Arthur O. Lovejoy and
The Revolt against Dualism

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Arthur O. Lovejoy is best known for *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, published in 1936. Although fixed permanently in the pantheon of outstanding works in the history of ideas, it represents only one aspect of Lovejoy’s scholarly vocation. *The Revolt against Dualism*, first published in 1930 and republished in 1960 and again in 1995, belongs to a tradition in philosophical theorizing that Lovejoy called “descriptive epistemology.” In the United States, this tradition owes much of its force to the writings of William James, Lovejoy’s teacher, whose clarifications of such ideas as perception are distinguished by their resourceful and sophisticated common sense.

Lovejoy’s principal aim in *The Revolt against Dualism* is to clarify the distinction between the quite separate phenomena of the knower and the known, something regularly obvious to common sense, if not always to intellectual understanding. This work is as much an argument about the ineluctable differences between subject and object and between mentality and reality as it is a subtle polemic against those who would stray far from acknowledging these differences. With a resolve that lasts throughout this long book, Lovejoy offers candid evaluations of a generation’s worth of philosophical discussions that address the problem of epistemological dualism.

The Early Development of the Ideal of Academic Freedom

Arthur Oncken Lovejoy was born in Berlin on October 10, 1873. Before he was two years old his family settled in Boston, where his father pursued a career in medicine. Lovejoy’s mother died of an accidental drug overdose shortly after the move to Boston. His father abandoned the practice of medicine to become an Episcopal minister and remarried in 1881. The elder Lovejoy’s evangelical enthusiasms never especially impressed his son, except as resistances to his plans to study philosophy rather than to become a minister as his father wished. Arthur Lovejoy’s early life was typical of many, especially bright but religiously uninspired young men who sought intellectual challenges and refreshment in the newly forming graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences.

Lovejoy was by no means hostile to religious conviction; he was simply not interested in being its personal advocate. His struggles with his father were undoubtedly significant to his intellectual development, but psychoanalytic explanation became sociological reality: He applied his intellectual energies to scholarly and professional tasks that collectively would help to disestablish the central role and intellectual prestige of Protestant clergymen in the administration of higher education in America. Throughout the nineteenth century, these clergymen were gradually replaced by a leadership dominated by university degrees other than those in theology. The future of the university was passing to a new kind of leadership called “scientific,” which required organizational change that no churchman or church movement could single-handedly effect.
At the same time, the rapid expansion of universities toward the end of the nineteenth century led to the formalization of academic credentials, in part for the sake of some outward consistency in curricula. When Lovejoy enrolled in Harvard University in 1895 to do graduate work in philosophy, he was immediately caught up in the larger debate about the pursuit of the Ph.D. William James, in his famous repudiation of this pursuit, “The Ph.D. Octopus,” regarded formal requirements with suspicion because they diverted “the attention of aspiring youth from direct dealing with truth to the passing of examinations.” Lovejoy completed his M.A. but never earned a Ph.D.

From James’s point of view, the true test of a student’s competence was measured by criteria that were at once more personal and hence more arbitrary. Recommendations, rather than degrees, would be the most stable source of currency in an academic market vulnerable to Gresham’s law. The value of a recommendation could never be worthless, even though the person recommended might be. The recommender had the choice (or, as is said today, held the power), fateful as it was (and always will be insofar as intelligence and character are inseparable in each person). James deplored academic snobbery, but why he objected so much to the meritocratic impulse implicit in examinations is related to his vision of higher education generally. Both he and Lovejoy shared an enthusiasm for ideas and for a clarity of purpose in the pursuit and analysis of them. Cookie-cutter Ph.D. programs were inimical to the freedom required to permit ideas to go wherever they might go. The first key to understanding Lovejoy’s life-long defense of academic freedom is represented in his remark to David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University, who hired Lovejoy in his first academic position: “I am personally very indifferent about it [the Ph.D. degree] and regard it as unwise for a man to go at all out of the way of his own philosophical interests in order to conform to the requirements of this exercise.”

The snobbery of James and Lovejoy was inner-rather than other-directed. Each man exemplified the privilege of determining the intellectual status of ideas; each formed canons as much as taught them. But this was a privilege of aristocratic rather than meritocratic talent. The greatest tragedy of the abundance of high intelligence today is the absence of a noblesse oblige that historically has been expected of an aristocracy of talent. Meritocracies of talent, including those constructed under the dubious proposition of affirmative action, have been destructive of the expectation that professionals have a moral obligation to work together toward common goals. “Career goals” are simply not the same goals.

Sociological explanations of occupational status have never satisfactorily addressed the social psychology of social class. The self-confident Lovejoy was the quintessential successor to the Boston Brahmins. But such self-confidence cannot be reduced to class or culture or to any number of other forms of determinism that draw the life out of explanation and make of those explained only a “type.” The second key to understanding Lovejoy’s defense of academic freedom is found in the self-confidence of his actions in relation to his vocation. After two years at Stanford, in 1901, he resigned to protest the university’s firing of Edward Alsworth Ross.

Ross, who would later become one of the best-known sociologists of his time, was dismissed toward the end of 1900 by Jane Lanthrop Stanford, the widow of Leland Stanford, former governor of California and U.S. senator. Under terms establishing the founding of the university, both Stanfords had assumed complete authority over its operation, and when Leland Stanford died, the same authority continued to be exercised by his wife. Jane Stanford had expressed disapproval of Ross over a number of years. University president Jordan had mediated on Ross’s behalf in an earlier episode, but Jane Stanford could no longer be appeased when, in the spring of 1900, Ross spoke disparagingly of those who had profited from the use of cheap (“coolie”) labor in the construction of the railroads; the Stanford family fortune had been made in railroads.

The details of Ross’s dismissal are recounted in a number of places. An imposing man with, in the words of Mary O. Furner, “well over six feet of brawn,” Ross had regularly expressed his opinions on many controversial subjects, and so he was not entirely surprised by his firing. James Mohr has documented that Ross was not an innocent player in the affair. By setting out consciously to make his dismissal a public event, Ross staged an early version of a drama that is now regularly played out in the academy. The public and the press came thudding to his defense when his dismissal was reported across the nation. He even hired news-clipping services to keep track of public opinion, which was overwhelmingly in his favor. Jane Stanford was characterized as standing in the way of scientific progress, though Stanford students and alumni were largely supportive of her actions (perhaps, as Mohr notes, because the preservation of Stanford’s reputation was consequential for its financial survival at the time).