

# **An estimate of the philosophical character of Dr. Priestley / by William Henry.**

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OF THE  
PHILOSOPHICAL CHARACTER  
OF  
DR. PRIESTLEY;

BY  
WILLIAM HENRY, M.D. F.R.S.  
&c. &c.

READ TO THE FIRST MEETING OF THE  
BRITISH ASSOCIATION,  
FOR THE  
PROMOTION OF SCIENCE,  
AT YORK,  
SEPTEMBER 28th, 1831.

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*An Estimate of the Philosophical Character of  
Dr. Priestley; by William Henry, M. D.,  
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THE principal source of the materials of the following pages, is the work, in which the discoveries of Dr. Priestley were originally announced to the public. It consists of six volumes in octavo, which were published by him, at intervals between the years 1774 and 1786; the first three under the title of "Experiments and Observations on different kinds of Air;" and the last three under that of "Experiments and Observations relating to various Branches of Natural Philosophy, with a continuation of the Observations on Air." These volumes were afterwards methodised by himself, and compressed into three octavos, which were printed in 1790. As a record of facts, and as a book of reference, the systematized work is to be preferred. But as affording materials for the history of that department of science, which Dr. Priestley cultivated with such extraordinary success; and, still more, for estimating the value of his discoveries, and adjusting his station as an experimental philosopher, the simple narrative, which he originally gave in the order of time, supplies the amplest and the firmest ground-work.

In every thing that respects the history of this branch of experimental philosophy, the writings and researches of Dr. Priestley, to which I have alluded, are peculiarly instructive. They are distinguished by great merits, and by great defects; the latter of which are wholly undisguised by their author. He unveils, with perfect frankness, the whole process of



reasoning, which led to his discoveries ; he pretends to no more sagacity than belonged to him, and sometimes disclaims even that to which he was fairly entitled ; he freely acknowledges his mistakes, and candidly confesses when his success was the result of accident, rather than of judicious anticipation ; and by writing historically and analytically, he exhibits the progressive improvement of his views, from their first dawns, to their final and distinct development. Now, with whatever delight we may contemplate a systematic arrangement, the materials of which have been judiciously selected, and from which every thing has been excluded, that is not essential to the harmony of the general design, yet there can be no question that as elucidating the operations of the human mind, and enabling us to trace and appreciate its powers of invention and discovery, the analytic method of writing has decided advantages.

To estimate, justly, the extent of Dr. Priestley's claim to philosophical reputation, it is necessary to take into account the state of our knowledge of gaseous chemistry, at the time when he began his inquiries. Without underrating what had been already done by Van Helmont, Ray, Hooke, Mayow, Boyle, Hales, Macbride, Black, Cavendish, and some others, Priestley may be safely affirmed to have entered upon a field, which, though not altogether untilled, had yet been very imperfectly prepared to yield the rich harvest, which he afterwards gathered from it. The very implements, with which he was to work, were for the most part to be invented ; and of the merits of those, which he did invent, it is a sufficient proof that they continue in use to this day, with no very important modifications. All his contrivances for collecting, transferring, and preserving different kinds of air, and for submitting those airs to the action of solid and liquid substances, were exceedingly simple, beautiful, and effectual. They were chiefly, too, the work of his own hands, or were constructed under his directions by unskilled persons ; for



the class of ingenious artists, from whom the chemical philosopher now derives such valuable aid, had not then been called into existence by the demands of the science. With a very limited knowledge of the general principles of chemistry, and almost without practice in its most common manipulations;—restricted by a narrow income, and at first with little pecuniary assistance from others;—compelled, too, to devote a large portion of his time to other pressing occupations, he nevertheless surmounted all obstacles; and in the career of discovery, outstripped many, who had long been exclusively devoted to science, and were richly provided with all appliances and means for its advancement.

