

***Perfection, Progress and Evolution:
A Study in the History of Ideas***

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	vii	
List of Tables	viii	
List of Abbreviations Used	ix	
Summary	x	
Preface	xi	
Statement of Authorship	xvi	
Chapter 1	<i>Introduction</i>	1
	Focus of Study	1
	The History of Ideas	3
	A. O. Lovejoy and the Study of the History of Ideas	4
	Phenomena in the History of Ideas	10
	In Support of Interdisciplinary Studies	12
	‘The Thinking Animal Engaged’: The Educational Function of the History of Ideas	16
	Philosophical-Historical Inquiry	18
	Perfection, Progress and Evolution: A Study in the History of Ideas	19
	The Role of Writers in this Thesis	26
Chapter 2	<i>Toward a Methodology in the History of Ideas</i>	31
	Focus of Chapter	31
	The Lovejoyan Program	31
	The Purpose	32
	The ‘Unit Idea’ and its Problems	35
	Between Text and Context	36
	What is an Appropriate Method in the History of Ideas?	38
	Folk Psychology	40
	Synchronic and Diachronic Evaluation and Change	40
	Other Approaches: The Great Man Theory of History versus the Concept of <i>Zeitgeist</i> versus the Concept of Paradigm	42
	The Complex of Ideas	43
	The Eclectic Program and Methodological Pluralism	44
	Summary of the History of Ideas as Applied in this Thesis	44
	The Three Aims of this Thesis	46
Chapter 3	<i>The True Perfection of Mankind</i>	50
	Focus of Chapter	50
	The Idea of Perfection	51
	The Idea of progress: An Inquiry into its Origin	51
	Three Principles of Progress	52
	The Myth of the Five Ages	53

Progress as a Theme in History, Philosophy and Social Science	55
Progress and Perfectibility	55
Perfectibility in Western Philosophy	56
History and the Idea of Progress: Hegel	57
Ludwig Feuerbach, Religion and Human Perfection	59
Karl Marx and a Revolutionary Concept of Change	61
Condorcet and <i>the Progress of the Human Mind</i>	64
A Review of History and Historical Forecasting	66
Bernard de Fontenelle: Selling Science	67
Popular Science Writing	70
The <i>Encyclopédie</i> : Hymn to The Enlightenment	70
<i>Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds</i>	71
Historical Change as Progressive	73
A New Religion	74
Voltaire and <i>Candide</i> : All for the Best	75
Mathematical Techniques and Measurable Properties	76
A Science of Humanity	77
The Concept of Probability	77
The Society for the Study of Man	79
Relations of the Physical and Moral in Man	80
A Socially Desirable Temperament	81
Human Perfection through Biological Intervention	83
Perfecting the Human Species	83
Chapter 4	88
<i>All by Rule and Calculated Contrivance</i>	
Focus of Chapter	88
The French Revolution	89
Begetting a New World	92
New Eras	94
Progress and Retrogression	95
The Age of Machinery	96
Looking Outward, Looking Inward	98
<i>Sartor Resartus</i>	99
Phrenology	101
Gall	102
Lavater	103
Phrenology in Britain: A Provocation of Progress	104
George Combe	106
A Charge of Materialism	107
Phrenological Hereditarianism	108
Phrenological Measurement and the Cephalic Index	109
Camper's Facial Line and Angle	110
Blumenbach	110
A Scale of Perfection	111
The Highest Ideal of Human Perfection	112
Chapter 5	118
<i>An Hereditary Bent of Mind</i>	
Focus of Chapter	118
The Language of Science	119
The Wonderful Century	121
The Journal <i>Nature</i>	122
Galton Biographically	124
Always Fond of Studying Abstruse Sciences	125

