



4-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Sullivan, James B. (2012) "New Orleans Connection: The Feibleman-Toynbee Interface," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 66 : No. 66, Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol66/iss66/5>

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A New Orleans Connection: The Feibleman-Toynbee Interface

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Introduction

This essay shows how facets of James K. Feibleman's (1904-1987) reciprocal relationship with Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975) may have influenced each thinker in their overlapping fields, respectively of philosophy and history. Toynbee remains a giant among world historians, and thanks to his able biographer and fellow world historian, William H. McNeill, his life and career are well known. By contrast, the American, Feibleman, despite a mammoth bibliography, remains relatively unknown outside of the states of America's south and west.

Toynbee's history made a major impact on Feibleman's philosophy of culture, and there is ample evidence that Feibleman, either individually or collectively with other critics, made Toynbee reconsider his coverage of philosophy and science. In the final volume of Toynbee's mammoth *A Study of History*, entitled "Reconsiderations", Feibleman is cited over twenty-five times.

Background

Given the first encounter between these two, the probability of any ensuing relationship seemed highly unlikely. When they first corresponded in 1939, Arnold J. Toynbee was already a distinguished historian, but he had not achieved the reputation which would follow full publication of his classic work. By contrast in 1934, when our story begins, his early reader and future critic James K. Feibleman was a virtually unknown Southern writer.

He was the scion of a New Orleans, German-Jewish immigrant family that sold their dry goods emporium, "Feibleman's House of Values" on Canal Street to Sears and Roebuck for two and a half million dollars just before the Great Depression struck in 1929. After graduating from Horace Mann preparatory school in New York City in 1924 and spending an abbreviated year at the University of Virginia plagued by illness, Feibleman's formal education was over.

He then worked for his father for five years selling shirts. Now he had an almost Aladdin-like opportunity to do whatever he wished, and he opened an office in downtown New Orleans with the modest name plate: "James Feibleman: Poet," sure to keep solicitors away.¹

¹ James K. Feibleman, *The Way of a Man: An Autobiography* (New York, 1969), 181.

He had first begun his writing career as a youthful poet contributing poetry to a local little magazine, *The Double Dealer*. His interests progressed to philosophy. Unable to find an American publisher for his first book, he sought out one in London during a vacation in Europe. Upon returning to America with a contract signed with Allen and Unwin to publish *Science and the Spirit of Man* (1933), he received a letter from his co-writer Julius Friend, a fellow New Orleans business man and holder of a B.A. from Yale. Their American book agent had released them from any legal commitment and Friend condescendingly wrote,

Personally, *Science and the Spirit of Man* intrigues me as much as a bowl of black-eyed peas, but these Allen and Unwin bimbos seem determined to write the title---apparently with one eye on the religious caterpillars and another on the popular scientific audience, the “Fun with Chemistry”---the homemade telescope boys.²

This first book was a curious lament about the threat to traditional values posed by the juggernaut of business, science and technology in the 1920s. Their sense of malaise did not last long. There was little in that first youthful book that previewed what was to come. Subsequently, tracing back the historical origins of modern business to technology, the new writers finally arrived at the original fount in Greek science and philosophy. They were also particularly influenced by the writings of the American philosopher and physical scientist, Charles Sanders Peirce.

Under this influence, Feibleman became a lifelong advocate of science, and a philosopher who hoped others might increasingly employ more science in their philosophical writings. Peirce saw scientific truths as asymptotic and never quite beyond doubt. To guard against absolutist claims, Peirce elevated the watch-dog principle of uncertainty in science, which he termed *fallibilism*³, to a philosophical principle. It became a gyroscope for Feibleman’s philosophy.

First Encounter, 1934

A quick stop at the Oxford bookstore, near the hotel where he and his wife were staying before embarking on their voyage home, first brought James Feibleman into contact with what would become Arnold J. Toynbee’s magnum opus. However, the budding philosopher was familiar with neither the author nor *A Study of History*. Only the philosophies of Charles S. Peirce and later the British logician and mathematician turned Harvard metaphysician, Alfred N. Whitehead, impacted Feibleman’s philosophy so deeply.

