosses and meanings." His principal line of argument is that the divine punishment threatened for the breaking of an oath is of such an uncertain nature that the mere taking of an oath cannot be relied upon as testimony to the honesty of the swearing. In his early work on ethics and legislation Bentham had mounted a forceful case to prove the uncertain nature of the belief in a future state of rewards and punishments; the experiential and linguistic considerations which characterized the earlier analysis produced similar results in the pages of Swear Not at All.

The practice of administering oaths was for Bentham an example of the deliberate deception practiced by the Church. The supposition upon which the efficacy of oaths depended was the certainty of punishment for disobedience, yet the penalty for the violation of an oath is never experienced by anyone. No man can say with certainty that there has ever been an instance when God has punished a man for breaking an oath; there are no empirical grounds upon which to base the belief that He will punish or ever has punished an oath-breaker. What knowledge we have of God's wrath is necessarily of an uncertain nature. Any supposition of certainty made by the Church, therefore, is the purposeful exploitation of a fiction—a method of deception and control. To the extent that this is admitted the ceremony of oath-taking is divested of its binding force and of any useful influence ascribed to or expected of it (Works, 5. 192). Bentham developed the criticism in greater detail in the Analysis of the Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind. Here he contends that the man of science must be opposed to the belief in an "inascrutable agent of boundless power," interfering in worldly affairs at will, a product of fancy instead of reason. In so far as such a conception is generally accepted or believed, it gives rise to untold delusions and makes all theory of human conduct impossible. Like Hume, Bentham met the authority, secular as well as ecclesiastical, which has ever proved an impediment to social and political improvement (UC xxvii. 48; see also v. 8). Bentham's message in these early manuscripts is clear: what religious truth, like all other truths, needs is "the liberty of making itself heard" (UC xiv. 14, xx. 1774).
argument from design on its own ground—the word of experience. He finds it to be “completely extra-experimental”: it describes a transition from confusion to order but no one has ever had experience of this “preliminary chaos.” Nor is the original creative power of God certified by experience, hence to introduce the notion of an “omnipotent will” in order to explain the facts is really no explanation at all, only a collection of meaningless words. Men “should not attempt to account for the original commencement of things—because it is obvious that experience must be entirely silent upon the subject.” When we infer that the world was created by an intelligent being we infer the action of an unknown being performing an inconceivable operation upon inconceivable materials, and as such the inference is illusory. The disjunction between the belief that the world was created by an intelligent agent and man’s experience of the world required no further elaboration for Bentham. His positive belief in the physical facts afforded man by sensory perception, to the exclusion of all other forms of knowledge, was unshakable. Unlike Hume he stopped short of philosophical skepticism: either there is undeniable evidence to support a proposition or there is not—if there is not, then it is a belief which has nothing to do with the world of experience and is, therefore, irrelevant to any discussion of the relationship between man and his world. Even if it were granted (which Bentham does not) that the world was created by a being that was uncreated by the world, he would not be unjustified in assigning any intentions to its creator other than what are actually realized in the visible constitution of things. If on examination we perceive in the world inequalities of fortune inexorable with our notions of morality we have no grounds for inferring that God’s intentions have been thwarted. To have no grounds for inferring that God’s intentions have been thwarted is more likely to impose pain than grant pleasure (Analysis, 19–20, 7). Nor can we assume that the injustices of this life will be rectified in a life to come. The attempt to visualize futurity is “to exalt the conceptions of fancy to a level with real and actual experience, so that the former shall affect the mind as vividly as the latter,” which, adds Bentham tersely, “is the sole characteristic of insanity, and the single warrant for depriving the unhappy madman of his liberty” (ibid., 49).

Experience of the perceivable physical world is the touchstone of this account. On such terms it is inconceivable to Bentham that religion should exercise the least influence upon human conduct. The pleasures and pains of this life unavoidably affect our conduct and experience teaches us the respect of a posthumous existence. The views men hold of the character of this future world can only be based upon the conceptions they entertain of the character of the Deity, but these conceptions are notoriously distinguished by their failure to account for all the evidence. The only conclusion to be drawn from the “fundamental data,” according to Bentham, is no more or less than the idea of God as a capricious and tyrannical being impressing upon us “extreme and unmitted fear” (ibid., 16). To assume that the Deity treats man with favor and kindness is a presumption entirely inconsistent with reality. The actual conception of the Deity should be one which fluctuates between good and evil, “but infinitely more as an object of terror than of hope” (ibid., 20).

