

Gerald Vaughn, "Amherst Professor Joseph Haven and His Influence on America's Greatest Social Critic, Thorstein Veblen" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 34, No. 1 (Winter 2006).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/mhj>.



**Amherst Professor Joseph Haven  
and His Influence on  
America's Great Social Critic,  
Thorstein Veblen**

**By**

**Gerald F. Vaughn**

The Rev. Joseph Haven (1816-1874), born and reared in Massachusetts, was professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy in Amherst College when, in 1857, he authored *Mental Philosophy*, one of the finest textbooks on the subject as taught in American higher education in the second half of the nineteenth century. Haven's textbook was instrumental in the intellectual development of no less a personage than America's great social critic, Thorstein Veblen.

Looking back from the vantage point of academic history and writing in 1939 on American psychology before William James, Jay Wharton Fay called Haven's work "a monument of scholarship" and "one of the great texts of the pre-experimental period, well-organized, written in a clean, straight-forward style, uncommonly free from the rhetorical flourishes characteristic of the period." Fay says:

It has an excellent bibliography [103 authorities], and gives valuable historical sketches of the various theories of Sensation, Memory, Imagination, Realism and Nominalism, Logic, Aesthetics, Cause, Instinct, Sensibilities, and Freedom of the Will. The work is eclectic, but shows clearly the influence of [Sir William] Hamilton. In moot points it states the arguments on

either side of the question, arrives at a definite position, and supports it by clear and cogent reasoning.

Fay includes part of the publishers' note from the new edition of 1883: "It soon became the most popular text-book on this subject....So great has been the demand for this book, that the stereo-typed plates have been entirely worn out, in printing edition after edition."<sup>1</sup>

Fay's twentieth century praise for Haven's textbook squares with the praise at the time of its publication, including anonymous mid-nineteenth century reviewers. In the periodical *North American Review*, one reads:

It is distinguished by a complete and exhausting division, lucid arrangement, and a style at once concise and clear, simple and elegant. It makes no pretence to originality of speculation; but it shows that every topic discussed has passed through the crucible of the author's own mind, and where we could not anticipate novelty, we find freshness of statement and illustration....We ought not to omit saying, that each leading division of this treatise is closed by an historical sketch of the progress of thought and the range of speculation on that one portion of intellectual science.

*New Englander* (forerunner to *Yale Review*) asserts: "The work of Prof. Haven on Mental Philosophy, recently published by Messrs. Gould & Lincoln, is in its form the best of the several textbooks on Mental Philosophy which have been recently offered to the American public." *Littell's Living Age* declares:

Among the numerous text-books on the subject of mental philosophy, which have appeared within the last few years (including Pres. Wayland's, Pres. Mahan's, Prof. Hickock's [sic], and Prof. Henry's edition of Cousin's 'Psychology'), the present treatise is distinguished for its simplicity and its

---

<sup>1</sup> Jay Wharton Fay, *American Psychology Before William James*, 1939 (Reprint New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 91, 114, 125, 126-128, 207-208, 224, 229.

completeness....With the exception of the profound and admirable works of Prof. Hickock [sic], we must regard this volume as the most important contribution to mental science as yet furnished by any American scholar.

Finally, *Massachusetts Teacher and Journal of Home and School Education* says: "We regard this volume as the best text-book in Psychology, for High Schools and Colleges, which has yet been written in our country."<sup>2</sup>

Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) was America's most astute social critic, certainly in the first quarter of the twentieth century and perhaps in the entire century. Being a philosopher, historian, economist, sociologist, social psychologist, anthropologist, he sought to understand the American social psyche. He mainly sought to understand social institutions, which was the study of the habits of American thought and the customs, laws, organizations, and forums that give expression and power to those habits of thought. Foremost among them to Veblen were economic institutions, and Veblen's ideas about economics were incorporated into the various policies and programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Veblen's New Deal ideas have been carried forward to some degree in successive administrations to this day.