² Letter Julius Friend to James K. Feibleman, 132/48/9, Jun. 23, 1933 (excerpt from Herbert Cohn note) Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University (all manuscript citations are from this site).

³ Charles S. Peirce denied that final truth in the natural sciences was possible and adopted the term “fallibilism” in his philosophy to emphasize that limitation. See Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (ed.) *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, I, 1.8, 1.13. Similarly, Karl Popper in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* also imposes limits on scientific truth claims with his “falsifiability” criterion.

In reading the first three volumes of Toynbee's work, Feibleman experienced a breathtaking introduction to the kind of history he found most enlightening. Toynbee's world perspective exhibited the cultural history Feibleman believed historians should spend more time focusing on instead of rehashing every moment of the American Civil War, as was most typical history in his native South. Although knowledgeable of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1926), and later the Russian, Nikolay Danilevsky's *Russia and Europe* (1869), he clearly preferred Toynbee's early volumes of *A Study of History*.

A Query to Toynbee, 1939

Almost four months after the Nazi invasion of Poland, Feibleman and his co-author, Friend, wrote Toynbee a letter concerning eight separate items from *A Study of History*. For example, they questioned whether Toynbee's "challenge and response" mechanism was intended to assume predictive powers.

Toynbee very graciously responded denying that history could ever predict the future. He concluded that under the most favorable circumstances for a given challenge to elicit the anticipated response certainty cannot be anticipated. This is true because the response must come from a 'spiritual personality' and ... 'spiritual forces' are not, I believe, subject to scientific measurement."⁴ They were also chagrined by the short shrift manner Toynbee treated philosophy.

The New Orleans duo questioned Toynbee's pessimism: "If there is nothing good in the world except otherworldliness, then is the growth of civilization only a necessary evil in order to terminate in the disintegration which gives rise to religion?"

If it is agreed that, "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain," then if the Lord keeps the city, what need is there for the watchman?"⁵

In ending their letter, the two hastened to assure Toynbee that they were not seeking flaws in his work but only to better understand it.⁶

Feibleman, raised in the Reformed tradition of Judaism, left the synagogue after the deaths of his parents and never returned. Ever wary of absolutism in any field of knowledge and transparent in his honesty about the limits of all knowledge, he wrote in *Ontology*:⁷

⁴ Letter, Arnold J. Toynbee to James K. Feibleman, Jan. 16, 1940, 132/86/5.

⁵ Letter, Feibleman and Friend to Toynbee (copy), Dec. 18, 1939, 132/86/5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Ontology* is the complex philosophical study of being and becoming and seeks to understand what exists in the world and the nature of reality in its most general sense.

For the human race is doomed to this paradox: that men are destined to speculate about ultimate questions such as the nature of God, immortality and the justification of evil in the world; and they are equally destined evidently not to find the answers to these questions... [thus,] the prime factor in knowledge is ignorance. We must teach people not how much we know but how little.⁸

Feibleman's Review of 1940 in the T'ien Hsia⁹ Monthly and A Response

Their initial query was not followed up until 1940 when Feibleman reviewed the first six volumes of Toynbee's monumental study in the Hong Kong journal, *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, published in English. By then Feibleman had struck out on his own. The 25 page review faulted the simplicity of Toynbee's "challenge-response" explanation for the development of civilizations. He included a number of other concerns about Toynbee's history which other reviewers would detect, but most important as a major influence on Feibleman's future work was his dissatisfaction with Toynbee's explanation for the genesis of civilizations as being simply common sense and his elevation of the example of the development of Christian civilization from its Roman predecessor as lacking sufficient examples in world history to qualify as an historical generality.¹⁰

Feibleman's own explanation for culture became a major theme of his system of philosophy. He wrote, "The origins of cultures always have the same cause: the implicit dominant ontology (abbreviated: i.d.o.). The occasion is always the acceptance of the i.d.o. This occasion may arise from any level of the environment: physical, chemical, biological, psychological or social."¹¹