For Bentham, then, knowledge is derived from experience and consists in “certain facts,” or “in believing facts conformable to experience” (ibid., 93), and to attribute events to the interference of the Deity is to “dethrone and cancel the authority of experience” (ibid., 99). He could not accept the “onable lie” or “double truth” view of the social utility of religion held by Voltaire and others, insisting that all human errors are just so many consequences of such “unnaturalized belief,” belief, that is, in “uncertified experience.” Belief in anything other than verifiable real entities, he argued, only serves to derange the mental system and prepare the intellect to receive unspecified quantities of other useless and uncerified beliefs. Moreover, the disjunction between belief and experience impairs a man’s power to make sound judgments concerning his temporal well-being (ibid., 94–96).

Bentham freely admits the inviolability of the course of nature to be a gratuitous assumption, but he argued that it is one which is essential to our understanding of truth—it is “the root from which all incompleteness between two assertions, and therefore all proof of the falsehood of either, is derived.” That he was more interested in the polemical point than in the internal logic of these remarks, however, is evident, for he adds, in characteristic utilitarian fashion, that if a man did not assume the uniformity of nature he would never have “the power of distinguishing the true methods of procuring enjoyment or avoiding pain, from the false ones; qualifying us indeed for the kingdom of heaven, but leaving us wholly defenceless against the wants and sufferings of earth” (ibid., 101). The preference for reason and science over divinity is, therefore, a rational choice for Bentham. The whole fabric of human happiness depends on the conformity of belief with experience; in posing a threat to this conformity the extra-experiential beliefs of religion pose a threat to human happiness. This attack on natural religion in the Analysis was later to be supplemented by Bentham’s critique of revealed religion in Not Paul, but Jesus. But it was in Church-of-Englandism that he first concerned himself specifically with the teachings of organized religion in a systematic fashion. Those articles of belief which Bentham particularly singled out as absurd or lacking in sense included the notion of the devil as God’s protagonist, the idea that God was conceived of the Holy Ghost, the claims that Christ was born of a virgin mother and that the son of God died a mortal death, and the doctrines of the Trinity and the Communion of Saints. In treating of
these propositions he turned his irony to good effect, but it is his theory of language that dictated the terms of his analysis. Never could there have been a subject so open to an attack founded on the demand for definitions and unambiguous language as the Church of England Catechism, and Bentham clearly relished the prospect of its examination. We need not follow him through his entire critique; its character is readily conveyed by a few brief examples.  

Bentham found the doctrine of the Trinity to be a glaring example of a proposition lacking any obvious sense, but in which children are expected to assent. Such an avowal is to utter "sounds without sense; mere words without meaning." If the Holy Ghost is the Holy Spirit of God, why do we need to profess belief in both God and His spirit? "Believing in a man, what more do you do, by believing in his spirit likewise?" It is only to "string words upon words," and then, for every word, believe or pretend to believe, that a correspondent really existing object is brought into existence (Church, 20, 22). Words must correspond to objects, to real entities, or they must be capable of reduction by paraphrase to real entities. If neither is possible, then the word is a fiction generating absurdity and capable of misapplication in unscrupulous hands. The article of belief in "the Holy Catholic Church" is another case in point. Is it the Church of England that is meant here, or is it the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of the Papacy who so zealously persecuted English Protestants? What is it that makes the Church holy? The article is a confused proposition to which no explanation is so much as hazarded. If the "poor child" were to think upon the subject "how distressing must be the perplexity, into which he here finds himself plunged" (ibid., 23, 24). For the propositions of the sacrament of communion Bentham has even harsher words: the transubstantiation or metamorphosis of bread and wine into body and blood "is the pure grimgribber, of modern technical theology." In Luther's reform of Roman Catholic theology the body and blood of Christ are said to accompany the bread and wine. This theory of consubstantiation Bentham calls "the adulterated grimgribber," and finds in it a greater source of confusion than in the theory of transubstantiation: "On the con plan the mass has more matter in it than in the trans; and the more the worse." The whole idea of communion is for Bentham "carnalism." The trick in the explanation he says, is to refer to the "spiritual sense" of the proposition; this is an appeal to a "purer" and "superior" sense than that of the "carnal" or "temporal" sense. It is by this means that the Church transforms something false or absurd into something true or reasonable. If there is a mind to subdue this is the way to do it, by introducing "the spiritual sense—that nonsensical sense" (ibid., 88–72).  