Veblen's research and writings in the newly emerging field of institutional economics were characterized by inductive reasoning, supplanting the deductive , reasoning characteristic of the older classical economics. Stanley Matthew Daugert discloses:

Veblen's emphasis upon induction and his marked contrasting of induction and deduction stems partly from his early training in the Scottish Common-Sense philosophy that he acquired at Carleton College from Joseph Haven's text on mental philosophy....the author [Haven] having drawn mostly upon the work of William

---

<sup>2</sup> Review of Haven, *North American Review*, 86 (January 1858), 283-284; Review of Haven, *New Englander*, 16 (February 1858), APS Online 207; Review of Haven, *Littell's Living Age*, 55 (October-December 1857), 660; Review of Haven, *Massachusetts Teacher and Journal of Home and School Education*, 12 (August 1859), APS Online 305.

Hamilton, though Thomas Reid, Thomas Brown, and Dugald Stewart occasionally enter his pages.<sup>3</sup>

Veblen's career as a social critic began at his graduation from Carleton College in 1880. His public oration at the graduation ceremony was quite unlike the usual. Instead of speaking on some topic of more general interest, he chose to critique "Mill's Examination of Hamilton's Philosophy of the Conditioned." He discussed John Stuart Mill's examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy of the conditioned mind, complete with mathematical points.<sup>4</sup> This reflected Veblen's instruction in, and first important declaration of his understanding, of the first principles of social institutions. It was gained by study of Amherst College professor Joseph Haven's textbook *Mental Philosophy*, as taught by Carleton professor John Bates Clark.

Lev E. Dobriansky emphasizes in his book *Veblenism: A New Critique*, "In reviewing Veblen's definitional expressions on institutions, it is obvious that his chief stress is on habit. Much of what has been called learned forms of conduct is, in his view, conventional. The more deeply rooted our institutions, the more powerful are their conditioning effects on individuals." Veblen defined an institution, consistent with the Scottish common-sense philosophy expounded by Haven, as "a product of habit, or perhaps more accurately it is a body of habits of thought bearing on a given line of conduct, which prevails with such generality and uniformity throughout the group as to have become a matter of common sense."<sup>5</sup>

Veblen studied *Mental Philosophy* under Clark, who taught from Haven's textbook, in the academic year 1879-1880. G. Stanley Hall has

---

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Matthew Daugert, *The Philosophy of Thorstein Veblen* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1950), 21-22. For the relevant section of Haven's textbook, see Joseph Haven, *Mental Philosophy; including the Intellect, Sensibilities, and Will* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1857), 194-209.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and his American* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Lev E. Dobriansky, *Veblenism: A New Critique* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1957), 219-220; Thorstein Veblen, *An Inquiry into the Nature of Peace and the Terms of its Perpetuation* (New York: Viking Press, 1919), 91.

described the American academic milieu into which Clark's undergraduate instruction and Haven's textbook fit circa 1879 when Veblen studied the subject:

Mental philosophy is usually taught during perhaps half the senior year from such text-books as Bowen's abridgement of Hamilton's *Metaphysics: The Human Intellect*, by President Porter of Yale College, which has been epitomised in a smaller volume; Haven's, Upham's and Wayland's *Mental Philosophy*; Everett's *Science of Thought*; Hickok's *Rational and Empirical Psychology*...Locke's *Essay*, portions of Berkeley, of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and even Mill, Hamilton, Spencer's *Psychology*, Bain, and Taine, are also occasionally introduced.<sup>6</sup>

Some brief background on Haven is needed before fully developing the process by which Veblen's study of Haven's textbook contributed to the former's intellectual development. Haven had been born in North Dennis, on Cape Cod in Barnstable County, Massachusetts, on January 4, 1816, to the Rev. Joseph and Elizabeth (Sparrow) Haven. His ancestors were of Puritan stock, many of them clergymen. He was a descendant of Richard Haven, who had emigrated to Lynn, Massachusetts, from England in 1645.

