

CANADIAN FACES OF REASON

PART IV

Armour and Trott introduce Jacob Gould Schurman as “philosopher as office-holder.”¹ Born on Prince Edward Island in 1854, Schurman moved to the United States in his early thirties, serving first as faculty member and then as President of Cornell University.² After the Spanish-American War,³ he was named President of the Philippine Commission.⁴ Later, Schurman emerged an important figure in the New York Republican Party, and, later still, named U.S. Ambassador to Greece and Macedonia, China and Germany.⁵ The eighty-eight years he lived began during the reign of Queen Victoria and ended during World War II. Armour and Trott note that he was in the Philippines when America “first began to wrestle with the problem of imperialism,” and “he was in the Balkans to watch the façade cracking on *Pax Britannica*,” adding: “he dined with Hitler and learned to detest him at first hand.”⁶ Schurman was “influenced by the main course of American thought and he exercised, in his turn, a perceptible influence on American policy.”⁷

Schurman studied first at Prince of Wales College⁸ then moved to the mainland to Acadia University, from where – after graduation - he went to England to study at the University of London; there he obtained a B.A. degree in 1877 and a Master’s degree in 1878.⁹ He won a fellowship which enabled him to travel for two years, spending the time in London, Paris, and Edinburgh, after which he accepted a teaching post at Acadia University; two years later he was offered the Chair of English and Philosophy at Dalhousie University.¹⁰ While at Acadia he published his first book, *Kantian Ethics and the Ethics of Evolution*, a book that attracted sufficient attention to persuade Andrew White, the first president of Cornell University, to offer Schurman the Chair of Philosophy, an appointment Schurman accepted in 1885.¹¹ Nine years later, when the presidency of Cornell fell vacant, Schurman was the unanimous choice of the trustees; he held the office for twenty-eight years.¹² “Even then,” Armour and Trott tell us, “his resignation, as a fat file of letters testifies, produced almost consternation,” adding: “Though it would hardly seem unusual for a man to retire as his sixty-fifth birthday was approaching, Schurman, in fact, resigned the presidency of Cornell only because his political and diplomatic career demanded it.”¹³ Not until he was nearly eighty did he retire, then living in Washington, D.C., “where his voice continued to be heard until his death in 1942 at the age of eighty-eight.”¹⁴

Schurman’s early years in Canada, in England, and those first nine years in Ithaca, New York, were devoted to philosophy; he was, like John Clark Murray,¹⁵ “edging his way toward a kind of idealism,” as he declined the evolutionists’ attempts to “reduce morality to the conditions for survival,” insisting that the “basis of value did not lie in the realm of scientific fact.”¹⁶ Armour and Trott tell us that he did not doubt

that a “synthesis of the new and traditional views is possible,”¹⁷ although he did not share the “detached certainty with which Beaven responded to the first flurry of interest in the theory of evolution.”¹⁸ Nor, Armour and Trott continue, was he “like Lyall, a man whose intellectual problems were created from within the history of philosophy and could be met by the creation of an effective synthesis of ideas already available.”¹⁹ They also contrast him to “Paxton Young, a man whose insights were illumined by clashes within his own culture.”²⁰ Lacking “Murray’s supreme self-confidence,” Schurman’s “arguments ... are, invariably, tortuous and laboured,” expressing his recognition that “he is a man facing what he knows to be a difficult set of problems.”²¹

Armour and Trott remind us that the “theory of evolution struck a serious blow to the body of traditional belief,” challenging the faith that humanity had been a “deliberate creation of God,” requiring to ground morality elsewhere.²² Even the concept of “God” - as well as “our notions of salvation, our dreams of the eternal status of men”²³ - could be decoded as elements of “our evolutionary adaptation to our environment.”²⁴ Schurman’s arguments against these ideas were made in books “within a span of fifteen years from 1881 to 1896,” addressed to those he imagined “troubled by Darwin, ... worried by Spencer, and educated in a way which made Kant the central focus of modern philosophy.”²⁵ Armour and Trott find “surprising ... the suggestion in Schurman, and after him in Watson, that Herbert Spencer is the most significant intellectual opponent of the hour.”²⁶ Why?