Medical Training	126
The Fallow Years	127
Early Efforts at Measurement: Hottentot Ladies	128
Marriage to Louisa Butler	128
The Influence of Social Milieu	130
Milieu and Environment	130
Etymological Origin of the Word Genius	132
The New Notion of Genius	134
The Superior Being	135
Progress and Reality	136
Controlling the Destiny of Society	137
Galton's Scientific Milieu	138
The Importance of Fact	139
Victorian Anthropology	139
The Impetus Toward Classification	141
The Bad Streak	141
A Man of Order	142
The Statistical Efficacy of Prayer	143
<i>Hereditary Talent and Character</i>	144
The Law of Deviation from the Average	145
The Concept of the Average Man	146
Insight into Human Inheritance	147
Typical Laws of Inheritance	148
The Anthropometric Laboratory	149
Mental Testing	150
Chapter 6	154
<i>The Select of their Generation</i>	154
Focus of Chapter	154
Making Utopias	155
Temporal and Spatial Utopia	156
The Engine of Progress	158
Herbert Spencer	159
Evolutionary and Developmental Views	160
Racial Determinism	161
Spencer and Lamarck	162
The Influence of Ernst von Baer	164
The Law of Individual Development	164
Associationism	165
The Influence of Alexander Bain	166
Spencer's Place in the Nature/nurture Controversy	169
From Biological Theory to Social Metaphor	170
The Differential Development of Human Races	170
Progress not an Accident but a Necessity	172
Social Progress and Laissez-faire	173
A Stark Individualism	175
Spencer and Huxley	177
The Most Efficient Type of Human Being	178
Galton supplants Spencer	179
<i>Looking Backward 2000-1887</i>	180
The Struggle for Existence more Intense	180
A Sort of Fanciful Fatalism	181
Pessimism Abroad	182

Chapter 7	<i>The Language of Survival</i>	185
	Focus of Chapter	185
	Darwinism, Social Darwinism and Eugenics: A Problem of Clarification	186
	Darwinism	186
	Darwin's Metaphorical Language	188
	<i>The Vestiges of Creation</i>	191
	We Had Fins—We May Have Wings	193
	Could Our Minds be Made Visible we Would Find Them Tailed	194
	<i>The Descent of Man</i>	197
	On the Failure of 'Natural Selection' in the Case of Man	199
	One Glorious Congregation of Saints, Sages and Athletes	201
	Progress is no Inevitable Rule	202
	The Language of Survival	205
	Social Darwinism and Eugenics	207
	Internal and External Social Darwinism	208
	The Residuum	209
	Degeneration	210
	Eugenic Solutions for Social Ills	213
	Positive Eugenics	214
	Galton's Disciple	214
	Civic Worth=Genetic Worth	217
	Negative Eugenics	218
	The Eugenic Enterprise	220
	Beyond Darwinism	223
Chapter 8	<i>The New 'Science of Man'</i>	226
	Focus of Chapter	226
	A Place in the Sun	227
	Charles de Brosses	229
	The Necessity to Engage Native Populations	230
	New Cythera	231
	Glorification of the State of Nature	233
	Mondobbo	235
	Students of the Variety of Mankind	237
	Racial Discourse and the Contextualist View of Science and Change	237
	Polygenism and Monogenism	239
	First 'Field-Trip' to the South Pacific	240
	A New Science	242
	Joseph Degérando	243
	For The Deaf-Mute is Also a Savage	246
	François Péron	247
	A Rousseauesque Anthropologist	248
	Regnier's Dynamometer	250
	On the Method of Measurements	252
	From Péron to Porteus	257
Chapter 9	<i>Dr Alan Carroll and the Science of Man</i>	259
	Focus of Chapter	259
	Dr Alan Carroll and the <i>Science of Man</i>	260
	<i>The Journal of the Science of Man</i>	263
	The Dissolution of Nations	266

The Race Problems	268
The Coming of the Laboratory	269
First Psychological Laboratories in Europe and America	271
The Laboratory Association of Australasia	274
The Ideal Human Type	275
Training the Senses	277
Fröbel's Teaching	279
Exemplary Children of the Enlightenment	280
The Child Study Association of Australasia	281
Questionnaire Studies	282
The Second Child Study Association	285
The Demise of the <i>Science of Man</i>	287
Chapter 10 <i>Conclusion</i>	290
Appendix	299
Bibliography	300