Joseph, Sr., was a Harvard graduate, and his personal library had given Joseph, Jr. an early education. Joseph, Jr., the youngest member of his class at Amherst, graduated with honors. He was regarded as the finest writer among the undergraduates and delivered the class oration, titled "Sources of Superstition," indicative of an already keen interest in mental and moral philosophy. Haven graduated from Amherst College with his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1835 and received Master or Arts degree in 1838. During the interim, he taught in New York City at the State Institution for the Deaf and Dumb (1835-37) and also studied at Union Theological Seminary (1836-37).

From 1837 to 1839, Haven studied at the Andover Theological Seminary, graduating in 1839. He was ordained to the Congregational

---

<sup>6</sup> G. Stanley Hall, "Philosophy in the United States," *Mind* 4 (January 1879), 94.

ministry on November 6, 1839, and served as pastor of the Congregational Church in Ashland, Massachusetts, from 1839 to 1846. On September 24, 1840, he married Mary Emerson (1819-1896), daughter of Professor Ralph Emerson (of Andover Theological Seminary), who was related to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Together Joseph and Mary went on to have ten children.

From 1846 to 1850, Haven served as pastor of the Harvard Congregational Church in Brookline, Massachusetts. He also co-founded and co-edited (with Edward Beecher and Increase N. Tarbox) *The Congregationalist* in Boston during 1846-1850. He also authored two thought-provoking review essays, one regarding William Paley's book on natural theology, the other Horace Bushnell's book on the divinity of Christ.

By 1850 he had attracted such attention for his philosophical as well as theological thought that he was offered, and which he accepted, the faculty post of Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy at Amherst College, where he taught from 1850 until 1858. He essentially expounded the philosophy of Sir William Hamilton, the last of the eminent Scottish common-sense philosophers, and visited Hamilton in Edinburgh in 1854, two years before Hamilton died. Haven took that opportunity in 1854 to also visit Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling in Berlin, the year Schelling died. Hamilton had helped to bridge the gap between the previously opposing Scottish and German schools of psychological thought.<sup>7</sup>

Haven described Hamilton as "dignified and prepossessing, of somewhat commanding form and bearing, resembling in some respects our countryman, the late Daniel Webster....In the later years of his life his natural reserve was increased by a difficulty of utterance, resulting from a partial paralysis of the vocal organs. Under these circumstances, a stranger on first introduction would hardly feel at ease; while at the same time he could not fail to be impressed with the whole appearance and conversation of the man." In contrast Schelling, Haven writes, was "a lean and shriveled old man, but full of vivacity and fire, bowed and

---

<sup>7</sup> Gardner Murphy and Joseph K. Kovach, *Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology*, 3rd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 46, 81, 96-98; Jurgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 12, 16, 55.

worn with the labors of years, but retaining all the enthusiasm of younger days, -- busily engaged to the very last in elaborating his second system, and to this end combating his own former views; pleasantly remarking that he found himself and his own former pupils the most difficult of all his antagonists to refute.”<sup>8</sup>

Haven did not agree with Hamilton, Schelling, nor anyone else, on all points. Haven was a free-thinker, taking what he could accept from leading authorities and integrating those views with his own. Such must have been an appealing model for the free-thinking Veblen. The Rev. C. D. Helmer said of Haven:

It is sufficient that he discriminated for himself between the opinions already put forth by other men, and was able to construct an eclectic system bearing the image and superscription of his own mind....And those who appreciate the value of common sense, whether in business, religion, or philosophy, will understand the merit of Prof. Haven’s system of thought. It was the product of sound common sense, combined with rare intellectual powers of analysis and construction. In other words he was a philosopher for the people in all great public issues.<sup>9</sup>

Haven also taught moral philosophy and delivered a sermon in 1853 that received wide attention when subsequently published, a tribute upon the passing of New England’s great statesman Daniel Webster. It was titled *Sketch of the Life and Character of Hon. Daniel Webster* and remains an oft-cited reference regarding Webster.

