

Note

CATHARINE MACAULAY'S REWORKINGS OF WILLIAM PALEY'S *PRINCIPLES OF MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY* (1785) IN HER *LETTERS ON EDUCATION* (1790)

William Paley, the archdeacon of Carlisle, and Catharine Macaulay, the Whig historian, were two of the most prominent philosophers in eighteenth-century Britain. Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) reached its eleventh edition in 1796 and became a standard moral philosophy textbook at the universities of the North Atlantic world, from Cambridge to Harvard.¹ Macaulay's writings, meanwhile, shaped the philosophical ideals of a variety of significant authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft.² That Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790) might have been indebted to Paley's *Principles* has not, however, been considered by scholars.³ It would, after all, be surprising if Macaulay had appropriated Paleyan notions. Macaulay not only never directly referred to Paley in her works but her *Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783) was partly dedicated to refuting some of the conclusions of the translation of Archbishop William King's *Origin of Moral Evil* (1731) produced by Paley's patron Edmund Law.⁴ Nevertheless, there is strong textual evidence that Macaulay drew extensively upon Paley in Part I of

the *Letters on Education* in 'Letter VIII' on the importance of the gentler satisfactions to happiness and 'Letter XVIII' on politeness and beauty. Her borrowings from Paley in these two epistles were often drawn primarily from the early chapters of Paley's *Principles*: the former from chapter six on 'Human Happiness' and the latter from chapter five on 'The Moral Sense'. In 'Letter VIII', Macaulay even went so far as to allude to Paley as 'a sensible writer'.⁵ Reconstructing Macaulay's philosophical encounter with Paley not only reveals a neglected source for her educational thinking but also points towards the ways in which she constructed the *Letters on Education* and the eclecticism of eighteenth-century British intellectual culture.

Macaulay's first substantial engagement with Paley emerged in 'Letter VIII' with Paley where her first five pages echoed the argumentative structure of chapter six of the *Principles* and regularly paraphrased that work. Paley had proposed that happiness consists in the overall predominance of pleasure over pain before moving on to discuss false ideas of pleasure in this life and then finally outlining a truer account of the highest earthly delights as arising from moderate social and intellectual enjoyments.⁶ Macaulay's 'Letter VIII' began with a distinct invocation of the 'moralist' who understood 'that the vexations of human life' arise from 'our ignorance of those matters on which our happiness depends' before proceeding to make more Paleyan deductions about the nature of true felicity.⁷ Paley had premised that 'any condition, in which the amount or aggregate of pleasure exceeds that of pain, estimating both pleasure and pain, by the intensity and continuance, may be denominated happy: and the degree of happiness depends upon the quantity of this excess.'⁸ Macaulay adapted this conclusion through the means of a debate between sensibility, reason, and experience:

How can happiness exist without pleasure, says Sensibility; and if pleasure is the ground work of happiness, says Reason, why certainly the more pleasure, the more happiness; and thus by

¹ W. Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 11th edn (London, 1796); N. O'Flaherty, *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment: The Moral and Political Thought of William Paley* (Cambridge, 2019), 2; W. Glick, 'Bishop Paley in America', *NEQ*, xxvii (1954): 347–54.

² B. Hill, 'The Links between Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay: New Evidence', *WHR*, iv (1995): 177–92.

³ There is no reference to Paley having a positive influence on Macaulay in any of the standard accounts of her writings. See for instance, B. Hill, *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford, 1992); K. Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren* (Oxford, 2005); C. Macaulay, *The Correspondence of Catharine Macaulay*, ed. K. Green (New York, 2020); K. Green, *Catharine Macaulay's Republican Enlightenment* (Abingdon, 2020); C. Macaulay, *Political Writings*, ed. M. Skjövberg (Cambridge, 2023).

⁴ See for instance, C. Macaulay, *A Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (London, 1783), 16–60, 166–268. For further discussion see: K. Green, and S. Weekes, 'Catharine Macaulay on the Will', *HEI*, xxxix (2013), 409–25.

⁵ C. Macaulay, *Letters on Education: With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London, 1790), 77.

⁶ W. Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (London, 1785), 18–34.

⁷ Macaulay, *Letters*, 74.