It is well known that the accident of living near a public brewery at Leeds, first directed the attention of Dr. Priestley to pneumatic chemistry, by casually presenting to his observation the appearances attending the extinction of lighted chips of wood, in the gas which floats over fermenting liquors. He remarked, that the smoke formed distinct clouds floating on the surface of the atmosphere of the vessel, and that this mixture of air and smoke, when thrown over the sides of the vat, fell to the ground; from whence he deduced the greater weight of this sort of air than of atmospheric air. He next found that water imbibes the new air, and again abandons it when boiled or frozen. These more obvious properties of fixed air having been ascertained, he extended his inquiries to its other qualities and relations; and was afterwards led by analogy to the discovery of various other gases, and to the investigation of their characteristic properties.

It would be inconsistent with the scope of this Essay to give a full catalogue of Dr. Priestley's discoveries, or to enumerate more of them, than are necessary to a just estimate of his philosophical habits and character. He was the unquestionable author of our first knowledge of oxygen gas, of nitrous oxide, of muriatic, sulphurous, and fluor acid gases, of ammoniacal gas, and of its condensation into a solid form by the acid gases. Hydrogen gas was known before his



time ; but he greatly extended our acquaintance with its properties. Nitrous gas, barely discovered by Dr. Hales, was first investigated by Priestley, and applied by him to eudiometry. To the chemical history of the acids derived from nitre, he contributed a vast accession of original and most valuable facts. He seems to have been quite aware that those acids are essentially gaseous substances, and that they might be exhibited as such, provided a fluid could be found that is incapable of absorbing or acting upon them.\* He obtained, and distinctly described,† the curious crystalline compound of sulphuric acid with the vapour of nitrous acid, or, more correctly, of sulphuric and hyponitrous acids, which, being of rare occurrence, was forgotten, and, has since been rediscovered, like many other neglected anticipations of the same author. He greatly enlarged our knowledge of the important class of metals, and traced out many of their most interesting relations to oxygen and to acids. He unfolded, and illustrated by simple and beautiful experiments, distinct views of combustion ; of the respiration of animals, both of the inferior and higher classes ; of the changes produced in organized bodies by putrefaction, and of the causes, that accelerate or retard that process ; of the importance of azote as the characteristic ingredient of animal substances, obtainable by the action of dilute nitric acid on muscle and tendon ; of the functions and economy of living vegetables ; and of the relations and subserviency, which exist between the animal and vegetable kingdoms. After trying, without effect, a variety of methods, by which he expected to purify air vitiated by the breathing of animals, he discovered that its purity was restored by the growth of living and healthy vegetables, freely exposed to the solar light.

It is impossible to account for these, and a variety of other discoveries, of less importance singly, but forming altogether a tribute to science, greatly exceeding, in richness and ex-

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\* Series I. Vol. ii. p. 175.

† Series II. Vol. i. p. 26.



tent, that of any contemporary, without pronouncing that their author must have been furnished by nature with intellectual powers, far surpassing the common average of human endowments. If we examine, with which of its various faculties the mind of Dr. Priestley was most eminently gifted, it will, I believe, be found that it was most remarkable for clearness and quickness of apprehension, and for rapidity and extent of association. On these qualities were founded that apparently intuitive perception of analogies, and that happy facility of tracing and pursuing them through all their consequences, which led to several of his most brilliant discoveries. Of these analogies many were just and legitimate, and have stood the test of examination by the clearer light, since reflected upon them from the improved condition of science. But, in other cases, his analogies were fanciful and unfounded, and led him far astray from the path, which might have conducted him directly to truth. It is curious, however, as he himself observes, that in missing one thing, of which he was in search, he often found another of greater value. In such cases, his vigilance seldom failed to put him in full possession of the treasure upon which he had stumbled. Finding by experience, how much chance had to do with the success of his investigations, he resolved to multiply experiments, with the view of increasing the numerical probabilities of discovery. We find him confessing, on one occasion, that he "was led on, by a random expectation of some change or other taking place." In other instances, he was influenced by theoretical views of so flimsy a texture, that they were dispersed by the first appeal to experiment. "These mistakes," he observes, "it was in my power to have concealed; but I was determined to show how little mystery there is in the business of experimental philosophy; and with how little sagacity, discoveries, which some persons are pleased to consider great and wonderful, have been made." Candid acknowledgments of this kind were, however, turned against him by persons envious of his growing fame; and it was asserted that *all* his discoveries, when