Haven was attuned to economic conditions in the United States. He delivered a compelling sermon, titled and published as *The Prosperity of Our Country*, at Greenfield, Massachusetts, on Sunday, July 21, 1856. This was almost on the eve of America’s financial

---

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Haven, *Studies in Philosophy and Theology* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1869), 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> C. D. Helmer, *A Sermon in Memory of Joseph Haven, D.D., LL.D.* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurq & Co., 1874), 6, 8.



crisis of 1857, which one could expect entered into his teaching. He exhorted at Greenfield:

Especially, in a crisis like the present, in these days, so dark and perilous, so fraught with danger to our country and the dearest rights of man....then it is time for all good men, and true, to speak and to act, -- time for us, as Christian citizens, to ask God, and each other, what we have to do.

To Haven there was no higher calling than the ministry. Two months earlier, on May 26, 1856, Haven had addressed the American Education Society and said: "He who would labor most effectually and directly for his country and the world, must place himself not at the bar, nor on the bench, not in the halls of legislation, not in the editor's chair, not on the rostrum of the secular orator, but in the Christian pulpit."<sup>10</sup>

Teaching Intellectual [or Mental] Philosophy at Amherst, Haven's plan to make eclectic use of leading authorities throughout history caused him to find no existing textbook adequate for his classes, so he had to lecture from multitudinous sources while integrating his own views into the lectures. His lectures became sufficiently well-structured and so voluminous that in 1857 he authored his textbook *Mental Philosophy*, which immediately was well-received in the United States and eventually translated into several foreign languages.

Claude Moore Fuess, in his history of Amherst College, states: "Haven was a genial, urbane person, with a sparkling vein of humor, a lucid writer and popular platform speaker, but incurably restless and impatient of routine." In 1858, Haven left Amherst to accept the professorship in Systematic Theology, and became one of the three founding professors, with Franklin W. Fisk and Samuel C. Bartlett, at the newly-established Chicago Theological Seminary, where he gained added renown from 1858 to 1870. He traveled to Europe, the Holy Land, and Egypt in 1870-71; preached and lectured at the University of Chicago from 1871 to 1873; and was serving as acting professor of

---

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Haven, *The Prosperity of Our Country* (Greenfield, MA: L. Merriam, Publisher, 1856), 18-19; Haven, *A Discourse Delivered Before the American Education Society* (Boston: T.R. Marvin, 1856), 13.

Mental and Moral Philosophy at that university when he died of typhoid fever in Chicago on May 23, 1874. At that time he was president of the Philosophical Society of Chicago and was also in charge of the Christian Union (later called the Chicago Athenaeum) class in English Literature. He was a member of the Everett Society (probably devotees of New England's Edward Everett, who was among those who had introduced German thought to the intellectuals of Boston or, less likely, Charles Carroll Everett, who authored *The Science of Thought: A System of Logic* in 1870), and was supply pastor of the Jefferson Park Presbyterian Church.<sup>11</sup>

In the years after Haven left Amherst, he had authored numerous noteworthy books and articles. He received the Doctor of Divinity degree from Marietta College in 1859 and from Amherst College in 1862. He received the Doctor of Laws degree from Kenyon College in 1862.