⁸ Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 18.

a rational deduction, we come to the conclusion that pleasure, and the means to obtain it, is the only wise pursuit of man. Your argument would be very just, replies Experience, were our opportunity always within our reach, and were the powers of the human frame and all its faculties, as capable of encreasing and lengthening enjoyment, as are the boundless desires of man.⁹

This passage differed from Paley's account of happiness not only in its greater rhetorical force but also in subtly downplaying the importance of pleasure. Pleasure became the 'ground work of happiness', rather than happiness itself.¹⁰ Nevertheless, by presenting pleasure as central to happiness, she was able to discuss which delights are more or less important to this state in essentially Paleyan terms and paraphrase his chapter six.

Immediately after this account of the limits of human pleasure, Macaulay declared that:

But as this is not so in Nature, as there are limits to which the intense pleasures soon arrive, and from which they ever afterwards decline, they are by necessity of short duration; and if we endeavour to compensate for such limitations by the frequency of repetition, we shall lose more than we gain by the fatigue of our faculties, and the diminution of sensibility.¹¹

This remark was clearly adapted from Paley's declaration in chapter six of the *Principles*:

The truth is, there is a limit, at which these pleasures soon arrive, and from which they ever afterwards decline. They are in their nature of short duration, as the organs cannot hold on their emotions beyond a certain length of time; and if you endeavour to compensate for this imperfection, by the frequency with which you repeat them, you lose more than you gain, by the fatigue of the faculties, and the diminution of sensibility.¹²

Macaulay's passage departed subtly from the *Principles* by appealing to 'Nature' in general and avoiding Paley's reductionist focus on the dependence of pleasure on the 'organs'. Yet much of the

phrasing was almost identical, such as the suggestion that 'we shall lose more than we gain by the fatigue of our faculties, and the diminution of sensibility'.¹³

Macaulay continued to rework other aspects of Paley's account of pleasure on the same page. Proceeding to discuss those who were unable to continue their pleasures with the same intensity, she declared:

Nor is it the sensual voluptuary only who has to lament in the decay of his faculties, the importunity of desires which can never be gratified, and the memory of pleasures which must return no more. No; the mentalist, whose enjoyments depend more on those delights, which are adapted to soothe his imagination, on the variety of his amusements, on the pleasing sensations which attend the gratification of the factitious passions; he also will find his capabilities fall infinitely beneath his desires.¹⁴

This passage was substantially taken again from chapter six of Paley's *Principles* where he described 'the loss of opportunities, or the decay of faculties, which, whenever they happen, leave the voluptuary, destitute and desperate; teased by desires that can never be gratified, and the memory of pleasures which must return no more'.¹⁵ The wording of the beginning of Macaulay's description is almost identical with shared descriptions of the 'voluptuary' being subjected to the 'decay of his faculties', taunted by 'desires which can never be gratified, and the memory of pleasures which must return no more'.¹⁶ Macaulay substantially reworked the purpose of this language by using it to set up the fact that 'the mentalist' enthralled to his imagination is subject to the same constraints but Paley had also critiqued those who relied too much on the delights of fantasy. He had declared that those for 'whom nothing will go down but works of humour and pleasantry, or whose curiosity must be interested by perpetual novelty, will consume a bookseller's window in half a forenoon' and be left unsatisfied.¹⁷ Thus, although Macaulay moved away from Paley's language, her argument retained a conceptual

⁹ Macaulay, *Letters*, 75.

¹⁰ Macaulay, *Letters*, 75.

¹¹ Macaulay, *Letters*, 75.

¹² Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 21.

¹³ Macaulay, *Letters*, 75; Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 21.

¹⁴ Macaulay, *Letters*, 75–6.

¹⁵ Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 22.

¹⁶ Macaulay, *Letters*, 75; Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 22.

¹⁷ Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 32.

connection to his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*.