The Catechism to Bentham, it seems, was nothing but a mass of confusing propositions to which the child is made to give his assent without any understanding of what it is he has assented to. He is made to declare "that he believes whatever is thus forced into his mouth, without knowing so much as who it is that put it where it is, much less what it is." The only thing learnt from this mode of instruction is "the art of gratuitous assertion—the art of speaking and writing without thinking—and the art of making groundless inferences" (ibid., 27, 28). Such are the pernicious consequences of "catechetical instruction."

The attack on religious beliefs was extended by Bentham in Not Paul, but Jesus to include the belief in miracles. Here again the metaphysical principles of his social science are in evidence, though on this occasion the discussion is carried on in terms more appropriate to a courtroom than a philosophical or theological controversy. Miracles, he had written in the Analysis, are founded upon the extra-experiential belief that God interferes in earthly affairs, or to put it in a cutting fashion, they are "fictions by which the human intellect has . . . been cheated and overruled." Given this view of affairs it is hardly surprising that Bentham finds little in the way of evidence to support the belief in Paul's miracles. He was unwilling to afford the Scriptures a special status in this regard: they were to be treated as any other historical writings, that is, according to methods applied in all other areas of human history. If miracles, being events which transcend or violate the laws of nature, do occur then we cannot draw a line and admit the truth only of a special class of reports of miracles, denying on general historical grounds that any other reports down through the ages could possibly be true—since if we were to do this we would be giving up the possibility of writing history altogether. On the other hand, if we accept the historian's assumption of a connection between natural causes and natural events, then we must deal not with miracles but with stories of miracles. This, in brief, was Bentham's position, and he encountered few difficulties in supplying accounts of the "stories" of Paul's miracles. Some he explained in terms of natural events, some he dismissed because of the lack of corroborative evidence, while others he condemned as frauds perpetrated by Paul and explained in terms of subterfuge. Bentham's strong case, however, is much like that given by Hume in his essay "On Miracles." If a miracle were reported today the response of persons who heard of it would certainly be skeptical. Who can doubt, says Bentham, that if Paul's exorcism of Lydia (Acts 16:16–18) were reported in some newspaper, as having happened at the present time, that it would "by its disconformity to the manifest state of things, and the whole course of nature, be regarded as too absurd and flagrantly incredible to deserve to be entitled to a moment's notice" (Not Paul, 308). What is believed to have happened at so many centuries distance, however, is accepted on the authority of the testimony of witnesses. Yet for the most part such evidence is at best of a circumstantial kind. The legal bent of Bentham's critique is evident: Paul's revelation and miracles are based on flimsy and often conflicting evidence.
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"On such evidence," he asks, "would any judge find a man a shifting?" And in an extraordinary outburst he censured Locke and Newton for believing when the evidence was so slight: "O Locke! O Newton! where was your discernment?" (ibid., 50).

The metaphysical speculations upon which Bentham's critique of religion, natural and revealed, is founded have now been explained, and its consequences for ecclesiastical doctrines and religious beliefs brought to light. However, that this mode of analysis should fail in certain crucial instances is a testimony to its limitations and, indeed, to the inappropriateness of its application to the religious life of man. It is to the flaws in Bentham's critique that I now turn in the concluding section of this essay.

