

CHAPTER 3

THE REALISTS WHO SHARPENED THE EDGES OF BURTT'S IDEAS

F.J.E. WOODBRIDGE

It was Frederick James Eugene Woodbridge, Dean of the Faculties at Columbia (1912-1929), not John Dewey, who was Burtt's doctoral thesis advisor. Sterling Lamprecht, one of Woodbridge's students, later at Amherst, commented that Woodbridge's teaching "was bound to generate metaphysical doctrines."¹ However, the sorts of metaphysical thinking Woodbridge invited were "analytic in character...concerned with nature and man's inclusion in it. Nothing about this metaphysics was of that transcendental import which current positivism has in mind when it rejects metaphysics."² True to the British tradition from which he derived, Woodbridge brought empirical realism to his interest in Naturalism. As a metaphysician Woodbridge was not a skeptical sort. His own work in philosophy was the attempted expansion of Aristotle's categories, prime matter and form, and to substitute for them "structure, behavior, and a natural theology of sequence."³

During the 1920s Woodbridge was simultaneously a teacher, supervisor of graduate students, and Dean of the College--obviously a very busy man. Burtt was quiet and Woodbridge was aloof. A good portrait the average student's situation has been drawn by Sidney Hook, in the Columbia graduate program just after Burtt, during the years 1923-1927.

The primary difficulty with the teaching of philosophy at Columbia when I was a student was that it was insufficiently systematic. Woodbridge was a thinker of deep insight, thoroughly steeped in the history of philosophy, who was convinced that epistemology was a mistake. He was always asking "simple questions," but it required considerable philosophical sophistication to understand the meaning of the questions and preternatural powers of intuition to grasp the "right" answers--which we did by guessing. Dewey at the time was challenging the confusion between cosmic and ethical issues central to the Greek classical tradition in philosophy and the mistaken theories of experience on which the whole of modern philosophy of empiricism rested. Long before Wittgenstein, he denied that there was any philosophical knowledge and dissolved questions like the existence of the external world, the traditional mind-body problem, etc., by showing that on their

own assumptions they were insoluble or question begging. This approach, as well as that of Woodbridge, would have been stimulating and challenging to students already well trained in the analysis of the traditional problems, but to the miscellany of theological students, social workers, teachers, seekers of wisdom, beauty or social salvation that in those days constituted a considerable part of the classes in philosophy, Dewey and Woodbridge were obscure. Their junior colleagues, some of whom were just as mystified by them, could not dissipate the obscurity.

But to return to the teaching scene. I doubt that the teaching staff got much philosophical stimulation or challenge from those they taught, except in a few small seminars. There was not enough intellectual feedback. Woodbridge enjoyed asking questions that stumped his class but didn't fancy getting questions in return....Everyone except Dewey and Montague seemed to me to be trying to understand why the philosophers of the past said the odd things they did, not whether what was said was true or even formally valid.⁴

Woodbridge continued as Dean of the Graduate Faculties until 1929, when "he resigned as dean...in order to devote all his energies to his primary concern--teaching".⁵

Everyone at Columbia recognized that Woodbridge was a definite second fiddle to Dewey. His role was primarily as well-informed teacher and administrator, who made it possible for the brighter lights at the university to shine. He was an excellent logician, who made his strongest contribution to the training of the philosophy majors; it was generally agreed that Columbia students would not acquire the special mental structure and disciplined habits necessary for rigorous work in philosophy if they did not have exposure to Woodbridge. Coming as he did from Yale, rather than being a Columbia graduate already tutored by Dean Woodbridge, it is possible that Burt was assigned to Woodbridge's graduate student load in order to "catch him up." As an ardent admirer of Woodbridge, John H. Randall described his general outlook and strengths within the Columbia group.

Woodbridge was familiar with the philosophical problems posed by the tremendous advances of the sciences; he had lived through the impact of evolutionary and biological thought upon the old certainties, and he was in the midst of the rising currents of experimental psychology. Modern philosophy, he was convinced, the response to the older Newtonian world, ought to be dead; philosophers should be dealing with the newer intellectual issues. But whereas Dewey...was using the newer conceptions of biological, human and social sciences directly to effect the same kind of criticism, Woodbridge preferred the more indirect approach. The two, however, were engaged in pretty much the same critical enterprise; and if Dewey's voice issued the clarion call, and was heard throughout the land, Woodbridge was organizing the solid instruction that would enable the students to understand Dewey's reconstruction and its necessity.

He would ask a searching question, and woe to you if you did not hit upon the answer--not his answer, but the answer. Then he would comment--and you learned what a disciplined imagination means. He would encourage your suggestion, a twinkle in his eye. And then he would put a simple question--and you realized you were lost; you had failed to think through the consequences of your idea.⁶

Overall, Woodbridge was frustrated by the emphasis the pragmatists placed on epistemology and he was known to complain that philosophy was making states of mind its object. He favored historical discussions over theoretical ones. Woodbridge's conviction that "critical and responsible historical scholarship [was] the prerequisite to original philosophical thinking"⁷ was fundamental to his position as a philosopher and teacher, and when Nicholas Murray Butler, who as President of the college had been instrumental in building the philosophy Department, retired, Woodbridge continued Butler's course in the History of Philosophy, teaching it himself until 1925. According to John Randall, Jr.:

A sound and critical knowledge of the history of philosophical thought, tested by searching written examination, has been since Butler's day an essential requirement for the degree [in philosophy]. Under both Woodbridge and his successor, there was emphasis on the historical context in which problems have arisen and become philosophical--that is, driven men to explore and question their assumptions--and on the historical criticism of those assumptions which they did not themselves criticize.⁸

Woodbridge and Dewey agreed on the value of history, but they differed on what it meant. For Woodbridge careful historical scholarship would show that, "one correct understanding of what has happened does not displace another as truth might displace error, but one supplements and enlarges another. Histories which have gone on before are not undone by those that follow after. They are incorporated into them in a very real way. Historical truth, therefore, when it does not mean simply the correctness of the records of history, is progressive."⁹

In contrast to Woodbridge's scrupulous attention to historical research and detail, Dewey's history was a little rough. History that suited Dewey's purposes could be painted with a broad brush, all the better to be suffused with psychological interpretations for the experience of the present. The most famous Columbia historians, James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard, were closer to Dewey's relativistic position on history than to Woodbridge's realist one. Between the two of them, they were rapidly rewriting the meaning of history, especially for the working classes. The point was to show how political, economic or social motives underlie historical events and to suggest how received versions of history are rather pathetically naive. Since James Harvey Robinson's *The New History* (1912) and Charles Beard's *The Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) and their collaboration on a project in European History for New York High

Schools, Columbia University had held the highest reputation for the work and influence of its historians.¹⁰ So it was that F.J.E. Woodbridge represented the tradition of the old guard.

Although Naturalism in American philosophy signifies the belief that the scientific method is adequate to study all phenomena, objective physical phenomena, social phenomena, and human consciousness, itself, one part of the scientific world-view is questioned. That is the dualism between thinking and extension created by a full acceptance of the philosophies of Descartes and Locke. For Naturalists the distinction is artificial but the degree of separation between perception and objective reality varies. On the question of truth, Naturalists can be pragmatists, idealists or realists. The key point for Naturalists is that reality, however it is defined, can be understood without reference to the supernatural. Naturalists absolutely disallow traditional metaphysics. Woodbridge, Dewey, Cohen and Burt could agree on Woodbridge's statement of the contemporary mind/body problem-- beyond that important distinctions lie. In Woodbridge's opinion:

Descartes' clear and distinct recognition of the radical difference between extension and thinking and Locke's isolation of the world of human understanding from the world of existing bodies in space both raised the problem of the relation of thought to a world external to thought and different from it.¹¹

