

THE
GREAT
CHAIN
OF
BEING

Arthur O. Lovejoy

THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

A Study of the History of an Idea

THE WILLIAM JAMES LECTURES DELIVERED AT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY, 1933

BY

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THE William James Lectures on Philosophy and Psychology were established at Harvard in 1929 from a bequest of the late Edgar Pierce. The purpose of the Lectureship is to honor the memory of William James and at the same time provide public lectures and informal instruction by an eminent scholar not permanently connected with the University. Professor Lovejoy's lectures were given as the second series on this foundation in the second half of the academic year 1932-33.

PREFACE

THE TITLE of this book, I find, seems to some not unlearned persons odd, and its subject unfamiliar. Yet the phrase which I have taken for the title was long one of the most famous in the vocabulary of Occidental philosophy, science, and reflective poetry; and the conception which in modern times came to be expressed by this or similar phrases has been one of the half-dozen most potent and persistent presuppositions in Western thought. It was, in fact, until not much more than a century ago, probably the most widely familiar conception of the general *scheme* of things, of the constitutive pattern of the universe; and as such it necessarily predetermined current ideas on many other matters.

The real oddity, then, is that its history has not previously been written and its meaning and implications analyzed. In now attempting this I shall be presenting what, I think, ought to be, but apparently are not, historical commonplaces; if they are not, I venture to hope that this book may help to make them such. Many separate parts of the history have, indeed, been told before, and are therefore presumably more or less familiar; it is their relation to a single pervasive complex of ideas — and thereby, often, to one another — that still seems to need to be set forth. That the use of the term “the chain of being” as the descriptive name for the universe was usually a way of predicating of the constitution of the world three specific, pregnant, and very curious characteristics; that these characteristics implied a certain conception of the nature of God; that this conception was for centuries conjoined with another to which it was in latent opposition — an opposition which eventually became overt; that most of the religious thought of the West has thus been profoundly at variance with itself; that with the same assumptions about the constitution of the world was associated an assumption about ultimate value, also in conflict with another and equally prevalent conception of the good — the former manifesting its full consequences only in the Romantic period; that this idea

of value, together with the belief that the universe *is* what the term “the chain of being” implied that it is, provided the chief basis for most of the more serious attempts to solve the problem of evil and to show that the scheme of things is an intelligible and rational one; and that the same belief about the structure of nature lay in the background of much early modern science, and therefore influenced the formation of scientific hypotheses in various ways — these are some of the more general historical facts which I have attempted to exhibit and illustrate in some detail. This preliminary intimation of them may at least help the possible reader to judge whether any of the themes of the volume are of interest to him, and to facilitate the task of the reviewer — though, as a prudent author should, I have tried to avoid disclosing in a prefatory summary too much of the plot of the story to be told.

The history of this complex of ideas has seemed to me to suggest, if not to demonstrate, certain philosophical conclusions; and these I have tried to indicate in the “moral” appended to the final lecture. But they are, I realize, very inadequately set forth; to have developed them fully would have inordinately lengthened the volume.

The lectures are for the most part printed as they were orally delivered; but the liberality of the Syndics of the Harvard University Press has made it possible to expand them considerably, chiefly by the addition of more citations of illustrative passages. These last will, I dare say, seem to some readers too abundant. But in my own reading of works of this character I have often been exasperated by finding *précis* or paraphrases where I desiderated the actual language of the authors whose ideas were under consideration; and my rule has therefore been to give the words of relevant texts as fully as was consistent with reasonable brevity. On the other hand, no attempt has been made to include the whole mass of possible illustrations; the volume makes no pretension to be, even approximately, a *corpus* of the texts in which the central and the related ideas dealt with occur.

There is in the nature of the enterprise attempted a certain difficulty for which I hope the benevolent reader will make some allowance. The lectures were not designed for specialists

in a single field, but for a mixed academic audience; and it is an essential part of the purpose of the book to pursue the ideas with which it is concerned into a number of distinct provinces of the history of thought. It has in consequence occasionally seemed advisable, when dealing with subjects belonging to one province, to explain certain matters which, to those especially conversant with that province, will need no explanation — but which may not be equally known to specialists in other fields, or to the “general reader.”

