Schurman, Jacob Gould (1854 – 1942)

Canadian-American. b: 22 May 1854, Freetown, Prince Edward Island, d: 12 August 1942, New York. Cat: Idealist. Ints: Science; ethics; evolution; philosophy of religion. Educ: Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown, P.E.I., 1870–2; Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 1872–5; University of London, 1875–8. Infls: Kant. Appts: Professor of English Literature, Logic, and Political Economy, Acadia University, 1880; Professor of Philosophy, Dalhousie University, Halifax, 1882; Cornell University, 1885; President of Cornell University, 1892, and served until 1921, although he obtained leaves of absence to serve as first Chairman of the Philippines Commission, and as US Minister to Greece and Montenegro; after his Cornell service he became US Ambassador to China and then to Germany; founded the Philosophical Review in 1892.

Main publications:

- (1881) Kantian Ethics and the Ethics of Evolution, and Williams & Norgate London.
- (1887) The Ethical Import of Darwinism, Scribner’s New York.

Secondary literature:


Schurman was a metaphysical idealist, but his principal interests were in the alleged conflicts between science and religion, and in formulating a worldview based on reason and experience. His early works deal with the moral issues which various thinkers believed to have been posed by the theory of evolution. Against the social Darwinists he argued that evolution has only an indirect bearing on moral principles because moral theories cannot be based upon scientific principles. The indirect bearing of evolutionary theories arises from the fact that the application of moral theories involves factual premises and so different historical situations pose different problems in different historical contexts. The fact that the universe is evolving suggests that the conditions for ideal moral behaviour arise only at a given stage of development.

Two of Schurman’s later books deal with questions of religion, which he believed could be given a rational foundation. Although he was much interested in the British idealists and his philosophy was strongly shaped by the conflicts of his time over biological evolution, Schurman’s work is most strongly marked by his respect—critical though it was—for Kant. Armour and Trott (1981) have explored the relations between his philosophy and his diplomatic and educational work. Armour (1981) has made an effort to reconstruct the philosophy of history which is immanent in his *Balkan Wars* (1914). His influence on the creation of the American Philosophical Association and the professionalization of American

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philosophy is mentioned in Wilson (1990).

Sources: WWW(Am).
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