Conclusion

It is evident that Bentham held a narrow, wholly materialistic, conception of what constitutes knowledge, and this can be traced, in part at least, to a metamorphosis of knowledge that takes place in his speculations on language. The terms "theory," "logic," "classification," "definition," and "nomenclature" are frequently very nearly synonymous in his vocabulary. In the "Essay on Logic" he came close to admitting as much: "In the whole field of the art of logic, so large is the portion occupied by the art of methodization ... that the task of showing what it ... can do, is scarcely distinguishable from the task of showing what logic can ... do." (Works, 8, 261). The crucial step in this metamorphosis, however, is not expressly acknowledged by Bentham but took place very early on in his thought. It is the reduction of everything in science and philosophy to "metaphysics," defined in terms of a theory of language which insists upon the correspondence between words, ideas, and language itself. This is now seen, in terms of the structure of language, not merely that for Bentham metaphysics becomes linguistic analysis; more importantly this step means that the structure of reality itself, more importantly this step means that the structure of reality itself, is seen as the heart of his narrow understanding of what constitutes knowledge and is therefore central to his understanding of religion. The irrational and the metaphysical (in the conventional sense of nature and thought) had to be expunged from discourse; language which has no bearing on the facts of experience is useless, frequently pernicious in its consequences, and certainly opposed to truth. Ultimately this was to mean the imposition on religious ideas of an alien, human-centered conception of language, an imposition which effectively stripped religious beliefs of their spiritual content. On such terms theology is necessarily perceived as irrelevant, since it deals not with the facts of ordinary experience but with a reality which transcends the materialism of the physical world.

Critical Assessments

Just as the language of opinion can have no place in the discourse of the sciences, natural or moral, so, for Bentham at least, neither can the untestable and unverifiable tenets of theology. Though it claims to be extra-religious, the anti-religious tendency of this approach is readily apparent, as is that of any approach to religion that refuses to treat religious knowledge as if it were not qualitatively different from the verifiable knowledge we possess of the physical universe. In Bentham's thought, however, the problems caused by materialism are compounded by the metaphysical presuppositions of his theory of knowledge. According to this theory, reality is first "known" and then represented by language. Northrop Frye has observed (without referring to Bentham) that within this conception of the function of language "a true verbal structure is one that is like what it describes." As there is no reality beyond sense experience so there is no reality beyond the language that describes that reality, and all propositions can be tested, disproved, or verified against this objective order. Frye shrewdly rationalizes the consequences of this view of language for religion thus:

In a conception of language where no premises are beyond scrutiny, there is nothing to stop anyone from returning to square one and the question: Is there a God? What is significant about this is that the answer ... can only be no, because any question beginning with "is there" is, so to speak, already an ungodly question, and "a god" is for all practical purposes no God. Not amenable to sense perception and therefore unknowable, "God" is linguistically unfunctional, except when employed in a historical sense or when used to describe other, presumably pre-scientific, belief systems. By extension, when rigidly adhered to, all questions of a spiritual or transcendent nature are meaningless within this theory of language: for all intents and purposes, God, the soul, faith, grace, and all other such features of man's spiritual life, are illusions. This is how matters stood for Bentham. The obvious flaw in his reasoning, however, is that the inability of a language to apprehend certain human experiences does not thereby testify to the unreality or non-existence of those experiences. Frye refers to this fallacy as one of "misplaced concreteness," and there is a certain satisfaction in being able to charge the arch-exposer of fallacies with the perpetration of one of his own.