“In Canada,” Armour and Trott explain, “so far as we can tell, Spencerians were very few and far between,” in contrast to the situation in the United States where “social Darwinism”²⁷ - a “set of doctrines which certainly derived strength from Spencer - had a vogue, but was an on-and-off thing not unlike the flurry of rather sceptical attention that, in recent years, attended the writings of Marshall McLuhan,”²⁸ that last phrase a patronizing swipe to which one grows accustomed in the Armour-Trott text. “In England,” they add, “Spencer served as a centre of debate rather than as a master to be followed.”²⁹ Back in Canada, the “nearest thing to a Spencerian thinker” was W.D. LeSueur,³⁰ although Armour and Trott quickly qualify that association, writing: “He would have nothing of Spencer’s metaphysics of the ‘unknowable’ but he was equally sceptical about materialism and idealism,” adding: “He understood the kind of idealism - represented in most of the Canadian idealists - which sought not to make the world an internal feature of our own experience but, rather, to dissolve the subject-object distinction.”³¹ Certainly one resists rejections of porosity at their border, affirming even epistemological reciprocity between the two categories, but to “dissolve” the distinction altogether? Maybe overstatement, even academic sensationalism, isn’t special to our era.

Now, in a kind of sidebar, Armour and Trott stay with LeSueur. They tell us that in a paper published in 1880,³² LeSueur argued that “ethics has a history,” that “moral beliefs change and they change in response to other factors and not independently of everything else,”³³ what curriculum studies scholars summarize as

relationality, no new idea, however, as even Franklin Bobbitt affirmed it.³⁴ Armour and Trott assure us that LeSueur will have “nothing to do with the individualism which characterized Spencer in at least some of his moods,” insisting that “true freedom ... is the rational subjection of the individual to law.”³⁵ Moreover, “excessive individualism makes decision making impossible,” as “only co-operation in an organic society can bring about survival and sustain civilization.”³⁶ Sounding somewhat Spencerian, Armour and Trott assert (staying with LeSueur) that “scientific ethics appeal to reason and prudence,” no relativism mind you, but “buried and unexpressed in his essay, however, is the notion that there is a direction to moral development and that some societies are better than others.”³⁷ Does anyone detect an odor of Social Darwinism here?

Armour and Trott then return to Schurman, suggesting “it is fair to think of Schurman as having someone not too unlike LeSueur for his intended audience – someone who accepted part of Spencer, questioned the rest, was open-minded but needed hard and firm arguments.”³⁸ Schurman starts “by trying to establish the autonomy of ethics,” arguing “that one cannot finally derive ethical conclusions from premises which have no ethical component.”³⁹ He points out that “because evolution has proceeded by the selection of the fittest in a natural competition,” it does not follow “that the ‘fittest’ in the sense implied are those who deserve to survive,” thereby questioning Spencer’s reluctance to intervene in the plight of the poor.⁴⁰ Schurman judged “such views were essentially pernicious and, though he is not entirely immune from the common Victorian feeling that man was ‘progressing’ inevitably and was destined for some wholly desirable end, he is concerned to undermine the smug self-satisfaction which went along with that view.”⁴¹

Thus, for Schurman, “power is only good – if it is ever good at all – in the hands of good men.”⁴² Likewise, “money is evil in the hands of villains.”⁴³ And while “intelligence” is welcome, “we prefer bank robbers to be without it.”⁴⁴ “Even happiness is only good in its appropriate context,” as feeling happiness “while watching one’s best friend incinerated” is “not good.”⁴⁵ What is “good in itself and without qualification is the good will,”⁴⁶ as the “good will is not just that intention (with which, it is said, the road to hell is paved),” but, “rather, it is that fixed determination which results in action,”⁴⁷ what I term resolve.⁴⁸ Schurman was also addressing the “historical consciousness which had been growing consistently and continuously throughout the nineteenth century,” a consciousness given “force” by Darwin’s theory of evolution but “which had been growing long,” namely the “view that human nature is not internally fixed and static and that human beings do change over time.”⁴⁹ Since human beings “change over time,” so does “morality,” a view “inconsistent with a pure Kantian rationalism.”⁵⁰ While “reason tells us what to look for,” our “experience may not yet reveal to us all of the value properties of the world, or it may be that our social, our political, and our aesthetic situations leave us blind to some states of affairs,” a fact