Feibleman agreed with Toynbee's assertion that outstanding cultural leaders, possessing reason, imagination and force, were major sources of cultural growth, provided their followers remained free of coercion.¹² Feibleman also concurred that cultures had natural life-spans but admitted their longevity was simply unknown. To avoid slipping into a purely idealistic explanation of cultures, Feibleman included the chosen technology of a society -- beginning with simple tools -- as another vital factor in cultural development.¹³

Feibleman's philosophy of culture held that the explicit philosophy of a Plato, Aristotle, Kant or others was much less common and pervasive than the informal philosophy represented by the i.d.o. Most people remained unaware that the i.d.o. was operating within their unconscious minds, virtually from the moment of birth, but as the individual

⁸ Feibleman, *Ontology* (Baltimore, 1951), 786.

⁹ English translation: "All Under the Sun."

¹⁰ Feibleman, *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, IX, 24.

¹¹ Feibleman, *The Theory of Human Culture* (New York, 1946), 179.

¹² Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, 1935-1939), vol. IV, 5-6. Also vol. I, 191-192, vol. III, 245-246.

¹³ Feibleman, *The Theory of Human Culture* (New York, 1946), 82-84.

developed, it became rational common sense and qualitatively detectable as the ethos of a particular culture.¹⁴

Feibleman's implicit dominant ontology clearly meant something deeper than an ideology, which might easily be discarded or traded in for a new model. The i.d.o. was so closely linked to one's very sense of identity that it could not easily be altered. However, as one's consciousness developed, the i.d.o. became more like typical ideologies and increasingly subject to changes introduced either by diffusion or through the creativity of talented leaders as Toynbee concluded.¹⁵

Feibleman gives indications of what a particular i.d.o. might include in examples extending from modern English history to the Middle Ages; however the fullest incidence of what he considers a specific example of an i.d.o. involves his own American culture. He believed that in order for an i.d.o. to achieve its fullest influence it requires many years of exposure to a given i.d.o., and it is largely acted upon subconsciously. People believe so deeply in particular propositions that they act upon them with virtually with little or no conscious appraisal.

These fundamental propositions become accepted common sense. Elements encompassed by an American i.d.o., include powerful cultural ideas found in part among immigrant groups such as the Puritans and discoverable in their most mature form in the writings of the English empirical philosophers and the French Encyclopedists. These fundamental beliefs include four ensconced in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence:

1. The self-evidence of truth and especially:
2. The equality of the creation of all men.
3. The inalienable right to life and liberty.
4. The inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness (equality of opportunity).

Feibleman believed that the frontier experience in particular helped to foster two additions to the American i.d.o., certainly by the 19th century.

5. The truth of workability
6. The sanctity of material success.¹⁶

Feibleman points out a crucial conflict between these i.d.o. components, and here his social conscience matches Toynbee's in his denunciation of the bitch goddess of material success to the exclusion of all else. "If human equality based on the creation of

¹⁴ Ibid., 48-53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 91, 164.

¹⁶ Ibid., 253.

human beings as free and equal is to lead to equality of opportunity, it cannot be reconciled with the sanctity of material success, for the material success of some men, if unchecked, will lead to the restraining of the equality of others.”¹⁷ Although he does not say it, slavery and the “Robber Barons” of American business would be obvious results of these conflicts.

An ancillary theme of his philosophy of culture appeared first in *The Theory of Human Culture* (also see page 5 above) written in 1946. Increasingly, he conceived of reality as arranged in overlapping integrative levels arising from the physical to the chemical to the biological to the psychological to the cultural and finally to the social level. These integrative levels were discoverable both in nature and in various human activities. One critic of Feibleman’s philosophy termed this hierarchy as “Feibleman’s Great Tree of Being” and ascribed it to Feibleman’s fascination with holistic views of history and philosophy spanning the entire spectrum of knowledge, which made him a generalist early on. It also made him amenable to Toynbee’s world history.