If Bentham expected any popular success for his criticisms of religion, he was to be sadly disappointed. The character of his attack was manifestly inappropriate to his subject. Though he explicitly rejected the notion that exaggeration is useful in attempting to persuade men to embrace the utilitarian doctrine, to accept utilitarian legislation, and to influence them to perform socially desirable actions, if vitriolic language was called for in
order to move the reader to an emotional response on questions of religion, Bentham had no qualms about employing it. Ridicule and passages of scurrilous irony were all introduced to bolster the indictment of religion as "the Whore of Babylon," to the clergy as "plunderers," to the Catechism as "poison," and the like, are frequent. For all his vaunted reverence for precision in language and for all his warnings about the dangers implicit in the very nature of language, his attacks were frequently conducted in terms reminiscent of the rabid critique was infrequently associated with the French philosophers. ant clerical literature one usually associates with the French philosophers. Moreover, Bentham surely expected linguistic clarification in religion to accomplish more than it really could. The committed Christian, irrational as it may seem to Bentham, is not likely to be moved to disbelief because the ideas of the soul, spirit, or grace are exposed as fictions irredeemable to any physical properties or real entities. Indeed, it is just as likely that such an analysis will serve to confirm the believer in his faith by reinforcing the notion that such conceptions must have their source in something that cannot be fully comprehended by mere mortals. This seems to have been very much the argument of Bentham's friend, the anti-slave trader, William Wilberforce. Christianity, he argued, cannot be reduced to "a mere system of systems of philosophers," but be "impressed with the weighty truth, so much forgotten in the present day, that Christianity calls on us, as we value our immortal souls, not merely in general, to be religious and moral, but specially to believe the doctrines, imbibe the principles, and practise the precepts of Christ." To Bentham, of course, this is an irrational response, but in so far as he relied on plain descriptive language to overcome it he surely underestimated the conviction with which believers hold to their faith, and overestimated the power of his metaphysics to have an impact on it. Yet Bentham remained convinced throughout his life that if men ignored reason and continued to place their trust in the doctrines of religion there could be little hope that they might improve their stock of happiness:

When a man has once got into the way of making Revelation serve him instead of Reason, and the opinions in which men in authority hold instead of Revelation, and the opinions which men in authority avow instead of what they hold, he is prepared for the embrace of every absurd and mischiefous error, and for the rejection of every salutary truth. (Works, 10. 144, Commenpleke Book, 1781–85)