not the fruits of plagiarism, were "lucky guesses," or owing to mere chance. \* Such detractors, however, could not have been aware of the great amount of credit, that is due to the philosopher, who at once perceives the value of a casual observation, or of an unexpected result; who discriminates what facts are trivial, and what are important; and selects the latter, to guide him through difficult and perplexed mazes of investigation. In the words of D'Alembert, "*Ces hazards ne sont que pour ceux qui jouent bien.*"

The talents and qualifications, which are here represented as having characterized the mind of Dr. Priestley, though not of the rarest kind, or of the highest dignity, were yet such, as admirably adapted him for improving chemical science, at the time when he lived. What was then wanted, was a wider field of observation;—an enlarged sphere of chemical phenomena;—an acquaintance with a far greater number of individual bodies, than were then known; from the properties of which, and from those of their combinations, tentative approximations to general principles might at first be deduced; to be confirmed or corrected, enlarged or circumscribed, by future experience. It would have retarded the progress of science, and put off, to a far distant day, that affluence of new facts, which Priestley so rapidly accumulated, if he had stopped to investigate, with painful and rigid precision, all the minute circumstances of temperature, of specific gravity, of absolute and relative weights, and of crystalline structure, on which the more exact science of our own times is firmly based, and from which its evidences must henceforward be derived. Nor could such refined investigations have then been carried on with any success, on account of the imperfection of philosophical instruments. It would have been

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\* These charges, especially that of plagiarism, which had been unjustly advanced by some friends of Dr. Higgins, were triumphantly repelled by Dr. Priestley, in a pamphlet entitled, "Philosophical Empiricism," published in 1775.



fruitless, also, at that time, to have indulged in speculations respecting the ultimate constitution of bodies ;—speculations that have no solid ground-work, except in a class of facts developed within the last thirty-five years, all tending to establish the laws of combination in definite and in multiple proportions, and to support the still more extensive generalization, which has been reared by the genius of Dalton.

It was, indeed, by the activity of his intellectual faculties, rather than by their reach or vigour, that Dr. Priestley was enabled to render such important services to natural science. We should look, in vain, in any thing that he has achieved, for demonstrations of that powerful and sustained attention, which enables the mind to institute close and accurate comparisons ;—to trace resemblances that are far from obvious ;—and to discriminate differences that are recondite and obscure. The analogies, which caught his observation, lay near the surface, and were eagerly and hastily pursued ; often, indeed, beyond the boundaries, within which they ought to have been circumscribed. Quick as his mind was in the perception of resemblances, it appears (probably for that reason) to have been little adapted for those profound and cautious abstractions, which supply the only solid foundations of general laws. In sober, patient, and successful induction, Priestley must yield the palm to many others, who, though far less fertile than himself in new and happy combinations of thought, surpassed him in the use of a searching and rigorous logic ; in the art of advancing, by secure steps, from phenomena to general conclusions ;—and again in the employment of general axioms as the instruments of farther discoveries.

Among the defects of his philosophical habits, may be remarked, that he frequently pursued an object of inquiry too exclusively, neglecting others, which were necessarily connected with it, and which, if investigated, would have thrown great light on the main research. As an instance, may be mentioned his omitting to examine the relation of gases to water. This relation, of which he had indistinct glimpses,