A Change of Career: On to Academe

The emergency of World War II and the draft of Tulane faculty members into the armed forces created a dearth of teachers at Tulane by 1943. Dean Martin ten Hoor knew Feibleman was an established writer and independent philosopher who had not been drafted. As a 40-year old married man with a minor son, Feibleman was not called to serve despite several efforts on his part to obtain a direct commission. He believed that his strong support of the liberal cause in the Spanish Civil War against Franco may have contributed to his being ignored for officer candidacy. Many colleges across the nation, including Tulane, acted as conduits for naval officer preparation through V-12 programs.

Feibleman volunteered for his new assignment as an “acting assistant professor” of English. He discovered his quickest groups finished their coursework 1-2 weeks early, so he introduced them to the broadest scope of knowledge to include philosophy. Feibleman loved teaching and even received a feeler from the University of Chicago about possibly joining their faculty. The offer of a full professorship of philosophy in 1946 and deep roots in New Orleans kept him home. He would have continued to teach at Tulane beyond his seventy-third birthday if the university had not adopted mandatory retirement age requirements.

First Meetings with Toynbee and Einstein: Princeton, 1950

Feibleman, accompanied by his wife, finally met Toynbee personally in 1950 when both participated in a Conference on the Uniformities of History at Princeton. The two got

¹⁷ Ibid., 254.

along quite well, and the historian especially enjoyed hearing Feibleman's account of the marsh lands and Louisiana's residents of the back country surrounding New Orleans.

The following day, a friend in the Spanish Department at Tulane had made arrangements for Feibleman to meet with the most renowned and metaphysical of 20th century scientists, Albert Einstein, who was a long time resident at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies. Feibleman took notes during their conversation and later published a dialogue from this memorable meeting in a book of memoirs:

Feibleman: Why is it that pure science, without which there would be no applied science, is flourishing so much in Europe and so little in America?

Einstein: Because the Europeans have something the Americans have not yet learned and that is appreciation of thought. There is one quality essential to scientists which some physicists lack.

Feibleman: What is that?

Einstein: Humility.

Feibleman: So many European intellectuals have come to the U.S. in recent decades that perhaps they will establish it over here.

Einstein: (with a twinkle): Appreciation of thought is something we immigrants do not seem to bring with us in our baggage.

On a lighter note, just as Feibleman and Einstein arose to part ways, the century's most famous scientist spoke again.

Einstein: You must send me something you have written. You have something?

Feibleman: Mr. Einstein, I have written fifteen books. [By contrast, Einstein had published very little in terms of volume; however, the impact of his Special and General Relativity papers on all knowledge including philosophy and the nature of being which so fascinated Feibleman, hardly needs introduction.]

Einstein sitting down again, spoke with mock astonishment and surprise, and laughingly repeated: "Fifteen books! But this is very suspicious!"

He enjoyed this so much that he repeated the words and the laughter.¹⁸ The question for many would linger throughout Feibleman's career: could proliferation and profundity co-exist in a single philosopher?

Feibleman's *Magnum Opus*: Ontology and Critics

Near the top of those influencing Feibleman's philosophy was the American philosopher and physical scientist, Charles S. Peirce. Feibleman wrote and published *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce: Interpreted as a System* in 1946, following a long battle with Harvard over permission to use their Peirce manuscripts which had been notoriously neglected for many years.

Written outside of academe, Feibleman's study of Peirce took the place of a dissertation. He used many of the Peirce papers currently being edited at Harvard by Paul Weiss and Charles Hartshorne. Both philosophers were former students of Whitehead and became Feibleman's friends. Feibleman's pioneering work in Peirce studies received some vindication in 1970 when M.I.T. published a paperback edition of the book.

In scale of conception Toynbee's *A Study of History* is most analogous to the neglected field of ontology in philosophy. Feibleman saw ontology as essential to all philosophy in the quest for the good life. Although the idea of writing a work on ontology developed over many years, shortly after Feibleman completed his 1946 books, one on human culture and another an introduction to Peirce's philosophy, he began five years of intense work to complete what he professed was his *magnum opus*.

He wrote to a Unitarian friend and minister in St. Louis that

My reputation as a philosopher must stand or fall on this single work...I have devoted at least half a day, seven days a week to it for the past five years...I have lived it, dreamed about it, and practically slept with it on my mind for many years - continuously I should say since I began the act of writing.¹⁹

Feibleman's *Ontology* (1951) was written as an example of what he termed secular metaphysics. Shorn of much of its traditional connection to religion, he constructed what he believed was a legitimate answer to the fundamental ontological questions: "what is there?" and "what can we expect to become?" Typically, ontology is defined as the study of being, and it first came into serious study as a legitimate field and division of metaphysics with the works of such early thinkers as John Scotus, William of Ockham, Christian Wolff, Gottlieb Baumgarten, and the 18th century philosopher, G.W. Leibnitz.²⁰

¹⁸ Feibleman, *The Way of a Man: An Autobiography*, (New York, 1969), (JKF-AE dialogue), 360-363.

¹⁹ Letter, James K. Feibleman to Thaddeus Clark, 132/29/18, Feb. 18, 1950.

²⁰ Paul Edwards (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967), V, 542-543, and Donald Borchert (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Maine, 2006), VII, 21-29. It also mentions Feibleman's special use of essence in his book *Ontology* (1951) which is cited in the bibliography.

Modern philosophy has seen the field divided most often into works considered by modern philosophers as either mere poetry, as in the case of Martin Heidegger, or as a problem of logical analysis, demonstrated particularly in the work of Willard Van Orman Quine. Only a few modern American philosophers have been bold enough to write ontologies. The Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana did it, and more recently Paul Weiss of Yale wrote a systematic ontology.

The bare essentials of Feibleman's version in a 788-page book consist of two main categories or realms, essence and existence, linked by a subordinate one which he called "destiny." The latter had nothing whatsoever to do with anything mystical, but rather described a bridge that individuals follow as they make life decisions which set them on a particular lifetime path. Feibleman wrote that if an individual was able to truly merge these two realms of being, the result would be nothing short of ecstasy. The New Orleans philosopher left open the operation of chance and accident operative in all human lives. These unpredictable elements could either visit tragedy or wonderful opportunity upon individuals, depending both upon circumstances and the choices people made.

The reviewer was not sympathetic and echoed Paul Weiss' long-time criticism that Feibleman was too Platonic. Furthermore, the review held that Feibleman's neglect of religion reduced it to ethics. The reviewer questioned how there could be progress toward an ideal ontology if all culture is its expression [as seen in Feibleman's i.d.o.]?²¹ Feibleman had written extensively on the i.d.o., particularly in *The Study of Human Culture*, so it was only briefly covered in his ontology. He never believed that the i.d.o. was static. Quite the contrary, he wrote that elements of individual i.d.o.s do change as cultures evolve. Two additional reviews followed with comments ranging from "provocative"²² to "obscure" and "superficial," but neither could be construed as wholly positive.²³ Despite his disappointment, Feibleman never considered abandoning philosophy and continued his work unabated. Even in retirement, there was always another book to write.

By the very nature of its vastness, the complex subject of ontology makes it an easy target for criticism. Professional scholars typically evaluate metaphysics on the basis of logic, completeness, applicability and plausibility. Even experienced American metaphysicians, such as Charles Hartshorne, admitted the difficulty in judging philosophical scholarship.²⁴

²¹ Isabel Stearnes, "Feibleman's Ontology," *The Review of Metaphysics* (1954), 7, 255.

²² W. Donald Oliver, "Review of Ontology," *The Philosophical Review*, (1953), 63, 143-144.

²³ Thomas Gouge, "Review of Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* (1952), 49, 537-539.

²⁴ Letter, Charles Hartshorne to Mandelbaum, 38/13/7, n.d., (probably late 1941 or early 1942).

Anyone can play the ontology game. All people can venture some opinion about reality, however simple or incomplete. Nonetheless, few could present as convincing a perspective as Feibleman's work, with its coupling of good social science with imaginative constructs which reflect the development of Feibleman's "i.d.o." and a personal quality absent from rival ontologies. Most importantly, Feibleman never claimed anything remotely absolute about his ontology. Peirce's doctrine of fallibilism infuses his ontology with a sense of honesty and a refreshing lack of pretense not always absent in academe. His philosophy reflects that humility which Albert Einstein felt many U.S. researchers never developed.

Feibleman saw ontology as a field requiring a collective effort subject to constant reconstruction based on new advances in science, upon which all believable metaphysics ultimately rests. He hoped other ontologists would join to advance the search for the good life. A truly valid ontology would mark a good starting point.

Reconsiderations: Volume XII

Nearly three decades after the first volumes of *A Study of History* came out in 1934, Toynbee finally answered his critics more comprehensively in his final volume of *A Study of History*, completed in 1961. The historian's remarks showed that he valued the criticism of philosophers who made him rethink some of his original hypotheses:

A philosopher will probably find little in this chapter except truisms and elementary errors, if he finds anything at all that is not a meaningless misuse of words. All the same, at my peril, I have to write it, because some of my critics have been philosophers who have taken issue with me on philosophical grounds. I exposed myself to this by raising philosophical questions. I did not seek these out. I found them rising out of a study of history. This is, I should say, to be expected, because, as I see it, the study of human affairs is really one and indivisible.²⁵

Neither did Toynbee forget his early critic and friend, the philosopher James K. Feibleman of New Orleans. Toynbee defended himself against Feibleman's criticism that *A Study of History* lacked a sufficiently high level of abstraction and quantification to such a degree that it was almost literary in its approach. The historian answered, "I do not question Feibleman's report, but I do demur to his requirement. What he is demanding is, I believe, a counsel of perfection for a student of human affairs."²⁶

Stephen Jay Gould, observed this tendency to demand quantification among biologists. He described it as "physics envy."²⁷ Feibleman abandoned that extreme requirement in *The Theory of Human Culture* written 6 years after that review.

²⁵ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Reconsiderations* (London, 1961), XII, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁷ Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), 262.

Toynbee cited his philosophical critic from New Orleans over twenty-five times either alone or in conjunction with others. By 1961, the historian's picture had already made it on to a 1947 cover of *Time* magazine, and he was a world-renowned figure. The world historian also made a special admission to Feibleman regarding the impact of his religious upbringing on his philosophy of history.

Some of Feibleman's comments are telling as well as witty. In my view, he says, the failure of human culture is the salvation of humankind. It is in...civilization's decline that all the good things for which civilization deserves its name take their start. There is really nothing that a civilization can do that will please Toynbee except to collapse and then, after giving birth to a universal church, to get out of the way! I cannot read this without bursting out laughing and crying touché. I have not, after all, succeeded in jumping clear of a standpoint I inherited from my ancestral religion.²⁸

To a philosopher who believed that much of human behavior could be explained largely by those ideas (i.d.o.) people absorbed and acted upon in accordance with their cultural conditioning begun in their earliest years, Toynbee's admission must have seemed particularly satisfying to Feibleman given the fact that Toynbee increasingly concluded that only Christianity or some combination of the great world religions could ultimately save civilization.

Feibleman's books *The Theory of Human Culture* (1946) and *Ontology* (1951) would in retrospect become key parts of a 16 volume system of philosophy which sought to keep alive the quest for the good life. This became Feibleman's life work. Both he and Toynbee received substantial criticism of their work. Both committed errors, but in works of such scope, specialists are bound to find mistakes. There are volumes of criticism of Toynbee's history.

A rough tally of reviews of Feibleman's work from 1931 through 1982 shows that he received 21 positive reviews, 19 negative ones and 22 mixed opinions. Toynbee's history received a vastly greater audience than Feibleman could have ever hoped for his philosophy. The two men had obvious differences, but they shared much as well. As fellow seekers of the good life, the historian looked to past experience to avoid the pitfalls of history, and his philosopher friend aimed at the future hoping to improve humankind and to anticipate problems.

Toynbee and Feibleman met again at Tulane in 1958 during a speaking tour through the South. Toynbee stayed with the Feibleman family in their New Orleans home in Metairie, and later he wrote an essay for his friend's *festschrift* published in a full issue of *Studium Generale: Journal of Interdisciplinarian Studies* (1971), dedicated to Feibleman's philosophy under the general editorship of G.H. Müller, Professor of Mathematics at Heidelberg University.

²⁸ Toynbee, *Reconsiderations* (London, 1961), XII, n. 302-303.

A System of Philosophy for the Modern Educated Public

Feibleman aimed at keeping his philosophy at such a level that it did not stray too far from what he described as “the price of eggs.”²⁹ He achieved this by limiting specialized philosophical vocabulary and *ex cathedra* statements devoid of any evidence as encountered in much of traditional philosophy. Neither is his philosophy strictly cerebral; the good life is both mental and physical. Thus, he avoids the mind-body split so characteristic of many of his predecessors. To welcome more people to philosophy, Feibleman went so far as to encourage his readers to construct their own ontologies.³⁰ His system includes all the major components of philosophy and more from logic to ethics and comedy in 17 published volumes.

His prose is occasionally enlivened by an earthy humor, which admittedly contains a sexist touch one might reasonably expect given his generation, arising out of the *Vieux Carré* cultural milieu which helped to form his “i.d.o.” Drawing upon the variety of customers who frequented his father’s Canal Street dry goods store across from the French Quarter, he casually mentioned in his ethics book one of the unconventional sources of wisdom, “An old prostitute is no worse for wear than an old virgin, but has perhaps a secret smile and greater knowledge of the world.”³¹

For these and many more reasons, most of his philosophy is easily accessible to educated men and women. This is in marked contrast to the exceedingly abstruse modern metaphysics of Martin Heidegger or Alfred North Whitehead. Even professional philosophers do not agree on what they mean in many instances. Feibleman’s ability to communicate with language drawn largely from the social sciences, plus his humility as a philosopher who admits at the onset the limitations of any philosophy, including his own, makes his thought particularly appealing.

Fellow metaphysician and editor of *The Review of Metaphysics* at Yale, Paul Weiss, who never fully accepted this philosopher with such an unusual background, wrote Feibleman in one of their last exchanges, “There are few today who know that philosophy must be systematic---and there are few besides yourself who set out to do what they should. But I have confidence in the power of honest inquiry to find its way sooner or later.”³²

Postscript and Conclusions

Professor Feibleman remarried in 1955, and he and his wife, Shirley Ann Grau, raised a family of four. In 1965, Shirley won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *Keepers of the Game*. Feibleman’s son from his first marriage, Peter Feibleman, also became a

²⁹ James K. Feibleman, *From Hegel to Terrorism: And Other Essays on the Dynamic Nature of Philosophy* (New York), 1985, i.

³⁰ Feibleman, *The Two-Story World* (New York, 1962), 38-39.

³¹ Feibleman, *Moral Strategy: An Introduction to the Ethics of Confrontation* (The Hague, 1973), 38

³² Letter, Paul Weiss to James K. Feibleman, 132/97/15, Nov. 14, 1967.

successful novelist and playwright. Considered together these Feibleman family members formed a New Orleans literary dynasty. Feibleman became the long-time Chairman of Tulane's Department of Philosophy and helped found and edit *Tulane Studies in Philosophy*. He was feted with two endowed professorships and two honorary doctorates from Rider College and the University of Louisville and was named a *professor emeritus* at Tulane in 1975.

In his presidential address, "The Third Sophistic," to the Southwestern Philosophical Society on the campus of Texas State University at San Marcos in 1981, he implored his fellow philosophers to take up the challenge of Alfred North Whitehead to study science, to incorporate their findings into their philosophies and to make those teachings available to America's educated citizenry. To the very end, Feibleman continued that quest. All his life, he faithfully read and studied the major scientific journals such as *Science* and the British journal *Nature*, which was his favorite. The final addition to his 17 volume system of philosophy, entitled, *Education and Civilization* (Humanities Press), was published after he died in 1987.