By the academic year 1879-80 when Veblen took Mental Philosophy under Clark at Carleton, Haven was dead yet his book remained alive and well. Veblen's introduction to the first principles of social institutions is traced by his biographer Joseph Dorfman as follows:

Thus the "self-regarding" passions, according to the Reverend Joseph Haven's textbook used at Carleton in the course on Intellectual [or Mental] Philosophy, are the "motive power" to action. The basic desire, if not the all-inclusive one, is the "desire for happiness" or "self-love," which has its "foundation in the constitution of the mind, and which is characteristic of reason and intelligence." The greatest pleasure of man is the pleasure of the ability to exert power, that is, to "control the actions of his fellow man and bend the will of others to his own." This desire for power may express itself in the form of the "desire for superiority," otherwise known as "the principle of emulation." Today such superiority is attainable principally by the "possession of wealth." "This, as the world goes, is the key that unlocks, the sceptre that controls, all things.... No wonder that he who

---

<sup>11</sup> Claude Moore Fuess, *Amherst: The Story of a New England College* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1935), 210.

desires power, should desire that which is one of the chief avenues and means to the attainment of power, and that what is valued, at first, rather as an instrument than as an end, should presently come to be regarded and valued for its own sake."<sup>12</sup>

Haven's line of thought would seem to be among the theoretical underpinnings of ideas presented in Clark's book *The Philosophy of Wealth* (1886) and Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of the Evolution of Institutions* (1899). For instance, Clark wrote of the "power to modify our subjective condition, under actual circumstances, and....mentally measured by supposing something which we possess to be annihilated, or something which we lack to be attained." Veblen in turn wrote: "The evolution of society is substantially a process of mental adaptation on the part of individuals under the stress of circumstances which will no longer tolerate habits of thought formed under and conforming to a different set of circumstances in the past."<sup>13</sup>

Returning to Veblen's 1880 commencement oration at Carleton, it stemmed from John Stuart Mill's *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865). Debate over Mill's arguments raged between two schools of thoughts, the intuitionists (largely deductive) and the experience-associationists (largely inductive), for at least the next two decades. Hamilton represented the intuitionists and Mill the experience-associationists.

In the opinion of this author, Hamilton and Mill were not so far apart on the first principles of Intellectual [or Mental] Philosophy, or Psychology as the field was coming to be known. Even when each man sought to advance beyond the first principles, agreement remained possible on many points. However, Hamilton died in 1854 and Mill continued to think and write on philosophy. It might be safe to say that by 1865 Mill stood in relation to Hamilton, much as Mill did in relation to the largely deductive classical economists. He sought to lead the

---

<sup>12</sup> Dorfman, 20-21.

<sup>13</sup> John Bates Clark, *Philosophy of Wealth* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1886), 78; Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Viking Press, 1899), 192.

behavioral and social scientists toward more empiricism and inductive reasoning, while allowing due place for deductive reasoning as needed.

One might surmise that Veblen well understood and probably inclined toward Mill's position, since he displayed uncommon interest in the philosophic thought of Mill. In addition to his commencement oration, Veblen had earlier presented in class (for over 40 minutes) a paper he had written on Mill's philosophy. His paper was judged "sufficiently long and sufficiently deep." It is difficult to be sure, however, that Veblen's interest necessarily meant he shared Mill's convictions. Veblen's brother Orson cautions: "Although he was fond of debate, and was always willing to discuss any topic of interest to himself, it was by no means certain that his arguments were on the side of his convictions. He enjoyed argument for argument's sake, and he liked to draw out other people's opinions without revealing his own."<sup>14</sup>

From Veblen's study of Mental Philosophy at Carleton, through his study of Kant's philosophy at Yale and Ph.D. dissertation titled "The Ethical Grounds of a Doctrine of Retribution," and into his many years of scholarly research and writing that groped toward an evolutionary economic philosophy, one can see him oscillate between the abstract theses of men such as Hamilton and the reality antitheses of men such as Mill. Karl L. Anderson observes: "Whether any reputable psychologist of Veblen's time would have defended his particular version of the general theory is highly questionable. Today nobody would defend it." Veblen may have tended toward Mill while ceaselessly groping for an elusive synthesis, which possibly accounts for some of the obtuseness in his writing. He was stimulated, but perhaps daunted, by Haven's eclectic treatment of Mental Philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

Haven definitely inclined toward Hamilton during the debate over Mill's criticisms, but Haven did not ignore the defects in Hamilton's philosophy. Haven wrote nothing on the debate in his textbook, as his book was published in 1857 and the debate began when Mill's criticisms of Hamilton were published in 1865. However, regarding the debate,

---

<sup>14</sup> Dorfman, 32-33; Florence Veblen, "Thorstein Veblen: Reminiscences of his Brother Orson," *Social Forces* 10 (1931-32), 192-193.