was a source of perpetual embarrassment to him, and led him to imagine changes in the intimate constitution of gases, which were in fact due to nothing more than an interchange of place between the gas in the water and that above the water, or between the former and the external atmosphere. Thus he erroneously supposed that hydrogen gas was transmuted into azotic gas, by remaining long confined by the water of a pneumatic cistern. The same eager direction of his mind to a single object, caused him, also, to overlook several new substances, which he must necessarily have obtained, and which, by a more watchful care, he might have secured and identified. At a very early period of his inquiries, (viz. before November, 1771), he was in possession of oxygen gas from saltpetre, and had remarked its striking effect on the flame of a candle; but he pursued the subject no farther until August 1774, when he again procured the same kind of gas from the red oxide of mercury, and, in a less pure state, from red lead. Placed thus a second time within his grasp, he did not omit to make prize of this, his greatest, discovery. He must, also, have obtained chlorine by the solution of manganese in spirit of salt; but it escaped his notice, because, being received over mercury, the gas was instantly absorbed. \* If he had employed a bladder, as Scheele afterwards did, to collect the product of the same materials, he could not have failed to anticipate the Swedish philosopher, in a discovery not less important than that of oxygen gas. Carbonic oxide early and repeatedly presented itself to his observation, without his being aware of its true distinctions from other kinds of inflammable air; and it was reserved for Mr. Cruickshank of Woolwich to unfold its real nature and characters. It is remarkable, also, that in various parts of his works, Dr. Priestley has stated facts, that might have given him a hint of the law, since unfolded by the sagacity of M. Gay Lussac, 'that gaseous substances combine in definite volumes.'

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\* Series II. p. 253.



He shows that

1 measure of fixed air unites with  $1\frac{6}{7}$  measure of alkaline air,

1 measure of sulphurous acid with 2 measures of do.

1 measure of fluor acid with 2 measures of do.

1 measure of oxygen gas with 2 measures nitrous, very nearly;

and that by the decomposition of 1 vol. of ammonia, 3 vols. of hydrogen are evolved.

Let not, however, failures such as these, to reap all that was within his compass, derogate more than their due share from the merits of Dr. Priestley; for they may be traced to that very ardour of temperament, which, though to a certain degree a disqualification for close and correct observation, was the vital and sustaining principle of his zealous devotion to the pursuit of scientific truth. Let it be remembered, that philosophers of the loftiest pretensions are chargeable with similar oversights;—that even Kepler and Newton overlooked discoveries, upon the very confines of which they trod, but which they left to confer glory on the names of less illustrious followers.

Of the general correctness of Dr. Priestley's experiments, it is but justice to him to speak with decided approbation. In some instances, it must be acknowledged, that his results have been rectified by subsequent inquirers, chiefly as respects quantities and proportions. But of the immense number of new facts originating with him, it is surprising how very few are at variance with recent and correct observations. Even in these few examples, his errors may be traced to causes connected with the actual condition of science at the time; sometimes to the use of impure substances, or to the imperfection of his instruments of research; but never to carelessness of inquiry or negligence of truth. Nor was he more remarkable for the zeal, with which he sought satisfactory evidence, than for the fidelity, with which he reported it. In no one instance is he chargeable with mis-stating, or even with straining or colouring, a fact, to suit an hypothesis. And though this praise



may, doubtless, be conceded to the great majority of experimental philosophers, yet Dr. Priestley was singularly exempt from that disposition to view phenomena through a coloured medium, which sometimes steals imperceptibly over minds of the greatest general probity. This security he owed to his freedom from all undue attachment to hypotheses, and to the facility, with which he was accustomed to frame and abandon them ;—a facility resulting not from habit only, but from principle. “Hypotheses” he pronounces, in one place, “to be a cheap commodity ;” in another to be “of no value except as the parents of facts ;” and so far as he was himself concerned, he exhorts his readers “to consider new facts only as discoveries, and to draw conclusions for themselves.” The only exception to this general praise is to be found in the pertinacity with which he adhered, to the last, to the Stahlian hypothesis of phlogiston ; and in the anxiety, which he evinced, to reconcile to it new phenomena, which were considered by almost all other philosophers, as proofs of its utter unsoundness. But this anxiety, it must be remembered, was chiefly apparent at a period of life, when most men feel a reluctance to change the principle of arrangement, by which they have been long accustomed to class the multifarious particulars of their knowledge.