that leaves Schurman concluding that a “value system, in short, can grow through the interplay of reason and experience.”⁵¹

In its sensory intensity, however, experience can overwhelm reason, and in *Agnosticism and Religion* Schurman argues that philosophy’s “function,”⁵² indeed its “divine mission,” is to “redeem us” from “immersion in sense and matter.”⁵³ Consequently, “knowledge cannot consist merely of the arrangements of material particles or of sensations” -- it “transcends them.”⁵⁴ To qualify as “knowledge it must be ... consistent with the real and, to be knowledge, it must exhibit the properties of a mind.”⁵⁵ Schurman even argued that “to know something is to become what you know,” a “notion,” Armour and Trott tell us, “goes back ... to Aristotle,” a “perpetual puzzle to philosophers.”⁵⁶ They explain:

To remain apart from the thing which one knows is always to be in the position of the sceptic. To become the thing which one knows, in the literal sense, would be to be absorbed by that thing so as no longer to count as a knower. The solution has to be to conceive of reality as the kind of thing which is revealed in the transformation of knowledge.⁵⁷

Schurman concludes that “if the universe represents a causal order, then its components are internally related.”⁵⁸

Armour and Trott remind readers “that the whole of his effort takes place against the background of his desire to salvage important parts of traditional belief in the face of an honest and quite general acceptance of the scientific ‘progress’ of his time.”⁵⁹ They tell us that Schurman affirms Hegel’s insistence “that identity and difference are both necessary to the being of the infinite spirit,”⁶⁰ but Armour and Trott think that “Schurman wants to cut deeper than that particular passage in Hegel would suggest,” arguing “that, in a mechanical, material world, the self would indeed disappear,” that mechanical/material theory itself entails the reality of something which transcends the domain which it describes.”⁶¹ Thus even evolution implies the existence of God.

Despite moving to the United States – Schurman became a U.S. citizen in 1892, the year he became President of Cornell University⁶² - Armour and Trott report that “he also maintained an interest in Canada, if we are to judge from *The Forum* magazine for March, 1889,” an article titled “the Manifest Destiny of Canada” wherein “he sought to explain to Americans why the proposals made by Senator Edmunds and Senator Sherman which suggested eventual political union between the U.S. and Canada rested on a misunderstanding,”⁶³ namely that Canadian would want to become Americans. Indeed, Schurman entertained “no doubts that the decision of Canadians would be to remain Canadians.”⁶⁴ Yet no mindless nationalist he, as Armour and Trott tell us, went on to say that “even the most ardent nationalist will have to admit that he somewhat overstepped the bounds of reality.”⁶⁵ And not only nationalism but economism came under his critique. In a report from 1911 he compared U.S. universities to those in England and Germany, concluding, “as so many scholars have

after him, that the tendency to run a university as if it were a business corporation is ultimately disastrous,”⁶⁶ a “tendency” not limited to the United States, as it is also the case at the Canadian university where I work.