His mind "enfeebled," the only support a man can find for such a system, says Bentham, is "blind credulity," and he will resist all objects and defend that system not because it is true, but simply because he has resolved to defend it (ibid.). The alternative is that men should make use of their own reason. But Bentham's reliance on reason or the authority of science is conspicuous by his complete failure to attempt, in his religious or other writings, to come to terms with the spiritual aspect of religion. The peculiarly narrow focus of his thoughts is directly related to the presuppositions of his metaphysics. He simply ignored the fact that religious knowledge ultimately depends on faith. In an early manuscript of 1773, it is true, Bentham endeavored to define "faith," but it is a facile and hopelessly inadequate attempt in which he reduced it to the "merit of believing the incredible: "The greater the difficulty of doing anything the greater the merit. The greater the difficulty in believing a thing the greater the merit in believing it." Such a train of reasoning taken to its limits, he declared, was "calculated to produce the greatest extravagances of credulity" (UC v. 15). On these terms faith is reduced to the outcome of stupidity or of ignorance of the "real" world, and this was the conclusion embraced by Bentham. The critical mind which begins by thinking and not believing and requires that there be empirical evidence that can be tested and verified before anything be accepted as final, is clearly not one that feels comfortable with "faith." Certainly the critical method will dissolve any false certainty upon which a man rests his religion, but rarely does logic or reason affect the quality or power of religious feelings. In this dilemma lies both Bentham's failure to come fully to terms with the subject matter of his religious writings, and the failure of these writings to make their mark as serious contributions to the literature on theological matters. Not that he thought of himself as writing theology; he would undoubtedly have been appalled if his religious works were accepted as such. But this cannot excuse the fact that whenever he touched on religion in its more sublime and subtle aspects his criticisms are unsatisfactory. Characteristically, Bentham could only admit that religious beliefs such as that in the "fall of man" were incomprehensible to him. He was singularly incapable of understanding that such religious teachings can be and are held by many persons regardless of the conclusions of rational science, that they are beyond the realm of, and thus not open to, the criticisms of scientific reasoning. He thought of theology as the mere ignorance of natural causes reduced to a system, and believed that knowledge of nature would eventually destroy religion. Convinced that scientific knowledge was the one thing needed for the happiness or well-being of man, he sought to remove religion from its privileged position not only in public life but also in the hearts of men. It is needless for us to dwell upon the too evident fact that Bentham ultimately failed in his mission, but this is not to say that his religious views had no impact upon his contemporaries. His crusade to secularize English social and political life called many to the utilitarian colors, and the subsequent retreat of religion in the nineteenth century cannot be entirely explained without reference to those who set themselves up as its implacable opponents.
Notes
1. Charles Everett acknowledged the importance of Bentham's writings on "method" but did not see any connection between these and the religious works, setting for the observation that nearly "the whole of his life was to be devoted to an attempt to apply the scientific method to the field of law" (The Education of Jeremy Bentham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931) 35). Mary MacK, on the other hand, does suggest an intimate association between metaphysics and religion, when she writes that "Bentham's religious opinions later underwent the same kind of transformation as his psychological (sic) and scientific (sic) opinions, i.e., a marked reversal of his earlier beliefs, and that this change in his later thought, and the connection between the "psychological" and religious aspects of his work, is forgotten or not thought relevant (Jeremy Bentham: his life and works and his religious views is forgotten or not thought relevant (Jeremy Bentham: his life and works and his religious views (London: Heinemann, 1962) 396-9).
2. Bentham essays, University College, London, Box 1061, fol. 32 (1809), vi, fol. 28-83 (1812-13), and v, fol. 63-316 (1813). Henceforth references to these essays will appear in brackets in the text, e.g., (EC 1-31).
4. Odyssey of Ides, 13. The picture drawn by Mack of the young Bentham, "From the shoulders up," suggests that he was a "terpsichorean" and that his "intellect was soon completed and that he was destined to become a great moralist." (Mack, 135, 242, 262).
6. Ibid., 441. My presentation of the philosophical foundations of Bentham's utilitarianism is necessarily brief and in many respects tailored to suit my specific concern with his views on religion. For a comprehensive exposition and analysis, see Ross Harrington's Bentham (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).
7. Mack is surely right (Odyssey of Ides, 151-52) that before he was a "statist" Bentham was a "metaphysician," meaning by this that he speculated on and evolved a comprehensive theory of language.
9. In a letter of 1826 Bentham described metaphysics as the science of the meaning of words and credited Herbart with its invention (EC xxiv, 1). Bentham's own definition of metaphysics was not entirely consistent, and he referred to it as "the science of the meaning of words and the relation of ideas" or as "the science of the meaning of words and the relation of concepts." (Bentham, 1826) 112, 113.
11. This MS is part of an analysis of a pamphlet by Richard Hey entitled Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty (London: J. Bentham, 1810) 284.
12. In a conversation with John Quincy Adams in 1827, Bentham left his American friend in no doubt as to the foundations of his unbelief: "The general tenor of his observations," writes Adams, "... was to discredit all religion, and he entertained doubts of the existence of a God. His position was, that all human knowledge was imperfect and uncertain, depending upon a process of the human mind which could not in its nature, be conclusive; that our knowledge of the physical world was positive, while that of a Creator of it was imaginary; that God was neither seen nor felt, nor in any manner manifested to our senses, but was the deduction from a syllogism, a mere probability from the combinations of human reason; that of the present existence of matter we have positive knowledge; that there was a time when it did not exist we assume without proof, for the purpose of assuming equally without proof, an eternal Creator of it" (Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, 1843-74, vol. 12, ed. Charles Francis Adams; New York: Frazer, 1970) 3: 564, entry for 8 June 1817.
21. These miracles are discussed at length in Not Paul, chap. XIII, sections 2-13. It is not known whether Bentham had read Hume's essay. For a discussion of the background to the eighteenth-century controversy over miracles and Hume's role in it, see J.C.A. Oskam, Hume's Philosophy of Religion (London: Macmillan, 1978) chap. 7.
24. Ibid., 16.
25. Ibid., 17.
27. Ibid., 13.
28. For a discussion of the "critical tradition" of theological thought, see Duncan Howlett, The Critical Way in Religion (New York: Prometheus, 1980). It is indicative of the neglect of Bentham's religious writings that Howlett ignores Bentham's contribution to this tradition.