Both Toynbee and Feibleman agreed that world government was an essential long term goal for a planet plagued by endemic warfare, and they shared a common concern for social justice and a hope that religion might help civilization to recover stability and avoid decline. However, while the historian considered religion as the ultimate antidote for civilization's failings, the philosopher was less optimistic of such a remedy for civilization's maladies. Toynbee wrote of the folly of rational Westerners' hope to somehow rid themselves of religious fanaticism only to witness its recrudescence in the guise of the secular religions of Communism, Fascism, and Western Nationalism, which exceeded the zeal and destructiveness of all other religions.³³

Feibleman believed that the absolute claims of these ideologies melt under scientific scrutiny. As a vital way of understanding and accepting the uncertainty of the modern world, science permitted educated people to see through the many masks of fanaticism - - be they religious or political -- and to accept rational probability in lieu of the delusion of certitude.

Feibleman did not believe that Toynbee truly understood science as a powerful cultural and analytical tool, quite apart from its links to technology.³⁴ He is correct in his belief that throughout most of Toynbee's writings, he fails to discriminate clearly between science and its practical application. However, Feibleman is perhaps too critical here. Late in his career, Toynbee corrected this blurring of theoretical and applied science in a small pamphlet entitled, "Science in Human Affairs: An Historian's View." It is a short but succinct and convincing portrayal of science's power to deny certitude and to keep

³³ Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, 1954), IX, 618-620. Also Toynbee's, *Christianity: Among the Religions of the World* (New York, 1957), 14,53,55.

³⁴ Feibleman, *Understanding Civilizations: The Shape of History* (New York, 1975) 173.

open inquiry, but as a humanist, he prudently cautioned readers that science like all human endeavors depended ultimately upon the honesty of its practitioners.³⁵

Toynbee was also undoubtedly right in his belief that, in the case of the ignorant or the poorly educated, philosophy could not fill the religious void.³⁶ Feibleman's religious insight remained markedly different from Toynbee's. Although he never joined any religion after he left the synagogue, he was a frequent guest speaker at Unitarian services in New Orleans and maintained a deep reverence for life itself. He wrote in the *Pious Scientist* (1958),

What science has done may be viewed religiously. Religion is not a special set of thoughts but something you hold in the back of your mind when you are thinking about something else. Religion is not a special kind of feeling but something you feel for the parts when the feeling for the whole comes through them. Religion is not a special thing to do but a certain way of looking at the way other things are done. What you do about your religion ought to mean only how you do what you do about everything else.³⁷

Feibleman continued to write up until his death in 1987 at the age of 83, and he anticipated world terrorism but not al-Qaeda in his 1985 book, *From Hegel to Terrorism and Other Essays*. His final books *The Destroyers: The Underside of Human Nature* and *Education and Civilization* were published posthumously. On the concluding page of this last volume in his system of philosophy, Feibleman wrote that the important study of the causes and cures for the ills of civilization remained in its infancy but acknowledged that Toynbee and Spengler's world histories marked important beginnings.³⁸

Although each man was fully cognizant of the nuclear threat, Feibleman remained more the hawk and Toynbee the dove in terms of their willingness to use force in the world arena. The philosopher and historian remained vigilant about threats to civilization. Two of Feibleman's last books focused on those dangers, both in the case of terrorism and in the inability of modern men to properly channel their natural aggressiveness. The two thinkers continued to share their conviction that a common holistic perspective on history and philosophy was vital to an understanding of human affairs given the changed circumstances of planet earth with its maze of interconnections and vulnerability to the machinations of its most violent human denizens.

A conclusion in his pamphlet size memoir, *Janus at Seventy-five*, set down earlier by an aging Toynbee in 1964 might have just as easily been written by his philosopher friend from New Orleans, "We are now moving into a chapter of human history in which our

³⁵ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Science in Human Affairs: An Historian's View* (New York, 1968), 27-30.

³⁶ Arnold J. Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (New York, 1956), 75-76.

³⁷ James K. Feibleman, *The Pious Scientist: Nature, God and Man in Religion* (New York, 1958), 39.

³⁸ James K. Feibleman, *Education and Civilization*, (New York, 1987), 234.

choice is going to be, not between a whole world and a shredded-up world, but between one world and no world.³⁹

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³⁹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Janus at Seventy-Five* (New York, 1964), 7.

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