Armour and Trott tell us that Schurman “did not feel himself much bound by Cornell’s conviction that universities ought to be essentially practical in outlook and action. he continued to urge that everyone ought to learn Latin and Greek,”⁶⁷ that (quoting Schurman) “an educated man now as always will find in the humanities the most important subjects of education.”⁶⁸ But “bound” he was, at least in part; Armour and Trott report that “the compromise which he struck was of a pattern which was to become a crucial determinant of American higher education,” namely that: “At Cornell one could, indeed, study anything – but one could only do it in a framework which provided for a liberal education.”⁶⁹ But “Schurman worried about the tendency for such programs to become spread so thin as to be insignificant,” a worry he did not keep to himself, “keep[ing] in his own mind and before his faculty a clear view of that which was most basic and most important and by trying, constantly, to make the point that fundamental humanitarian studies are not impractical,”⁷⁰ a point still be made today.⁷¹ “Rather,” Armour and Trott continue, “they [the humanities] provide an enlargement of the mind which enables one to see new possibilities in old settings,” anticipating Michael Roth’s concern for “plasticity,”⁷² as well as Christopher Lasch’s concern over the “minimal self” (in contrast to Schurman’s “enlargement of mind.”)⁷³ Schurman “stood his ground in the face of his trustees and he urged his faculty on to the kinds of fundamental achievement which make for an important university,”⁷⁴ a stance that evidently did undermine his authority. In fact, Schurman “seems to have remained beloved by them all.”⁷⁵ Armour and Trott comment: “No doubt it was easier then than it is now for a president to survive an office for twenty-five years but, even then, Schurman’s was no mean achievement.”⁷⁶

As do other – but hardly all - defenders of the humanities, Schurman had his conservative streak, “retain[ing] the nineteenth-century conviction that the civilization of western Europe was destined, in any case, to spread around the world.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Armour and Trott tell us that “Schurman’s views, meanwhile, seemed to become increasingly conservative on many topics” - he even opposed anti-trust legislation.⁷⁸ He wasn’t only conservative, however: Like John Clark Murray at McGill, Schurman campaigned for women’s rights, including for women’s suffrage.⁷⁹ He was not, Armour and Trott continue, “a man to hang onto his views in the face of clear evidence of their unsatisfactoriness,” noting that “by the time Franklin Roosevelt came to power and the effects of the Depression were obvious, he had changed many of them,” even writing to “Roosevelt expressing at least a measure of support and agreeing that the American people had fallen on terrible times indeed.”⁸⁰ Earlier, in 1916, in a Lincoln Day address to the Republican Club in Utica, New York, Schurman said: “A nation is not merely an economic organism, still less it is a military machine. A nation is more than a physical entity. A nation is at the same time a moral personality.”⁸¹ And during his deliberations

on the Philippines, Schurman had called attention to the “Canadian solution to analogous political problems and he was frequently stirred to remark that nations tend to have a life of their own and are more than a simple aggregate of individuals.”⁸² Armour and Trott conclude that the “Hegelian streak in him never died and the sense of real communitarian values never died in him either.”⁸³

When Schurman retired from Cornell – Armour and Trott tell us he never stopped making “the point that Cornell University was more than a business organization, more than a random collection of individuals organized for some specialized kind of production” - it was to devote the rest of his life (through the 1920s and 1930s) to “diplomacy.”⁸⁴ When appointed American Ambassador to Germany, he was returning to the “source of many of the ideas which had animated him throughout his life.”⁸⁵ His appointment occurred at a moment when Germany had “moved from economic and social collapse to a dictatorship which he found as incomprehensible as it was reprehensible.”⁸⁶ That the country which had produced such important philosophical ideas had fallen into the most despicable of dictatorships could only be attributed, he thought, to the “imposition of de-humanizing systems, of irrational economic forces which could not be understood well enough to be controlled, and the inability of those ideas to withstand assault by irrational forces.”⁸⁷ It was not the ideas that were to blame, nor did he conclude that “there was a fatal flaw in human nature.”⁸⁸ Instead, he concluded that “men lose faith in rationality in the face of the incomprehensible”⁸⁹ – why that wouldn’t be a “fatal flaw” I’m unsure - and the “solution, he thought, could only be achieved by patient understanding – especially at the diplomatic level.”⁹⁰

Schurman died in 1942 “still full of energy,” still sure that the “divine prius would, in the end, take care of the world.”⁹¹ What “seems never to have occurred to him is that he might return to Prince Edward Island or, indeed, to Canada.”⁹² Armour and Trott tell us “references to Canada became fewer in his letters and virtually non-existent in his public statements after his years as President of the Philippine Commission.”⁹³ And, despite serving for “forty years a major figure in American diplomacy and for longer than that a major world figure in education, there is nothing in the files to suggest that anyone ever invited him to return to Canada.”⁹⁴ While the country of his birth may have disowned him, Armour and Trott reclaim him as one of the most distinguished Canadian philosophers of all time.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 1981, 176.