Continuing in a similar vein about how intense enjoyments invariably fail to satisfy in the long-term, Macaulay went on to declare that:

When the humour of being prodigiously delighted, says a sensible writer, has taken a strong hold on the imagination, it hinders our providing for, or acquiescing in those gently soothing engagements, the due variety and succession of which, are the only things that supply a continued stream of happiness.¹⁸

That 'sensible writer' was evidently Paley because the passage was an almost exact reproduction of his remark that: 'when this humour of being prodigiously delighted, has once taken hold of the imagination, it hinders us from providing for, or acquiescing in, those gently soothing engagements, the due variety and succession of which, are the only things that can supply any man with a continued stream of happiness'.¹⁹ Macaulay then wove this Paleyan principle into a further justification for one of Archbishop François Fénelon's educational principles in his *Treatise on the Education of Daughters* (1688). She contended that this desire to be 'prodigiously delighted' often arises when children are incentivised to be good by gifts of 'a very fine baby, a fine coach the horses, or some other toy'. She then averred that this method of cultivating the passions of children violated Fenelon's belief that a well-educated young lady has 'no need of fine machines or sights, theatrical pomps, or expences to recreate her'.²⁰ In this way, Macaulay seamlessly blended Paley's understanding of the nature of pleasure into her wider educational framework.

In 'Letter XVIII', Macaulay engaged in a similar process of turning Paley's philosophical arguments into a concrete educational proposal. Cautioning against elaborate dress as reflecting a mind too focused on insignificant matters, she argued that human ideas of physical beauty were invariably shaped by society, so that 'the Venuses and the Adonises of the African shores' differ 'in colour, figure, and form of feature to the brilliant beauties of Europe'.²¹ Her justification for this

aesthetic position was taken from Paley's argument that what some philosophers, such as Francis Hutcheson, considered an innate moral sense in fact arises gradually from human beings associating the qualities of good and bad with certain objects.²² She averred that ideas of beauty were socially constructed by children associating ideas of affection with specific objects:

Yes: children readily apply expressions of affection or aversion, of approbation or resentment; and when these expressions are once connected by the same associations, which connect words with their ideas; the sentiment will follow the idea, and attend upon the object to which the child has been accustomed to apply the epithet.²³

This passage was a close paraphrase of Paley's declaration that: 'when these passions and expressions are once connected (which they soon will be) by the same association, which unites words with their ideas; the passion will follow the expression, and attach upon the object which the child has been accustomed to apply the expression'.²⁴ Indeed, Macaulay signalled that her argument was drawn from critiques of the notion of an innate moral sense. She declared that: 'Hence moral sense proceeds, and hence those trains of affections, which with the exception of some eccentric beings, govern the human character through the whole course of its conduct'.²⁵ Macaulay then utilised this philosophical case to support her own educational proposal: that tutors should 'discountenance all high panegyric on colour, size, shape, limb, and feature' and instead focus on how moral character is reflected in the expression.²⁶

Macaulay's *Letters on Education* were thus evidently substantially indebted to Paley's *Principles* for her account of the art of pursuing the best pleasures and the social construction of beauty. That a writer as resolutely opposed to many of the philosophical principles of Paley's fellow-travellers as Catharine Macaulay still utilised his *Principles* testifies to the expansive influence of that work. Macaulay's method of deploying

¹⁸ Macaulay, *Letters*, 77.

¹⁹ Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 21.

²⁰ Macaulay, *Letters*, 77–8.

²¹ Macaulay, *Letters*, 176.

²² Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 8–17.

²³ Macaulay, *Letters*, 177.

²⁴ Paley, *Principles*, 1st edn, 14.

²⁵ Macaulay, *Letters*, 177.

²⁶ Macaulay, *Letters*, 177.

Paleyian ideas is also suggestive of the process by which she wrote the *Letters on Education*. She almost never simply reproduced Paley's system in its entirety but usually adopted a specific argument or principle, which she then reworked to support her own wider position. Notably, Macaulay invariably took these ideas from chapters in Paley's *Principles* that were directly related to the theme she was discussing, which seems to suggest that she was plundering her own commonplace books under headings such as 'Happiness' and 'Moral Sense' for relevant passages to support her claims. Despite her philosophical differences with Paley's circle, therefore, Macaulay was able to extract

particular arguments from Paley and mould them to her own purpose; an intellectual process that reveals the ways in which the eclecticism of eighteenth-century European intellectual culture could transcend the battlelines of philosophical dispute.

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