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Lovejoy's Rôle in American Philosophy

What a wonderfully discriminating and devastating essay Lovejoy could write on the plethora of diverse and incongruous meanings of the abused terms "American" and "philosophy"!

Consider the diversity of ideas about Americans in: Buffon's and Hegel's curious notions about the inferior size of mountains, living things, and persons in America; James Fenimore Cooper's stories of our Indians, whose war-paint and feathers still stick to the European image of the American temperament; the fiery sermons of Jonathan Edwards who converted Indians and other Americans; Alexis de Tocqueville's and Charles Dickens' views of Americans; Emerson's plea for the independence of the American scholar; Henry James's American; the gringo Yanqui despised by Latin-Americans; the Communist Party's "twentieth-century Americanism" up to 1945 and anti-American hate campaign after 1945; the K. K. K., Christian Front, and McCarthyist notions of Americanism; the D. A. R., the A. D. A., the New, Fair, Square, and No Deal-ers' programs to save America; Sinclair Lewis's optimistic and Theodore Dreiser's tragic American; American tourists, expatriates, and Fulbright Fellows abroad; the Anglo-, Dutch-, French-, Irish-, Italian-, Jewish-, Oriental-, Polish-, Russian-, Scandinavian-, Spanish-, and any other hyphenated Americans, recalling that there is no other kind. One does not have to be a discriminating
Lovejoy to wonder what the specialists in “American Studies” mean by “the American mind.”

Of course, this assortment of ideas about what an American is, does not imply that there is no such animal, any more than the historical fact that the American Constitution has been interpreted so differently by the courts at various times, and by experts in constitutional law at the same time, implies that we have no Constitution. Similarly, we have American philosophy, or better, philosophy in America; but do we have in fact or in desire an American Philosophy? Does the history of philosophy in the United States give us an unequivocal answer?

In colonial and theocratic New England, whom shall we declare to be the representatives of early American philosophy—the intolerant witch-hunter Cotton Mather or the more enlightened John Woolman, the tory Governor John Winthrop or the more liberal Roger Williams, Calvinistic original sinners like Edwards or Deistic free-thinkers like Paine? And when we move on to more recent times, would any be so foolhardy as to claim that American religious philosophy is represented fully by one or another of the sects of Congregationalists, Episcopalians (High or Low), Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Jews (Orthodox or Reform), Christian Scientists, or Jehovah’s Witnesses? In the history of our political philosophies who is more truly American—Thomas Jefferson or Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson or John Adams and his line, Abe Lincoln or Stephen Douglas, General Grant or General Lee, Teddy or Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman or Dewey, Adlai or Ike, Senator Morse or Senator McCarthy?

It may be objected that I have chosen the very controversial domains of religious and political philosophy, where unanimity is rare and difficult to establish. Then let us turn to the more objective field of the growth of the sciences in America. Here
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we find two divergent views: the popular, that Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison represent the best tradition of Yankee experimental inventiveness and practicality; and the scholarly, that the less well-known scientific theorists like Josiah Willard Gibbs, Joseph Henry, and Charles Peirce, more admirably represent the best in American science. Obviously, however, "American science" is as absurd a term as, e.g., "Russian science," so far as anything inherent in the content or logic of science is concerned. And to the extent that an American philosopher is scientific, he cannot in truth be propounding an "American" philosophy.

When we come to "American Philosophy," the problem of characterizing its distinctive features is complicated by the traditional lack of agreement among philosophers concerning the nature of their discipline and its problems. Lovejoy has more than once indicated that there is little hope for progress in philosophy, in America or anywhere else, so long as there is so little agreement about the method of resolving differences of opinion on philosophical questions—in contrast with what we find in the cumulative and cooperative growth of the sciences. Lovejoy, we know, rejects methodolatry, the worship of method apart from subject matter. He has not taken to the habit of certain positivists of emasculating philosophy by elaborating formal rules and criteria of meaning überhaupt. A keen student of natural languages and a masterful semasiologist, Lovejoy could not accept the logical syntax or semantics of formalized languages as providing the method of philosophy, although this method of purging philosophy of its past disorders has been very fashionable among younger American philosophers influenced by Russell, Wittgenstein, and Carnap. Although l'esprit de finesse is stronger in Lovejoy than l'esprit géométrique, I do not think he would deny the value of symbolic logic for the analysis of
mathematical ideas. I believe he would say of such mathematical philosophizing what Aristotle said of the Pythagoreans, that number and spatial magnitude do not exhaust the categories of reality. The rapid advance of pure and applied mathematics in technological America has helped promote the vogue of logical or scientific empiricism among the younger philosophers here who wish to get away from the apparently futile verbal wrangling among the older American idealists, realists, and pragmatists of all stripes. Lovejoy, critical realist, also showed his discontent with the state of philosophy in America about fifty years ago by applying his critical and historical abilities to the analysis of the ambiguities of pragmatism, to an incisive attack on blanket monisms of all schools, and to the revitalization of the study of the history of philosophic ideas. Thus Lovejoy has done his superb share in making of philosophy in America not a logomachy, but a sustained search for the strands and patterns of ideas in the historical strife of philosophical systems, in literary works, arts and political movements, whenever they embody the products of scientific, aesthetic, and moral reflection—a search far closer to the actual modes of men's thinking than formal logic. If philosophy is to have a future in America, it will not only have to study the logic of the exact sciences, but will also, as Lovejoy has shown by his exemplary studies in the history of ideas, have to devote itself to methodological and philosophic clarification of ideas in the humanistic disciplines and social studies.

The problem of what constitutes the "American" components of "American philosophy" is a humanistic and social problem, and Lovejoy's method of resolving complexes of ideas into their discriminable components in order to examine their historical roots and their affiliations with ideas in related fields has been acknowledged as very useful. Now Lovejoy sharply distinguishes
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the sociology of knowledge from philosophy as the perennial search for truth and wisdom. Philosophy as a normative discipline cannot be content with answering the question, "What is American Philosophy?" solely by historical and cultural analysis. Philosophy must also ask, "What can or should philosophy in America be?" I shall, in order to illustrate and clarify what I take to be Lovejoy's distinction, make some personal observations and draw on reminiscences of my acquaintance with him and his ideas; I beg Lovejoy's and the reader's pardon for indulging in autobiography, but my purpose is to illustrate from my own experience (which must be similar to that of hundreds of other students of American philosophy) the important cultural and philosophical rôle of Lovejoy in American thought.

When the Latin-American philosophers were invited in 1948 to participate in a Pan-American Congress of Philosophy under the auspices of the American Philosophical Association, they were confronted with the question: "Is there a North American Philosophy?" It seemed to me at the time that the Latin-American philosophers were too willing to answer affirmatively so that in their papers they could proceed to show that each Latin-American country had its distinctive philosophy too. When Lovejoy was invited to speak on the question, he declined on the ground that his answer would be simply "No," followed by a perhaps unwanted discourse on the universality of philosophy that rendered the national characteristics of philosophers of secondary importance. He was willing to admit (as I recall the conversation) that pragmatism, in some of its variety of doctrines, might be said to be expressive of certain features of American life and thinking, namely, the emphases on the temporal, pluralistic, experimental, and utilitarian phases of our culture. As philosophers, however, our task is not simply to express such modes of existence but to analyze the doctrines held concerning them.
Lovejoy has in his philosophical writing given much weight to time and dualism in the theory of knowledge. His own theory of knowledge grew out of his intensive study of the ideas of evolutionism, of the great chain of being (especially of its temporalization by Leibniz), and of the uncritical realisms of William James, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred N. Whitehead. It is a fact that the most thorough historical study of evolutionism and the most critical analysis of pragmatism in the last half century were offered by Lovejoy to American philosophers; but it is, unfortunately, also a fact that these studies have been much ignored. American philosophers have adopted the epistemological views of Bertrand Russell and Alfred N. Whitehead without meeting the critical objections to their theories of perspectives and prehensions so meticulously analyzed by Lovejoy in his *Revolt Against Dualism*, a model of philosophical analysis.

Bertrand Russell (whose right to a professorship at the City College of New York was vigorously defended in 1940 by Lovejoy, M. R. Cohen, John Dewey, W. P. Montague, J. H. Randall, Jr., and practically the whole educational world in the United States) has hardly shown his skill as a logician in his analysis of American pragmatism. In the first place, he does not distinguish among the varieties of pragmatism in any way approaching the discriminations made by Lovejoy in his article of 1908, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms"; and in the second place, he shows little understanding of the liberalism in American philosophy when he finds James's and Dewey's pragmatic theories of truth to be the same as those of the Nazis and Soviet Marxists. Soviet philosophers agree with Russell only on the Nazism.

Russell's eminent countryman and collaborator in mathematical logic, Alfred North Whitehead, after many years of impressive teaching and writing of philosophy at Harvard, became an adopted "American philosopher," thus adding another variety
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to our list of ambiguities surrounding that term. Now, Whitehead's personal charm and sweet temper and kindly disposition do not condone the obscurity of his metaphysical terms. In The Revolt Against Dualism Lovejoy undertook a painstaking analysis of some of these obscurities among objective relativists, including Whitehead's own monistic synthesis, couched in "prehensions" of "organic unities" where everything is related to everything else. The rôle of Lovejoy's poignant criticisms, unheeded unfortunately by American admirers of Whitehead's idealism, has been to warn us of the "metaphysical pathos" into which lovers of obscure monisms tend to fall. William James's radical empiricism and Bergson's intuitionism, whatever share they may have had in the making of Whitehead's metaphysics, would have left a more permanent mark on philosophy in America were it not for Lovejoy's penetrating criticisms.

Ralph Barton Perry, whose Thought and Character of William James is a monument of American scholarship on the sources of pragmatism, describes in Jamesian fashion the democratic and religious respect for persons as "characteristically American." Some well-known public figures in America have failed to realize that by attacking the character and reputation of a person whom they suspect to be subversive, without caring too much about due process and the rules of evidence, they are emulating the Communist Party tactics of character assassination and disregard of the individual. Since these public figures are Americans elected by other American citizens, the characteristic imputed to Americans by Perry must be, as I am sure he will grant, an ideal of what we should like Americans to be. And if people everywhere learned to respect persons, there would then be no difference between Americans and other people. The Prussian-born philosopher Immanuel Kant sought to defend such a universal moral ideal in his ethics and cosmopolitan
philosophy of history, without having to wait for American philosophy. Evidently, Lovejoy did not follow the advice of his Harvard teacher, William James, that the best way to study Kant was to go around rather than through his philosophy.

Perry’s Americanism is not in fact the exclusive property of even democratic thinkers, for every defender of intellectual aristocracy in the history of philosophy from Aristotle to Leibniz and Santayana has defended, as part precisely of the aristocratic code, the respect for persons of which James made so much. Long before the New World was explored and settled by Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, and British adventurers and slave-traffickers, the religious leaders of Oriental, Greek, Hebrew, and Christian faiths founded morality on respect for the good in persons as creatures of God. Lovejoy in an article on “William James as Philosopher,” published in the International Journal of Ethics in 1911, the year after James died, hailed James’s religious regard for the individual and his creative potentialities as one of the salient characteristics of his philosophy; but Lovejoy noted that this sort of moral individualism appears also in the works of the American poet Whitman—and in the Russian religious mystic Tolstoy.

Having myself been taught philosophy by students and contemporaries of William James, like Harry A. Overstreet, Morris R. Cohen (who, however, preferred Charles S. Peirce’s more rigorous pragmaticism to James’s psychologism), William P. Montague, Irwin Edman, Stephen C. Pepper, and John Dewey, I early accepted the prevailing notion that there was a philosophy called pragmatism that was grass-roots American philosophy. A midwestern philosopher, E. H. Hollands, who came from the University of Kansas to the University of Southern California as Visiting Professor in 1930, first introduced me to the idealistic traditions in America. These not only antedated pragmatism
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but furnished it with Kantian and Hegelian elements that profoundly modified the empiricism in American thought derived from Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. My doctoral dissertation, accordingly, attempted an idealistic critique of experimentalism; fortunately, only part of this was ever published, viz., two chapters on the non-American experimentalists Boyle and Galileo.

It was a Lithuanian-American friend of mine, the late Jerome Rosenthal (whose tragically prolonged illness deprived America of one of the most learned and acute critics of Hegelian and Marxian philosophy) who encouraged me to dig more deeply into the history of experimentalism and the impact of the natural sciences on the American pragmatists. And it was natural for him to recommend to me the erudite writings of Arthur O. Lovejoy on the history of evolutionism and other scientific theories in the history of philosophy. It was this same Jerome Rosenthal who suggested my proposing to Lovejoy in 1938 that we needed in America a journal devoted to the history of philosophy. There was no reply to my letter for several months, and I had given up the idea, not knowing that Lovejoy had gone to Europe as an Emeritus Professor and that the letter was pursuing him all over Europe. When the reply came, it was a very long and detailed one; it was not simply an enthusiastic endorsement of the idea of a historical journal, but a convincing argument that the journal should be more general than the history of philosophy in order to cut across related historical research in literature and the arts, in the sciences, in social and political movements, and in ethical and religious reflection; in short, that we needed a Journal of the History of Ideas.

Lovejoy had already outlined the program for such a journal in his article on "The Historiography of Ideas," in the Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society (March, 1938), re-
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printed in Lovejoy's *Essays in the History of Ideas*. Thus the prospectus of the new Journal was the product of a fusion of Lovejoy's and Rosenthal's ideas. Like the older History of Ideas Club at The Johns Hopkins University, the Journal was motivated by a philosophic need in American thought of becoming more deeply conscious of our intellectual heritage. This became a matter of great cultural urgency in the fall of 1939, when the Nazis invaded Poland, and when Whitehead told us that the United States had become the custodian of Western civilization.

The group of American philosophers and scholars associated with Lovejoy on the Board of Editors of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (George Boas, Crane Brinton, Gilbert Chinard, Morris R. Cohen, Richard McKeon, Perry Miller, Marjorie Nicolson, John Herman Randall, Jr., and others) were distinguished leaders in their fields who felt the urgency and eagerly supported America's greatest historian of ideas as their Editor-in-Chief. I was more than repaid for my share of doing the work of a managing editor by my association with Lovejoy, whose long, detailed, and very helpful critical comments on manuscripts were a precious correspondence course for me and the authors.

My book on *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* was the outcome of Lovejoy's suggestion that the Harvard liberals at the time of the Darwinian controversy were not only precursors and founders of a variety of pragmatisms but also an important group in the history of American liberalism. This suggestion, coming from America's most astute critic of the pragmatic movement, as John Dewey liked to call it, led me toward the historical roots of the thirteen pragmatisms, roots which I traced to the diverse interests of the founding fathers of the liberal movement in such fields as the methodology of the sciences (Chauncey Wright, William James, and Charles S. Peirce), the philosophy of law (Nicholas St. John Green and Oliver
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Wendell Holmes, Jr.), the philosophy of history (John Fiske), and the philosophy of religion (F. E. Abbot's scientific theism and James's will to believe). The point is that I would not have suspected such a rich diversity of ideas in the history of but one school of American philosophy had not Lovejoy shown me that what was so loosely termed "pragmatism" was not one coherent doctrine but, in fact, a whole congeries of ideas. Keeping in mind the distinct tasks of the cultural historian and the philosopher, I have learned, thanks to Lovejoy, to appreciate in the writings of the pragmatic philosophers what ideas they have contributed to philosophy and what inadequacies lurk among them.

There are then two sets of ambiguities in the phrase "American philosophy," one due to the cultural complexity of our social history, the other to the want of clear definition of the problems and method of philosophy. Hence, it should not surprise us, though it may be disillusioning to many, to read the following candid statement by Herbert W. Schneider in his *A History of American Philosophy* (preface, pp. viii-ix):

The reader of this story will probably be at least as bewildered as I am in trying to tell what American history teaches us or what American philosophy 'stands for.'

My own experience in tracing the genesis and analyzing the outcome of but one school of American philosophy (which did stand for liberal democratic ideals) also confirms Schneider's statement, as well as Lovejoy's early analysis of the thirteen pragmatisms. If we add to these pragmatisms the idealisms (Berkeleyan and Neoplatonic, the St. Louis Hegelians and the Royceans), realisms (neo-Thomistic, logical, critical), and positivisms (Johnson, Stallo, Bridgman, the Viennese and Warsaw schools), without counting the phenomenologists, sociologists of knowledge, Marxists, Humanists, Personalists, Existentialists,
Theosophists, and what not else, all on the American philosophical scene, we can better still appreciate the force of Schneider's informed observation. The democratic ethos of "live and let live" has surely spawned a fascinating and odd variety of philosophies in America, and none but a spiritual totalitarianism would wish to destroy the freedom to create a diversity of ways of thinking on ultimate questions. The only sort of philosophy we cannot with impunity tolerate in the defense of liberal traditions of American thought is the totalitarian monolithic authoritarianism that would block the road to inquiry, as Peirce put it, and would forget that it is through the individual's effort that the inevitable comes to pass, as Justice Holmes put it.

One great lesson we can learn from the history of American or any other philosophy is that great philosophers do not merely "reflect" prevalent social forces (as Marxists dogmatically claim), but react critically to historically grounded but often unreflectively held and inadequate beliefs. I recall that soon after World War II Lovejoy urged the need for more public forums and discussion groups on Marxism, led by those who were trained in the critical habits of historical research in order to counter the distortion of historical and philosophical truth by Communist Party propagandists, busy organizing "front" forums and clandestine meetings. The historian should also be able to teach the dangers of permitting the crude tactics of crushing one sort of totalitarianism by installing another, as happened in Germany with the advent of Hitler. Lovejoy's vigorous opposition to both Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianisms is a high example of the union of disinterested love of truth with deep human concern for the preservation of intellectual and political freedom.

American philosophy can be regarded as the testing ground of liberal ideals of intellectual freedom and human welfare. It
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can stand that test successfully only by carrying on the ancient liberal tradition of the pursuit of reason in the arts, the sciences, and the conduct of life. It must do more. It must press the pursuit beyond residual dogmas of class, creed, and nationalism whenever they interfere with the free life of the mind. That there are such residual dogmas, challenging enough to the philosopher in America, history and our own time more than amply show. In order to win this battle for freedom, he will need Lovejovian courage and wisdom.