<sup>15</sup> Karl L. Anderson, "The Unity of Veblen's Theoretical System," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 47 (1933), 623.

Haven soon wrote a paper that was published and Veblen may have read. It is titled "Mill Versus Hamilton" and appeared in *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1868. It was reprinted the next year in a collection of Haven's papers.<sup>16</sup>

There is much food for thought in the comparison and contrast of the works of Veblen to those of Francois Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694-1778). Various writers have likened Veblen to Voltaire as an institutional analyst and critic. Vivian Mercier describes Veblen as "the American Voltaire." H. J. Hodder asserts: "Veblen's satire, reminiscent of Voltaire's, is doubtless an overstatement even for his own period, but it contains an important element of truth." John P. Diggins writes of Voltaire and Veblen: "Both the French philosopher and the American social theorist embraced modernity with some ambivalence, and both turned their sardonic wit on the fictions that sustained sacred institutions and on the inexhaustible foibles of the human race." One could regard the American Veblen much as Philip George Nesperius regarded the French Voltaire: "Upon everything in France Voltaire fastened his keen gaze, and with rare insight and remarkable discrimination he analyzed the situation, devoting his life to an attempt to win recognition of the essential and pressing need of his program of reform."<sup>17</sup>

In comparing and contrasting Veblen and Voltaire, it is important to assess both form and content. As to form, Veblen mainly wrote scholarly books and articles in the social sciences, while Voltaire was as much poet, playwright, essayist and short-story writer, and novelist, as scholarly historian and philosopher. Further, they wrote in different centuries, Voltaire in the eighteenth and Veblen mainly in the twentieth, which by itself produced changes in literary style even if scholarly works alone are considered.

Nonetheless, in acutely important aspects the two men's writings are not so dissimilar as one might expect. Each man's writings reveal

---

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Haven, "Mill Versus Hamilton," in his *Studies in Philosophy and Theology* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1869), 72-115.

<sup>17</sup> Vivian Mercier, Review of Veblen, *Commonweal* 48 (July 23, 1948), 362; H. J. Hodder, "The Political Ideas of Thorstein Veblen," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 22 (1956), 351; John P. Diggins, *The Bard of Savagery: Thorstein Veblen and Modern Social Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 10; Philip George Nesperius, "Voltaire's Political Ideas," *American Political Science Review* 20 (1926), 31.

great erudition, and each man's also have a somewhat guarded tone. They insightfully analyzed and criticized existing institutions in their respective nations and eras, but evidently with prudent concern for how their views would be received. Some superficiality and vagueness may be purposeful. In Voltaire's day, he did not have the protection of freedom of speech and freedom of the press that Veblen later enjoyed. Voltaire suffered exile but could easily have suffered loss of life. Veblen, though presumably less fearful for his life, wrote mostly from academia at a time when the protection of academic freedom hardly existed, and so he had difficulty surviving as a professor. Nonetheless, to a large extent both Voltaire and Veblen wrote with the courage of their convictions, even if upon occasion they had to pull their punches and leave much to the reader's interpretation. Veblen was perhaps the more original thinker and seemed to write for other scholars. Voltaire may not have been so original a thinker, but he could distinguish between the good and bad ideas of others and explain these ideas for the common man.

As to content, Voltaire and Veblen interfaced best as historians, complementing and supplementing each other. Voltaire worked in what became known as cultural history, and while Veblen understood "cultures-as-wholes," he was most proficient in the subfield of economic history. The two historians worked as institutional analysts and critics using a philosophy of history broader in scope than had been employed before their respective eras.

In interpreting and describing historical change, Veblen and Voltaire were ever conscious of discontinuities and gradations of relatedness in a system of events. They analyzed institutional development in full awareness that development is a continuing process. A researcher cannot know at what point the study has intersected the continuum, which makes difficult and uncertain any prediction of further institutional change. Voltaire and Veblen were therefore cautious and restrained in their predictions.

Voltaire's and Veblen's studies of institutional development were not exhaustive in their treatment of an age or region, nor were they connected by any general theory of society. They employed political, social, and economic theory to shed light on society rather than make unwarranted value judgments about problems or recommend predetermined solutions. They knew that the structure and functioning

of seemingly the same institution differ widely from place to place and rarely have universal application.

It has become axiomatic that all wars are fought about land, often with religious and/or economic origins though the proximate cause of a war's outbreak may be something else. Voltaire and Veblen helped people to know this, and they have aided the understanding of many more truths as well. Subsequent historians advanced and articulated this broader philosophy, refined its research techniques, and deservedly have received much of the credit. Yet Voltaire and Veblen were among the intellectual progenitors.

In Voltaire's area of cultural history, the name of Karl Lamprecht is probably better-known. At the 1904 Congress of Arts and Science in St. Louis, Lamprecht presented this thesis: "History is primarily a socio-psychological science." He argued that historical comprehension is inadequate unless it includes "the socio-psychological treatment, the consideration of the evolution of the collective psychic products of human communities...." He said if modern historical science concerns itself "with the investigation of the dominating social psyche of the times in question, and with its changing forms during the various ages of culture, it can only do this by taking a survey of all its embodiments in history from time to time." This Voltaire had done.<sup>18</sup>

In Veblen's area of economic history, the name of Abbott Payson Usher is probably better-known. Usher believed economic history revolved around the management of resources. He writes, "The study of costs and prices is important, and the institutional structure of organized social life demands careful attention, but the basic problems of economic history lie in the field of the management of resources." Usher also states, "The movement of economic history is due to reactions among three distinct classes of factors: physical resources, the technologies developed for the use of resources, and social institutions." This was Veblen's approach.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Karl G. Lamprecht, "Historical Development and Present Character of the Science of History," in H. J. Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science, Universal Exposition, St. Louis, 1904*, Vol. II, 1906 (Reprint: New York: Arno Press, 1974), 111, 117, 123.

<sup>19</sup> Abbott P. Usher, *A History of Mechanical Inventions*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 1; W. Bowden, M. Karpovich,

Voltaire and Veblen understood that the totality of life in any age or region, much less all ages or regions, is too vast and complex to comprehend; the cultural or economic historian is foolish to try. So even the best historians can reconstruct only some portion, hopefully a significant portion, of the system of events. Allan Nevins wrote of Voltaire, “another new principle which he helped bring into history was his insistence that persons and personal interests are of secondary importance; that it is the community, not the individual, which counts for most.” The same could be said of Veblen. To Voltaire and Veblen, therefore, the processes -- the how -- of institutional change within communities are of paramount concern. Scholars doubtless can discern a fuller range of points of convergence between Veblen and Voltaire, more intelligibly, and extracting more meaning and implications.<sup>20</sup>

Believing that Veblen’s introduction to the first principles of social institutions is a relatively simple derivative from Amherst College professor Joseph Haven’s textbook *Mental Philosophy*, one can understand why Anderson called for significant enlargement of Veblen’s approach to the study of institutional economics: “Veblen’s evolutionary approach demands a complete study of the whole of human history, with particular reference to the development of those habits and institutions which affect economic behavior.” Background for such a study already was available via posthumous publication of Haven’s opus, *A History of Philosophy, Ancient and Modern* (1876). Perhaps Veblen drew from it to some extent.<sup>21</sup>