In all those feelings and habits that connect the purest morals with the highest philosophy, (and that there is such a connection no one can doubt), Dr. Priestley is entitled to unqualified esteem and admiration. Attached to science by the most generous motives, he pursued it with an entire disregard to his own peculiar interests. He neither sought, nor accepted when offered, any pecuniary aid in his philosophical pursuits, that did not leave him in possession of the most complete independence of thought and of action. Free from all little jealousies of contemporaries or rivals, he earnestly invited other labourers into the field, which he was cultivating ; gave publicity, in his own volumes, to their experiments ; and, with true candour, was as ready to record the evidence which



contradicted, as that which confirmed, his own views and results. Every hint, which he had derived from the writings or conversation of others, was unreservedly acknowledged. As the best way of accelerating the progress of science, he recommended and practised the early publication of all discoveries; though quite aware that, in his own case, more durable fame would often have resulted from a delayed and more finished performance. "Those persons," he remarks, "are very properly disappointed, who, for the sake of a little more reputation, delay publishing their discoveries, till they are anticipated by others."

In perfect consistency with that liberality of temper, which has been ascribed to Dr. Priestley, it may be remarked also, that he took the most enlarged views of the scope and objects of Natural Science. In various passages of his works he has enforced, with warm and impressive eloquence, the considerations, that flow from the contemplation of those arrangements in the natural world, which are not only perfect in themselves, but are essential parts of one grand and harmonious design. He strenuously recommends experimental philosophy as an agreeable relief from employments, that excite the feelings or overstrain the attention; and he proposes it to the young, the high-born, and the affluent, as a source of pleasure unalloyed with the anxieties and agitations of public life. He regarded the benefits of its investigations, not merely as issuing in the acquirement of new facts, however striking and valuable; nor yet in the deduction of general principles, however sound and important; but as having a necessary tendency to increase the intellectual power and energy of man, and to exalt human nature to the highest dignity, of which it is susceptible. The springs of such enquiries he represents as inexhaustible; and the prospects, that may be gained by successive advances in knowledge, as in themselves "truly sublime and glorious."

Into our estimate of the intellectual character of an individual, the extent and the comprehensiveness of his studies must always enter as an essential element. Of Dr. Priestley



it may be justly affirmed, that few men have taken a wider range over the vast and diversified field of human knowledge. In devoting, through the greater part of his life, a large portion of his attention to theological pursuits, he fulfilled, what he strongly felt to be his primary duty as a minister of religion. This is not the fit occasion to pronounce an opinion of the fruits of those inquiries, related as they are to topics, which still continue to be agitated as matters of earnest controversy. In Ethics, in Metaphysics, in the philosophy of Language, and in that of General History, he expatiated largely. He has given particular histories of the Sciences of Electricity and of Optics, characterized by strict impartiality, and by great perspicuity of language and arrangement. Of the mathematics, he appears to have had only a general or elementary knowledge ; nor, perhaps, did the original qualities, or acquired habits, of his mind fit him to excel in the exact sciences. On the whole, though Dr. Priestley may have been surpassed by many, in vigour of understanding and capacity for profound research, yet it would be difficult to produce an instance of a writer more eminent for the variety and versatility of his talents, or more meritorious for their zealous, unwearied, and productive employment.



## APPENDIX.

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SINCE the foregoing pages were written, I have added a few remarks on a passage contained in a recent work of Victor Cousin, in which that writer has committed a material error as to the origin of Dr. Priestley's philosophical discoveries. "La chimie," he observes, "est une création du dixhuitième siècle, une création de la France ; c'est l'Europe entière qui a appelé chimie Française le mouvement qui a imprimé à cette belle science une impulsion si forte et une direction si sage ; c'est à l'exemple et sur les traces de Lavoisier, de Guyton, de Fourcroy, de Berthollet, de Vauquelin, que se sont formés et que marchent encore les grands chimistes étrangers, ici Priestley et Davy ; là Klaproth et Berzelius." (Cours de l'Histoire de la Philosophie, tom. i. p. 25.)