² <https://president.cornell.edu/the-presidency/jacob-gould-schurman/>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-American-War>

⁴ 1981, 177.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://pwc.upei.ca/>

⁹ 1981, 177.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 1981, 178.

¹⁵ See research brief #107.

¹⁶ 1981, 178.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 1981, 179. For more on Beaven, see research briefs #105-107.

¹⁹ Ibid. For more on Lyall, see research briefs #104 and 106.

²⁰ Ibid. For more on Paxton Young, see research briefs #81, #106, #107.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 1981, 180.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 1981, 181.

²⁵ 1981, 183. For more on Darwin, see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Darwin> For more on Spencer, see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herbert-Spencer> For more on Kant, see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Immanuel-Kant>

²⁶ 1981, 183. Armour and Trott turn to John Watson soon, in research brief #109. For more on Watson now, see: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-watson>

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- 27 Ibid. Regarding Social Darwinism: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-Darwinism> See also research brief #104.
- 28 1981, 183-184.
- 29 1981, 184. Spencer is cited in curriculum studies for his question: What knowledge is of most worth? For him the answer was science: Pinar 2023, 42, no. 3.
- 30 <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/william-dawson-lesueur>
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 1981, 184.
- 33 1981, 185.
- 34 Bobbitt (1918, 10) acknowledged that “everything in the community is related to everything else in subtle, intangible, and usually unknown ways.” Recent assertions of especially social relationality aren’t, then, exactly breaking news.
- 35 1981, 185.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 1981, 186.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid. Armour and Trott tell us that “Spencer, at least at times, really believed that social processes deliberately designed to protect the weak were in fact wrong because they inhibited the selection of the fittest. Spencer even opposed public libraries (ibid.).
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 1981, 186-187.
- 48 Pinar 2015, 180-187.
- 49 1981, 187.
- 50 1981, 191.
- 51 1981, 192.
- 52 1981, 194.
- 53 Quoted in 1981, 194.
- 54 1981, 198.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 1981, 200.
- 59 1981, 205.
- 60 Quoted in 1981, 205-206.
- 61 1981, 206.
- 62 1981, 209.
- 63 1981, 208.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 1981, 209.
- 66 1981, 210.

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- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Quoted in 1981, 211.
- ⁶⁹ 1981, 211.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid. Of course, what is “most basic and most important” *is* the canonical curriculum question – the question constantly confronting the field of curriculum studies: what knowledge is most worth?
- ⁷¹ The President of Wesleyan University (another prominent private university in the United States), Michael Roth (2014, 18) noted that “throughout American history calls for practicality have really been calls for conformity – for conventional thinking,” that conformity is itself “anti-educational; having lost our ability to change ourselves and our society, we would become merely more or less useful components of society’s contemporary form” (2014, 168). Roth (2014, 195) concludes: “Liberal education matters far beyond the university because it increases our capacity to understand the world, to contribute to it, and reshape ourselves.”
- ⁷² “Conformity is the enemy of learning,” Roth (2014, 168) wrote, “because in order to conform you restrict our capacity for experience; you constrict our plasticity.”
- ⁷³ Lasch 1984.
- ⁷⁴ 1981, 211.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ 1981, 213.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ 1981, 210.
- ⁸⁰ 1981, 213.
- ⁸¹ Quoted in 1981, 214.
- ⁸² 1981, 214.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ 1981, 214-215.
- ⁹¹ 1981, 215.
- ⁹² Ibid.
- ⁹³ Ibid.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid.