Ideas about Substance

Hammond, Albert L.

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The history of ideas as a form of scholarly inquiry took shape at The Johns Hopkins University in the first half of the century. The man chiefly responsible was Arthur O. Lovejoy, whose twenty-eight years as professor of philosophy were spent promoting the historiography of the intellect. With two colleagues, George Boas and Gilbert Chinard, he founded the History of Ideas Club, where, in an atmosphere at once congenial and critical, visiting scholars might offer their interpretations of the development of the great ideas that have influenced civilization. Lovejoy was instrumental in founding the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in pursuit of the same end. And in his own writings he persistently and patiently charted the transformations which a seminal idea might undergo—over time, across disciplines, or within the intellectual development of an individual thinker.

When, with Carnegie Corporation support, The Johns Hopkins University inaugurated an imaginatively new program of adult education in 1962, it was a happy inspiration to build it around a set of graduate seminars in the history of ideas; for the History of Ideas Club itself had long before been described as “a sort of seminar where mature men and women learned new and valuable lessons.” To be sure, this evening program has followed Lovejoy’s spirit of inquiry rather than his own actual practice. Not all the seminars are concerned to pursue in detail the transformations of a single unit-idea. Rather, there is a shared view that no theory—at any time, in any field—is simply self-generated, but that it springs by extension or opposition from earlier theories advanced in the field, or is borrowed from theories in cognate fields, or is derived from the blending of hitherto
separate fields into one. To pursue the unfolding of any
theory in these terms (so the teachers in the seminars be­
lieve) allows a sophisticated and rigorous discussion of con­
temporary scholarship with an audience lacking previous
specified knowledge. These notions are an extension, not
an abuse, of Lovejoy’s concern; he had never wasted effort
on being unduly prescriptive except to call, hopefully, for
cooperative scholarship in a venture so clearly beyond the
reasonable capabilities of a single scholar.

This series of books, Seminars in the History of Ideas,
is intended to provide a wider audience with a chance to
participate in “a sort of seminar” similar to those in the Uni­
versity’s program. Just as the teaching seminars themselves
draw on the spirit rather than merely the letter of Love­
joy’s original enterprise, so this published series extends be­
yond those topics already offered in the University’s program.
But all, nonetheless, reflect that intent with which Lovejoy
so long persisted in his own work: “the endeavor to investi­
gate the history, and thereby, it may be hoped, to understand
better the nature, of the workings of the human mind.”