PRICE, RICHARD (1723-1791). Born at Tynton, Glamorganshire, and educated at dissenting academies, Richard Price became a Dissenting minister at twenty-one. After twelve years as a domestic chaplain, he preached primarily at Stoke Newington and Hackney. He married Sarah Blundell, an Anglican, in 1758; they had no children.

Price was an influential actuary, economist, and theologian as well as a moral philosopher and champion of the American and French Revolutions. His papers on “the Doctrine of Chances” (1764, 1765) won him a Fellowship of the Royal Society; his work on life expectancy helped modernize insurance practices. His *Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the National Debt* (1772) influenced William Pitt’s economic policies. His *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776) sold 60,000 copies within its first year, and probably encouraged America’s decision to declare independence. In *A Discourse On the Love of Our Country* (1789), Price also praised the French Revolution, moving Edmund Burke to reply in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

In *A Review of the Principle Questions and Difficulties in Morals* (1758, 2nd.ed 1769; 3rd ed. 1787), Price defends a rationalist view of ethics, influenced by Samuel Clarke, against criticisms by the empiricist moral sense theorists, especially Francis Hutcheson. They had argued that reason cannot give rise to moral ideas because all simple ideas are derived from sense and reflection. Price develops a Platonist theory of the understanding, derived from the *Theaetetus* and Ralph Cudworth, according to which “the faculty within us that discerns truth, and that compares all the objects of thought, and judges of them, is a spring of new ideas.” These ideas include solidity, inertia, substance, accident, duration, space, and power or causation. Price turns Hume’s argument on its head, claiming that since sensation can only reveal constant conjunction, our idea of power or causation must come from the understanding. Ideas therefore fall into two categories: those which denote only affections of the mind itself, including both sensory ideas and reflective ideas such as beauty; and those
which “denote something distinct from sensation; and imply real and independent existence and truth.”

Price examines three pairs of moral ideas to determine which category they belong to: right and wrong, beauty and deformity, and merit and demerit. His main concern is to show that right and wrong are ideas of the understanding. If actions were not right in themselves, our moral perceptions would be arbitrary. Furthermore, no action would really be obligatory, for “intrinsically right” and “obligatory” are the same. But once the thesis that simple ideas must originate in sense is defeated, the main obstacle to the view that right and wrong are “real characters of actions” is removed.

Emotions of approval and disapproval accompany moral perceptions: a right action appears beautiful and a wrong one deformed. But Price denies that these feelings can only be explained by an implanted moral sense. There is an intelligible connection between moral ideas and the attendant feelings: a rational being is necessarily pleased by a right action and displeased by a wrong one. Similarly, the ideas of happiness, truth, and honor necessarily move a rational being to desire them for himself and others. Yet because we are imperfectly rational, God has also provided us with “instinctive determinations,” including a moral sense, to strengthen our rational intuitions and affections.

Ideas of merit and demerit arise directly from those of right and wrong, for it is right that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished. But the moral motive is the perception of rightness or obligation itself, which moves us directly to action. This does not mean that benevolence is not a virtuous motive. Rational, as opposed to instinctive, benevolence “coincides with rectitude.” But Price opposes the reduction of all virtue to benevolence. The worship of God, due concern for oneself, gratitude, veracity, and justice are right in themselves.

Virtue requires freedom of the will, which Price defends in *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity* (1778), published correspondence with his friend Joseph Priestly. Priestly argues that freedom of the will requires action without a
motive and so without a cause. Price replies that freedom does not require action without a motive as long as the motive is not conceived as a mechanical or physical cause. The cause of free action, and the foundation of morality, is the self-determining agent.

Price’s commitment to the value of the self-determining agent also motivated his enthusiasm for the American and French Revolutions. In the Observations on Civil Liberty, Price argues that every human being has a natural right to physical, moral, religious, and civil liberty. Civil liberty exists only in a society whose laws are made by the people themselves, directly or through elected representatives. Indeed, all forms of liberty are forms of self-government, for we only act as we like when the will rules the passions. Like Kant, to whom he is often and justly compared, Price celebrated the revolutions as harbingers of the ultimate triumph of liberty and justice on earth.

Works by Richard Price


The most important ethical and political works available in recent editions are:


**Works about Richard Price**


published works and a list, organized by subject matter, of works that were written in direct response to Price.

Christine M. Korsgaard