List of Illustrations

Figure

1. Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94)/Following page 50.
2. Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters*, 1799/Following page 94.
3. Valentine Green, A Philosopher shewing an experiment on the air pump, after Joseph Wright of Derby, *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, 1768/Following page 99.
4. Joseph William Mallord Turner, *Rain, Steam, Speed*, 1844/Following page 100.
5. Camper's facial line and angle/Following page 110.
6. Progressive development of man in 24 heads/Following page 112.
7. William Frith, *The Railway Station*, 1862/Following page 140.
8. International Health Exhibition: Gymnastics for girls/Following page 149.
9. Anthropometric instruments used at the International Health Exhibition, 1884/Following page 150.
10. Donald MacKenzie: Galton's view of British Social Structure/Following page 218.
- 11a. The dynamometer invented by Edme Régnier/following page 250.
- 11b. Summary of mean muscular force of five groups tested by Péron/Following page 250.
12. Portrait of Dr Alan Carroll/Following page 260.
13. Prospectus of the *Laboratory Association of Australasia*/Following page 274.

List of Tables

Table

1. Francis Galton: Mean age attained by males of various classes who have survived their 30th year/Page 144.
2. Francis Galton: Comparison of Mr Booth's classification of all London with the normal group/Following page 218.
3. Robert Reid Rentoul: Fair estimate of the number of mental degenerates in the United Kingdom/Following page 218.

List of Abbreviations Used

AAAS	Australian Association for the Advancement of Science
ADB	<i>Australian Dictionary of Biography</i> (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976)
ADBB	<i>A Biographical Register 1788–1939: Notes from the Name Index of the Australian Dictionary of Biography</i> . Compiled and edited by H. J. Gibbney and Anne G. Smith. (Canberra: Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1987)
ANZAAS	Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science
Dsc	Doctor of Science
Dlitt.	Doctor of Letters
EES	Eugenics Education Society
FRS	Fellow of the Royal Society
FRAS	Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Society
FRASA	Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia
MD	<i>Medicinae Doctor</i> (Doctor of Medicine)
MP	Member of Parliament
SOMJ	<i>Science of Man</i> and Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (under the word; under the heading)

Summary

The study of perfection, progress and evolution is a central theme in the history of ideas. This thesis explores this theme seen and understood as part of a discourse in the new fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology in the nineteenth century. A particular focus is on the stance taken by philosophers, scientists and writers in the discussion of theories of human physical and mental evolution, as well as on their views concerning the nature of social progress and historical change. The wisdom and feasibility of improving the human species is discussed alongside an analysis of new methods of investigating and measuring physical and mental attributes of the human organism. The instruments used to assess the development of mind, body and society are described, and are viewed as part of an increased emphasis on the use of technology as an integral part of modern life, and as a means toward the ordered gathering of information in social-scientific practice. An international perspective is taken by observing the way in which ideas about the physical and mental development of humankind was discussed in light and consequence of English and European scientific exploration in the Southern Hemisphere. Further, an evaluation is made of the manner of the spread of new thought in the social sciences from the intellectual and cultural ‘centre’ of England and Europe to the Anglo-European community located at the ‘periphery’ in Australia in the late nineteenth century. In particular the educative role played by the non-professional enthusiast as a pivotal conduit for the dissemination of these ideas is highlighted and linked back to a significant tradition of amateur scholarship as a central phenomenon in the study of the history of ideas.

Preface

The motivation for undertaking the thesis presented here is a long held interest in and enthusiasm for the history of ideas. This interest has been closely connected with an appreciation of ‘the interdisciplinary approach’. Neither is well understood as a method of proceeding with research, and it was my objective to attempt a synthesis of the two in the hope that I might both contribute to and encourage others to further efforts in this direction. I chose as my topic one which has at one and the same time been a ‘staple’ for historians of ideas (for example the early twentieth century American philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy) and one which remains a centre of interest if not debate within many disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. The topic was the complex association between the ‘idea of perfection’, the ‘idea of progress’ and the ‘idea of evolution’. I understood these as making up an emotionally charged ‘web of belief’ and I wanted to explore them as part of a ‘complex of ideas’ which has influenced individuals and directed change in the social sciences over the period 1795 to 1914. My aim was to elucidate the connection or interrelationship between the three themes; to demonstrate how those themes were understood across the boundaries of disciplines, and to show these themes as constituting dynamic intellectual and even intrapsychic problems for individuals in particular places at particular times.