This kind of dualism sets the thinking mind of man over and against nature. It sets thinking above and separate from the physical world, including the body and experiences of the body, and this creates the problem of perceptions. Perceptions can not be part of the physical world, nor part of the thinking mind and yet must somehow be related to both. According to Woodbridge, this artificial dualism essentially renders philosophy a fruitless, meaningless exercise. Only a rejection of dualism, leading to a unified theory of man in nature can restore an adequate realism to philosophy. Woodbridge defended the real as it is in itself in nature, not in abstraction. He wrote:

The possibility of natural knowledge is not a problem, but the advancement of learning is. Man names that which is expanded unto his eyes according to its properties...The analyses begin and end in the visible world and my repeated, varied, and perhaps tedious assaults on 'dualism' have been made in order to keep that world from losing its preeminence and finality in the pursuit of knowledge.¹²

The relative degree of emphasis on the mind/body problem as an impediment to knowledge of objective reality separates idealist type naturalists, such as Burt, from the realist types. Woodbridge's solution was a realist's one; he did not conceive of man in relation to the world, but actually in the world as part

and parcel of it. For him "consciousness" meant "cognition" and for him there was some definite object of cognition to be identified. Woodbridge was well aware of the problems posed to explanations of cognition by modern science, but he did not make a contribution to their solution himself. He was content to leave it to others to deal with the "newer" intellectual issues.¹³

In the limited time that Woodbridge had for scholarship he was attempting some kind of synthesis between Aristotle's notion of matter limited by form as actuality and modern science ideas, leaving space for "spirit." Sensitive to the philosophical concerns of his day, Woodbridge sought some kind of synthesis between scientific knowledge and philosophy to save philosophy from being chewed up, lost, and permanently discarded by the new scientific world-view.

Woodbridge and Burttt attacked the dualism inherent in the scientific philosophy of Descartes and Locke from different perspectives. Burttt sought to integrate mind into objective reality by demonstrating that presuppositions, which exist in the mind, affect perception, while Woodbridge was seeking a more adequate definition of the objectively real than dualistic philosophies could provide. In a series of highly respected papers on consciousness, Woodbridge defended the view that true knowledge is a direct perception of the object and not of an idea or image of it. A group of six American philosophers, who called themselves the New Realists, published a joint manifesto, based, in part, on Woodbridge's views and his further suggestions concerning Russell's and Moore's philosophy and aspects of Royce's logic in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1910.

For his part, Burttt valued science methods and furthermore did not see how its findings could be honestly refuted. But he was a reluctant naturalist and half-hearted realist compared to Woodbridge. He probably did not have much discussion with Woodbridge during the early 1920s on these fine points, even though Woodbridge was, at least technically, his advisor because Woodbridge was too busy. Moreover, it was not Woodbridge's style to tutor anyone or lead them along. He simply asked questions.

Years later, after Woodbridge gave up the time-consuming administrative duties and had returned to full time teaching, he advised another Ph.D. dissertation dealing with Burttt's subject. This was Edward Strong's *Procedures and Metaphysics, A Study in the Philosophy of Mathematical-Physical Science in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1936). Strong's thesis is much more aligned with Woodbridge's own views than was Burttt's. Under Woodbridge's guidance *The Metaphysical Foundations*, revised 1932 edition, became the point of departure for Strong. Strong attacked Burttt's thesis directly and made the case for the realist point of view in writing the history of science, especially concerning Galileo. Published as a book, Strong's *Procedures and Metaphysics* has been used by formalist historians of science to criticize Burttt's history of science and Burttt's use of the word "metaphysics" to describe Galileo's mathematics as Pythagorean.¹⁴ In

E.A. Burtt, Historian and Philosopher

A Study of the author of *The Metaphysical Foundations
of Modern Physical Science*

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2002, X, 300 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0428-5