

Daniel J. Wilson. *Arthur O. Lovejoy and the Quest for Intelligibility*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980. Pp. xvii + 248. \$18.00.

In the Preface, Daniel Wilson writes, "The questions a biographer needs to ask about a soldier, or a politician, or even a novelist are quite different from those that must be asked about a philosopher" (p. xii). Although he does not specify what questions he has in mind, it is certainly true that the biography of a philosopher or any other scholar and thinker—whose life is taken up with ideas, research, and the construction of theories—poses peculiar problems. Despite the prevalent fashion in Anglo-American philosophical writing, a philosophy is not simply a set of propositions whose logical relations either do or do not stand up to careful analysis. The arguments that philosophers construct and the conclusions they defend are stated in terms and respond to problems that are at least partly determined by political and cultural as well as by personal circumstances. To understand a philosopher, therefore, requires both a broad understanding of the intellectual context in which the subject worked and a narrow understanding of the meanings of crucial terms the subject used. As much as I enjoyed reading the biographical information that Wilson has collected here, I think the book is seriously flawed both in its presentation of the historical context and in the conceptual precision of its analysis.

Wilson describes his book as a "biography . . . an attempt to trace the personal and intellectual roots of Lovejoy's devotion to rational scholarship and to outline the development of his religious beliefs, his philosophical positions, his historical studies, and his social and political activism," (p. xii). The book's overall structure is biographical in the strict sense. Chapter I deals with his family and unsettling early life, his undergraduate education at the University of California, Berkeley, and graduate education at Harvard, his decision (on James's advice!) not to seek a Ph.D., and how he got his first job, as the entire philosophy department at Stanford. I was especially charmed to learn that James dissuaded Lovejoy from the Ph.D. on the grounds that such work killed creativity and only served to create and perpetuate an intellectual élite. Chapters two through four discuss his philosophical development from 1895 to 1910, as well as his resignation from Stanford in a dispute over academic freedom, his next job as (once again) the entire philosophy department, this time at Washington University in St. Louis, and his eventual move to Johns Hopkins. Chapter five, covering 1910 through 1920, presents the unedifying spectacle of Lovejoy's continuing defense of academic freedom and his involvement in the founding of the A. A. U. P. contrasted with his rabid support of U.S. entry into World War I, his opposition to conscientious objection, and defense of the government's right to limit academic freedom during wartime (e.g., to fire teachers who had only been indicted for civil disobedience). Chapters six and seven deal with the twenties and the heyday of Lovejoy's history of ideas work and its connection to his more strictly philosophical theories. Chapter eight (1930–1962) treats his retirement, the founding of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, his government work during the Second World War, and the intellectual isolation of his last years. It is unfortunate that this story-line is broken up by long analyses of particular texts that are often little more than careful resumes of Lovejoy's arguments.

But the book has, as I have suggested, two problems that are more serious. The

first is the inadequacy of its historical setting. Wilson often mentions Lovejoy's teachers, especially Howison, James, and Royce. But only Howison's philosophical position is ever explained at all carefully; and Howison is the only teacher to whose position Wilson relates Lovejoy's views as they developed through his life. William James, also Lovejoy's teacher and surely a more widely influential philosopher than Howison, John Dewey, a friend and opponent for many years, and the entire American pragmatic movement are only mentioned, alluded to from time to time. As a result, the book gives little sense of the American intellectual and philosophical world in which Lovejoy was educated, taught, and wrote. And there is even less discussion of the influence European philosophers might have had. The mention of F. H. Bradley (p. 58) suggests that Lovejoy was at least aware of absolute idealism in England; and this, in turn, suggests the influence of German Idealism that is also hinted at by the use of the term *Zeitgeist* (p. 154) and mention of Wilhelm Windelband as a source of Lovejoy's notion of "unit ideas" (Ch. VIII, n. 16). Certainly the history of ideas as a field owes something to Hegelian modes of thought; but we are never told whether or how Lovejoy may have been affected by Hegelianism or even whether he ever read Hegel. Leaving out the general intellectual milieu, as Wilson does, creates the impression that Lovejoy was the only really original philosopher of the time or that he developed his ideas altogether on his own, struggling with Howison's idealism and his father's evangelicism. But if that is Wilson's opinion—and even if it is true—such a claim must be substantiated by presenting Lovejoy's ideas within a thorough picture of the intellectual world of the time.

The failure to provide an adequate historical context for Lovejoy's ideas may simply be an example of what I consider the book's second major problem: a kind of philosophical naïveté in the use of terms such as "thought," "reason," and "intelligence." These are recurrent features of philosophic discourse, terms whose meanings are continually being debated, rather than special, technical terms belonging to one period or one school of thought and possessing clear, established meanings. In fact, one way to distinguish philosophic systems or theories is precisely to distinguish the different senses in which they use such terms as "reason," "thought," and "intelligence." So, when Wilson states, as the overall thesis of his book, that "The quest for intelligibility and the answer he suggested—reason as the sole guiding principle in a pluralistic universe—shaped his entire career" (p. xii), we are not told anything very specific or informative about Lovejoy's thinking. The quest for intelligibility and reason as a guiding principle could just as well describe Plato or Aristotle or Hegel or Dewey. The conceptual oversimplification can also be seen in more specific points, such as the description of philosophy as "a method of thought" (p. 18).

An intellectual biography of A. O. Lovejoy would be a valuable contribution to the history of philosophy and the history of ideas in the twentieth-century U.S. A satisfactory one requires a better balance between story and theory, a full presentation of the intellectual situation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a more extensive account of whom Lovejoy read and learned from, and, in consequence, an analysis of Lovejoy's ideas that is both deeper and more precise than the present book offers.

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