My purpose was also to show that the study of that interrelationship could best be approached as a subject for investigation by recognising that it was not merely a metahistorical or metatheoretical issue. Indeed method is not at the strategic centre of this thesis. Rather the approach embraces a different rationale: one suggested by the English philosopher Mark Bevir (1999: 88–9) which states ‘that we [as historians of ideas] should not dismiss the search for evidence. We should reject only the idea that the search for evidence should take a particular form’. Taking the position offered by Bevir (1999: 61) that ‘all historical meanings are either meanings for individuals or abstractions derived from meanings for individuals’, what would be at the strategic centre of this thesis is the relationship between people and the ideas in which they believed; and between people and people and the ideas in which they believed.

For this reason this thesis eschews an overt discussion of such issues as the merits of, or tension between methodological individualism and methodological holism as preferred approaches to research in the social sciences. I do not choose between the two. I have chosen rather to ‘oscillate’ like the phenomenon elucidated in the ideas themselves; to oscillate between the perspective on the idea of perfectibility and social progress of a utopian philosopher/mathematician like the Marquis de Condorcet ([1795] 1955) and a sceptical historian/essayist like Thomas Carlyle (1829). Or there is drawn out here the contrast between the labours of a pragmatic optimist like the psychologist Francis Galton (1865; 1883; 1885; 1901; 1908) and those of a didactic theorist such as the sociologist Herbert Spencer (1851; 1857; 1860). And further the effort is made to establish a contrast between the objectives of the scientifically curious French aristocrats of the *Société des observateurs de l’homme* and the scientifically curious mid-Victorians who formed the first editorial board of the journal *Nature*. There is also here an attempt to show how the great ship of ideas—to paraphrase Karl Pearson (1914–30, 2: 69)—was surrounded by a host of smaller vessels of intellect. The discussion of the idea of perfection, progress and evolution in the work of major authors in this thesis, is augmented by discussion of perfection, progress and evolution in the work of minor authors. Major English and European identities are contrasted with lesser-known or now forgotten individuals, like the ‘amateur’ Australian journal editor and anthropologist Dr Alan Carroll, who nevertheless served as a conduit for conveying ideas to a wider audience in a small, isolated and very distant part of the world.

Difficulties arose in taking A. O. Lovejoy’s (1936; 1940; 1948) approach as a model. Lovejoy was enormously well acquainted with a wide European literature and was able to evaluate that literature in Latin and in French. For me a problem arose in looking particularly to French sources for inspiration and discussion in the areas of anthropology and education. As a non-French speaker this led to a reliance on the translations and commentaries of others. This was particularly the case when a text which was potentially useful for the discussion of evolution and race had not been translated at all. I was buffeted in this way between primary and secondary sources in the case of French anthropology in the eighteenth century. So that the complete version of George Cuvier’s (1800) ‘Instructive note on the researches to be made relative to the anatomical differences between diverse races of man’, has never been translated into English although it is contemporary with Matthew Flinders’s (1801–03) circumnavigation of Australia at a time when both French and English scientific interest in the land-mass of Australasia was at its height. The only source is ‘extracts’ contained within a secondary source discussion of French

anthropology in 1800 by George Stocking published in 1964. As late as 1988 in an exploration of the contribution of French artists to the early depiction of the southern lands, Australian scholars were still relying on Stocking's limited translation. It was not possible for me to access the personal papers for most of the individuals discussed in this thesis when those papers are in archival collections in England, Europe and America, often in widely scattered locations. The letters and papers of Francis Galton which have been catalogued by Merrington and Golden (1976) for instance, are held in the library of London University. Here the 'tyranny of distance' impacted on my work in a real way. Yet even for those with greater access 'few Galton books are available in modern reprints and his numerous [original] papers are lost in nineteenth-century periodicals' (Keynes 1993: 3). However, his journal articles are readily available for analysis (as are those of most of the great Victorian scientists and essayists) in Australia's major state libraries, and Karl Pearson's (1914–30) great biography has never been bettered for its thorough documentation of his teacher's life and work. Such, that most Galton scholars would still look to it for inspiration to some extent.