Most of what is here printed as Lecture VII and some sentences of Lecture X have previously been published in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. XLII, 1927.

My thanks are due to several colleagues and friends who have generously read in manuscript parts of the book on which their learning made them especially valuable critics and advisers. For such assistance I am particularly indebted to Dr. George Boas, Dr. Harold Cherniss, Dr. Robert L. Patterson, and Dr. Alexander Weinstein, of Johns Hopkins University, and Dr. Marjorie Nicolson of Smith College. I cannot refrain from expressing to the Harvard Department of Philosophy my high appreciation of the honor and privilege of presenting at Harvard, upon a lectureship bearing the name of William James, some slight fruits of the years since, in my philosophical novitiate, I first heard him exemplify in his incomparable way the meaning of “pragmatic openness of mind” and the possibility of fresh and revivifying approaches to man’s ancient problems.

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THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

I

INTRODUCTION

THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

THESE lectures are primarily an attempt to offer a contribution to the history of ideas; and since the term is often used in a vaguer sense than that which I have in mind, it seems necessary, before proceeding to the main business in hand, to give some brief account of the province, purpose, and method of the general sort of inquiry for which I should wish to reserve that designation. By the history of ideas I mean something at once more specific and less restricted than the history of philosophy. It is differentiated primarily by the character of the units with which it concerns itself. Though it deals in great part with the same material as the other branches of the history of thought and depends greatly upon their prior labors, it divides that material in a special way, brings the parts of it into new groupings and relations, views it from the standpoint of a distinctive purpose. Its initial procedure may be said — though the parallel has its dangers — to be somewhat analogous to that of analytic chemistry. In dealing with the history of philosophical doctrines, for example, it cuts into the hard-and-fast individual systems and, for its own purposes, breaks them up into their component elements, into what may be called their unit-ideas. The total body of doctrine of any philosopher or school is almost always a complex and heterogeneous aggregate — and often in ways which the philosopher himself does not suspect. It is not only a compound but an unstable compound, though, age after age, each new philosopher usually forgets this melancholy truth. One of the results of the quest of the unit-ideas in such a compound is, I think, bound to be a livelier sense of the fact that most philosophic systems are original or distinctive rather in their patterns than in their components. When the student reviews the vast sequence of arguments and opinions which fill our historical textbooks, he

is likely to feel bewildered by the multiplicity and seeming diversity of the matters presented. Even if the array of material is simplified somewhat by the aid of conventional — and largely misleading — classifications of philosophers by schools or *-isms*, it still appears extremely various and complicated; each age seems to evolve new species of reasonings and conclusions, even though upon the same old problems. But the truth is that the number of essentially distinct philosophical ideas or dialectical motives is — as the number of really distinct jokes is said to be — decidedly limited, though, no doubt, the primary ideas are considerably more numerous than the primary jokes. The seeming novelty of many a system is due solely to the novelty of the application or arrangement of the old elements which enter into it. When this is realized, the history as a whole should look a much more manageable thing. I do not, of course, mean to maintain that essentially novel conceptions, new problems and new modes of reasoning about them, do not from time to time emerge in the history of thought. But such increments of absolute novelty seem to me a good deal rarer than is sometimes supposed. It is true that, just as chemical compounds differ in their sensible qualities from the elements composing them, so the elements of philosophical doctrines, in differing logical combinations, are not always readily recognizable; and, prior to analysis, even the same complex may appear to be not the same in its differing expressions, because of the diversity of the philosophers' temperaments and the consequent inequality in the distribution of emphasis among the several parts, or because of the drawing of dissimilar conclusions from partially identical premises. To the common logical or pseudo-logical or affective ingredients behind the surface-dissimilarities the historian of individual ideas will seek to penetrate.