Veblen became America’s greatest analyst and critic of existing social institutions. To some extent this ability was aided by the fact that he also studied Moral Philosophy, taught by Clark using Haven’s textbook of that title published in 1859. Haven taught the subject subsequent and complementary to his course in Mental Philosophy at Amherst, as did Clark at Carleton. Illustrating the complementarity of the second course Dorfman quotes Haven’s *Moral Philosophy* regarding

---

and A. P. Usher. *An Economic History of Europe Since 1750* 1937 (Reprint: New York: H. Fertig, 1970), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1938), 253.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, 621.



the institution of property, “that the desire to possess, to appropriate, lies among the native and implanted principles of the mind.”<sup>22</sup>

However, D. R. Scott observes of Veblen:

In his scheme of thinking, institutions were by-products rather than central objects of attention. For example, when he pointed out the change in the fundamental theory of property which came with the cultural change from the Middle Ages to the individualistic or natural rights period, he was not interested in giving an account of the evolution of the theory of property but rather he was using an effect upon a particular institution to show a more general change in habits of thought; a shift in social philosophy. And in accounting for this change of bias, or point of view, or philosophy, lying below the level of institutional organization, he was influenced largely by the theory of technological determination of Karl Marx.

Some consider Veblen a socialist, for this and similar reasons.<sup>23</sup>

One can reach that conclusion, and it is not the purpose in this article to speculate at length about the political philosophy of Veblen. One can therefore consider Veblen not a socialist but, instead, a philosophical anarchist. George M. Fredrickson interprets Veblen’s “apparent lack of concern for the future of the working class, a lack of faith in government action and an obvious dislike of capitalism accompanied by a paradoxical refusal to call himself a socialist” in the light of “anarchistic morality,” a term Veblen himself uses to mean “live and let live” in the tradition of his Norwegian ancestors. For the first seventeen years of Veblen’s life, he lived as a son of an immigrant farmer in Norwegian communities of the upper Midwest. He grew up in the transplanted Norwegian “*bondekultur*” of independent and self-sufficient farmers who had little use for a money economy, and his ideas were conditioned by their set of values. Fredrickson’s entire article does

---

<sup>22</sup> Dorfman, 21.

<sup>23</sup> D. R. Scott, “Veblen Not an Institutional Economist,” *American Economic Review* 23 (June 1933), 275.

an excellent job of explaining “*bondekultur*” and how it produced the “anarchistic morality” of which Veblen wrote and its essence permeated his thought. Veblen was vehemently opposed, for example, to absentee ownership of property, not only of farmland but also of the assets of business and industry.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the wise alternative is to speak of Veblen’s “anarcho-socialism” as Rick Tilman has done. In any case, Veblen seemed desirous of dismantling obsolete institutions rather than improving them or replacing them with something better suited to changing needs. Social institutions come into existence to meet fundamental human needs. Veblen was a social reformer but mainly in the negative sense, which is helpful in so far as it goes, yet not if it stops, there. It is easier to tear down than to build up. Fortunately, others have taken Veblen’s keen insights and acute criticisms and used them in reform measures of many kinds, perhaps most constructively during the New Deal as noted previously. His observations regarding business and industry are ever-relevant as America’s recent financial scandals tragically reaffirm. New reforms will have a sounder basis if cognizant of and reflecting the thought and warnings of Veblen a century ago.<sup>25</sup>

It seems odd, even ironic, to harken to the pleas of Veblen regarding corporate business ethics when he was amoral, and at times reprobate, in his own life. One need only to respect his intellect, not his morals, to find application toward improving business ethics. One cannot reform Veblen. One can reform corporate business ethics. Haven, as an Amherst professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, would approve.

---

<sup>24</sup> George M. Fredrickson, “Thorstein Veblen: The Last Viking,” *American Quarterly* 11(Fall 1959), 403-415.

<sup>25</sup> Rick Tilman, *Thorstein Veblen and His Critics, 1891-1963: Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 89.