It is to be lamented that so enlightened a writer as Victor Cousin, yielding, in this instance, to the seduction of national vanity, should have advanced pretensions in behalf of his countrymen, which have no foundation in truth or justice. Nothing can be more absurd or unprofitable than to claim honours in science, either for individuals or for nations, the title to which may be at once set aside by an appeal to public and authentic records.

It was in England, not in France, that the first decided advances were made in our knowledge of elastic fluids. To say nothing of anterior writers, Dr. Black had traced the causticity acquired by alkalies, and by certain earths, to their being freed from combination with fixed air ; and Mr. Cavendish, in 1766, had enlarged our knowledge of that gas and of inflammable air. In England, the value of these discoveries was fully appreciated ; in France, little or no



attention was paid to them, till the philosophers of that country were roused by the striking phenomena exhibited by the experiments of Priestley. Lavoisier, it is true, had been led, by an examination of evidence derived from previous writers, to discard the hypothesis of phlogiston. The discovery of oxygen gas by Dr. Priestley not only completed the demonstration of its fallacy, but served as the corner-stone of a more sound and consistent theory. By a series of researches executed at great expence, and with consummate skill, the French philosopher verified in some cases, and corrected in others, the results of his predecessors, and added new and important observations of his own. Upon these, united, he founded that beautiful system of general laws, chiefly relating to the absorption of oxygen by combustible bodies, and to the constitution of acids, to which, alone, the epithet of the Antiphlogistic or French theory of chemistry is properly applied. Of the genius manifested in the construction of that system, and the taste apparent in its exposition, it is scarcely possible to speak with too much praise. But it is inverting the order of time to assert, that it had any share in giving origin to the researches of Priestley, which were not only anterior to the French theory, but were carried on under the influence of precisely opposite views. This, too, may be asserted of the discoveries of Scheele, who, at the same period with Dr. Priestley, was following, in a distant part of Europe, a scarcely less illustrious career.

It is the natural progress of most generalizations in science, that at first too hasty and comprehensive, they require to be narrowed as new facts arise. This has happened to the theory of Lavoisier, in consequence of its having been discovered, that combustion is not necessarily accompanied with an absorption of oxygen, and that acids exist independently of oxygen, regarded by him as the general acidifying principle. But after all the deductions, that can justly be made on that account from the merits of Lavoisier, he must still hold one of the highest places among those illustrious men, who have advanced



chemistry to its present rank among the physical sciences. It is deeply to be lamented that his fame, otherwise unsullied, should have been stained by his want of candour and justice to Dr. Priestley, in appropriating to himself the discovery of oxygen gas. This charge, often preferred and never answered, would not have been revived in this place, but for the claim so recently and indiscreetly advanced by M. Victor Cousin. To the credit of Dr. Priestley it may be observed, that in asserting his own right, he exercised more forbearance, than could reasonably have been expected under such circumstances. In an unpublished letter to a friend, he thus alludes to the subject of M. Lavoisier's plagiarism. "He," (M. Lavoisier) "is an *Intendant of the Finances*, and has much public business, but finds leisure for various philosophical pursuits, for which he is exceedingly well qualified. He ought to have acknowledged that my giving him an account of the air I had got from *Mercurius Calcinatus*, and buying a quantity of M. Cadet while I was at Paris, led him to try what air it yielded, which he did presently after I left. I have, however, barely hinted at this in my second volume." \* The communication alluded to was made by Dr. Priestley to M. Lavoisier in October, 1774; and the Memoir, in which the latter assumes to himself the discovery that *mercurius calcinatus* (red oxide of mercury) affords oxygen gas when distilled *per se*, was not read to the Academy of Sciences before April, 1775. † In evincing so little irritability about his own claim, and leaving its vindication with calm and just confidence to posterity, the English philosopher has lost nothing of the honour of that discovery, which is now awarded to him, by men of science of every country, as solely and undividedly his own.

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\* Letter to the late Mr. Henry, dated Calne, Dec. 31, 1775.

† See an Abstract of this Memoir in the *Journal de Rozier*, Mai, 1775.