These elements will not always, or usually, correspond to the terms which we are accustomed to use in naming the great historic conceptions of mankind. There are those who have attempted to write histories of the idea of God, and it is well that such histories should be written. But the idea of God is not a unit-idea. By this I do not mean merely the truism that different men have employed the one name to signify superhuman

beings of utterly diverse and incongruous kinds; I mean also that beneath any *one* of these beliefs you may usually discover something, or several things, more elemental and more explanatory, if not more significant, than itself. It is true that the God of Aristotle had almost nothing in common with the God of the Sermon on the Mount — though, by one of the strangest and most momentous paradoxes in Western history, the philosophical theology of Christendom identified them, and defined the chief end of man as the imitation of both. But it is also true that Aristotle's conception of the being to whom he gave the most honorific name he knew was merely one consequence of a certain more general way of thinking, a species of dialectic (of which I shall later speak) not peculiar to him but highly characteristic of the Greek and almost wholly foreign to the ancient Jewish mind — which has historically manifested its influence in ethics and aesthetics, and sometimes even in astronomy, as well as in theology. And it would, in such a case, be to the prior idea, at once more fundamental and more variously operative, that the historian of ideas would apply his method of inquiry. It is in the persistent dynamic factors, the ideas that produce effects in the history of thought, that he is especially interested. Now a formulated doctrine is sometimes a relatively inert thing. The conclusion reached by a process of thought is also not infrequently the conclusion of the process of thought. The more significant factor in the matter may be, not the dogma which certain persons proclaim — be that single or manifold in its meaning — but the motives or reasons which have led them to it. And motives and reasons partly identical may contribute to the production of very diverse conclusions, and the same substantive conclusions may, at different periods or in different minds, be generated by entirely distinct logical or other motives.

It is not, perhaps, superfluous to remark also that the doctrines or tendencies that are designated by familiar names ending in *-ism* or *-ity*, though they occasionally may be, usually are not, units of the sort which the historian of ideas seeks to discriminate. They commonly constitute, rather, compounds to which his method of analysis needs to be applied. Idealism, romanticism, rationalism, transcendentalism, pragmatism —

all these trouble-breeding and usually thought-obscuring terms, which one sometimes wishes to see expunged from the vocabulary of the philosopher and the historian altogether, are names of complexes, not of simples — and of complexes in two senses. They stand, as a rule, not for one doctrine, but for several distinct and often conflicting doctrines held by different individuals or groups to whose way of thinking these appellations have been applied, either by themselves or in the traditional terminology of historians; and each of these doctrines, in turn, is likely to be resolvable into simpler elements, often very strangely combined and derivative from a variety of dissimilar motives and historic influences. The term 'Christianity,' for example, is not the name for any single unit of the type for which the historian of specific ideas looks. I mean by this not merely the notorious fact that persons who have equally professed and called themselves Christians have, in the course of history, held all manner of distinct and conflicting beliefs under the one name, but also that any one of these persons and sects has, as a rule, held under that name a very mixed collection of ideas, the combination of which into a conglomerate bearing a single name and supposed to constitute a real unity was usually the result of historic processes of a highly complicated and curious sort. It is, of course, proper and necessary that ecclesiastical historians should write books on the history of Christianity; but in doing so they are writing of a series of facts which, taken as a whole, have almost nothing in common except the name; the part of the world in which they occurred; the reverence for a certain person, whose nature and teaching, however, have been most variously conceived, so that the unity here too is largely a unity of name; and the identity of a part of their historic antecedents, of certain causes or influences which, diversely combined with other causes, have made each of these systems of belief what it is. In the whole series of creeds and movements going under the one name, and in each of them separately, it is needful to go behind the superficial appearance of singleness and identity, to crack the shell which holds the mass together, if we are to see the real units, the effective working ideas, which, in any given case, are present.

These large movements and tendencies, then, these con-

ventionally labelled *-isms*, are not as a rule the ultimate objects of the interest of the historian of ideas; they are merely the initial materials. Of what sort, then, are the elements, the primary and persistent or recurrent dynamic units, of the history of thought, of which he is in quest? They are rather heterogeneous; I shall not attempt a formal definition, but merely mention some of the principal types.