Yet secondary sources were viewed in another and positive way. The balanced use of primary and secondary sources is possible when the secondary sources themselves serve to illuminate a point being made: that all thinkers are influenced by the social and intellectual environments in which they work, and whose 'history' and values they have internalised. In 1958 the English historian Asa Briggs wrote a foreword to the Centenary edition to Samuel Smiles's Victorian bestseller *Self-Help* (1859). Aside from the analysis of Smiles's place in Victorian literature and of *Self-Help* as a work of literature, Lord Briggs, is able to ask 'what is the place of self-help in the welfare state, where social contingencies are met by government action? In a 1996 reprint of Smiles's *Self-Help*, Lord Harris of High Cross, in an essay titled 'A New Consensus for the Millennium' laments the very existence of the welfare state; reading into Smiles's work an anodyne for the debilitating affects of 'state benevolence' under both Conservative and New Labour governments. He suggests that rather than dismissing the Victorian author's gospel of self-sufficiency as quaint 'Victorian values' Smiles's recipe of self-improvement through self-help provides the answer to the major social problems besetting the end of the twentieth century. The use of secondary sources can tell us where—as far as ideas are concerned—we have come from in relation to certain themes and where we currently stand intellectually in relation to those themes. After all the discussion of intellectual change itself is about a centuries long process of the sifting of concepts and beliefs through many minds in a dynamic relationship with time, place and scholastic fashion.

Most texts regarded as indispensable to scholarship in the field of the history of ideas and in the areas specific to the themes of this thesis, are Anglo-American in their focus. This I regarded as a challenge, and it largely determined the choice of an English, French and Australian focus to the themes discussed. I found it sometimes difficult to reconcile the dominance of the Anglo-American interpretation in virtually all matters relating to the development of society through the nineteenth and twentieth century, with my desire to somehow include some analysis which was Australia-centred. Consequently a background influence for me was the tension of acknowledging that scholarship at the centre and the efforts by those seeking to make a contribution from the periphery was an effort to justify Lovejoy's (1948: 3) statement that 'ideas are commodities which enter into interstate commerce'.

The problems which I encountered in doing this thesis mirror many of the problems encountered by others in doing certain kinds of research at the periphery whatever the discipline concerned. Not to be at the centre can be a real limitation; a limitation which is more than geographic. It is an emotional one also—the sense of being cut off from the mainstream.

Finally, I was encouraged in approaching my topic by an awareness of the seeming diminution of interest in the importance of the 'themes and variations' of European ideas as a worthwhile subject for research in Australian higher education; and as a still relevant field for understanding our cultural beginnings and our ongoing progress. I perceive that by taking an interdisciplinary approach to research in the social sciences and humanities our enthusiasm for intellectual history can be reinvigorated and maintained. In the immediate future the search for an appropriate 'method' seems the most urgent requisite for this type of research. It will perhaps be one which takes a 'pluralistic' approach as to methodology and one which broadens rather than narrows the definition of thesis. For while wisdom decrees that a successful thesis will be 'narrow and deep' a willingness to explore beyond defined boundaries—once again recognising the wisdom of Lovejoy (1940: 4) when he wrote that 'ideas are the most migratory things in the world'—is to recognise the nature of the attempt which I made here.

At a technical level, the consideration of what constitutes the material appropriate for exploration and extrapolation within and across the boundaries of disciplines I considered as important as the writing of the thesis itself. For this reason, as well as using and perusing conventional 'texts', that is the written word, I also took a keen interest in visual material which might be useful in illustrating the biographical, technical and scientific as well as the literary and artistic dimensions of the thesis. In

line with Lovejoy's (1936; 1940; 1948) admonition that researchers cooperate with others in the promotion of intellectual history I regarded the involvement of those with particular expertise as vital in undertaking this thesis.

I acknowledge the staff of the Borchardt Library at La Trobe University; in particular Margot Hyslop for her help in obtaining detailed information about publishing histories of Australian books and serials. Richard Overell, Rare Books Librarian at Monash University for allowing me access to fragile book materials and his willingness to facilitate the production of reproductions from these sources. To this end Adrian Dyer of the Physics Department Photographic Service in the Faculty of Science at Monash University gave valuable advice. The staff of the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries at the State Library of New South Wales were helpful in locating material related to Dr Alan Carroll. I also thank Simon Conti of The Mary Evans Picture Library, London, for 'chasing up' a desired image of the Marquis de Condorcet and making this available to me.

I thank my supervisor's Dr Bob Bessant and Dr Lorraine Ling of the Institute for Education for their guidance during the research and writing of this thesis.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.