(1) There are, first, implicit or incompletely explicit *assumptions*, or more or less *unconscious mental habits*, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation. It is the beliefs which are so much a matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for, the ways of thinking which seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness, that often are most decisive of the character of a philosopher's doctrine, and still oftener of the dominant intellectual tendencies of an age. These implicit factors may be of various sorts. One sort is a disposition to think in terms of certain categories or of particular types of imagery. There is, for example, a practically very important difference between (we have no English term for them) *esprits simplistes* — minds which habitually tend to assume that simple solutions can be found for the problems they deal with — and those habitually sensible of the general complexity of things, or, in the extreme case, the Hamlet-like natures who are oppressed and terrified by the multiplicity of considerations probably pertinent to any situation with which they are confronted, and the probable intricacy of their interrelations. The representatives of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, were manifestly characterized to a peculiar degree by the presumption of simplicity. Though there were numerous exceptions, though there were powerful ideas in vogue which worked in the contrary direction, it was nevertheless largely an age of *esprits simplistes*; and the fact had the most momentous practical consequences. The assumption of simplicity was, it is true, combined in some minds with a certain sense of the complexity of the universe and a consequent disparagement of the powers of man's understanding, which might at first seem entirely incongruous with it, but which

in reality was not so. The typical early-eighteenth-century writer was well enough aware that the universe as a whole is physically an extremely large and complicated thing. One of the favorite pieces of edifying rhetoric of the period was Pope's warning against intellectual presumptuousness:

He who through vast immensity can pierce,
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
Observe how system into system runs,
What other planets circle other suns,
What vary'd being peoples every star,
May tell why Heaven has made us as we are.
But of this frame, the bearing and the ties,
The strong connections, nice dependencies,
Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
Look'd thro? Or can a part contain the whole?

You may find this sort of thing in abundance in the popular philosophy of that time. This pose of intellectual modesty was, in fact, an almost universally prevalent characteristic of the period, which Locke, perhaps, more than anyone else had brought into fashion. Man must become habitually mindful of the limitations of his mental powers, must be content with that "relative and practical understanding" which is the only organ of knowledge that he possesses. "Men," as Locke puts it in a familiar passage, "may find matter sufficient to busy their heads, and employ their minds with variety, delight and satisfaction, if they will not boldly quarrel with their own constitution, and throw away the blessings their hands are filled with, because they are not big enough to grasp everything." We must not "loose our thoughts into the vast ocean of being, as if all that boundless extent were the natural and undoubted possession of our understandings, wherein is nothing exempt from its decisions or that escapes its comprehension. But we shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use to us, for of that they are very capable. . . . It will be no excuse to an idle and untoward servant, who would not attend his business by candle-light, to plead that he had not broad sunshine. The candle that is set up in us shines bright enough for all our purposes. The discoveries we can make with this

ought to satisfy us, and we shall then use our understandings right, when we entertain all objects in that way and proportion that they are suited to our faculties.”

But though this tone of becoming diffidence, this ostentatious modesty in the recognition of the disproportion between man's intellect and the universe, was one of the most prevalent intellectual fashions of a great part of the eighteenth century, it was frequently accompanied by an extreme presumption of the simplicity of the truths that *are* needful for man and within his reach, by a confidence in the possibility of “short and easy methods,” not only with the deists, but with pretty much all matters of legitimate human concern. “Simplicity, noblest ornament of truth,” wrote John Toland, characteristically; and one can see that to him, and to many of his time and temper, simplicity was in fact, not merely an extrinsic ornament, but almost a necessary attribute of any conception or doctrine which they were willing to accept as true, or even fairly to examine. When Pope, in his most familiar lines, exhorted his contemporaries:

Know then thyself! Presume not God to scan!
The proper study of mankind is man,

he implied that the problems of theology and speculative metaphysics are too vast for human thought; but he also implied, to the contemporary ear, that man is a tolerably simple kind of entity, to plumb whose nature was well within the scope of the decidedly limited and simple intellectual powers with which he was endowed. Assuming human nature to be a simple thing, the Enlightenment also, as a rule, assumed political and social problems to be simple, and therefore easy of solution. Rid man's mind of a few ancient errors, purge his beliefs of the artificial complications of metaphysical ‘systems’ and theological dogmas, restore to his social relations something like the simplicity of the state of nature, and his natural excellence would, it was assumed, be realized, and mankind would live happily ever after. The two tendencies I have been mentioning, in short, may probably be traced to a common root. The limitation of the scope of activity of man's interest and even of the ranging of his imagination was itself a mani-