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## [Sorry, Montague!](#) [4]



A few years ago, in the introduction to a special issue of the philosophy journal *Synthese* focusing on creationism, I wrote:

In the first wave of antievolution activity—the attempts during the 1920s to remove evolution

from the classroom—philosophers were all but uninvolved in the debate. Although the impresario of the Scopes trial, George Rappelyea, hoped to get John Dewey to testify for the defense (de Camp 1968, p. 80), only experts in science and religion were selected, and in the event they were not permitted to testify (Larson 1997, pp. 170–193). Only [Alfred North] Whitehead, of the leading American philosophers of the day, reacted to the trial, according to a study of American intellectuals and Darwinism (Conkin 1998, p. 145). And his muted reaction took the form of a piece in the *Atlantic Monthly*, published after the trial, which mentioned evolution just once and Scopes, the law under which he was prosecuted, and the trial itself not at all (Whitehead 1925).

Well, I accurately reported what Paul K. Conkin said in *When All the Gods Trembled*, but both he and I seem to have overlooked someone!

I was recently skimming through Charles T. Sprading's *Science Versus Dogma* (1925), a fairly obscure pro-evolution tract published after the Scopes trial. Sprading (1871–1959) seems to be best remembered as a forerunner of libertarianism in politics—he wrote a book entitled *Liberty and the Great Libertarians* (1913), was active in the Libertarian League of Los Angeles between the two World Wars, and wrote a number of books published by the Libertarian Publishing Company (including *Science Versus Dogma*). *Science Versus Dogma* is not especially political, however. In successive chapters, it addresses the scientific method, “The Christian War on Science” (relying heavily on John William Draper and Andrew Dixon White), the evidence for evolution, religious objections to evolution, Bryan's objections to evolution in particular, and what scientists have said in defense of the teaching of evolution.

As in antievolution tracts of the day, a lot of the book is occupied by wholesale quotations, interlarded with either praise or criticism. In the final chapter of the book, Sprading offers a long quotation from “Prof. William Hepperell Montagne” writing “in an article written for Universal Service on this case” (i.e., the Scopes case, evidently before the trial commenced). Here's the first paragraph:

There will be nobody left in the teaching profession but cowards and liars if this movement against the freedom of thought and expression continues. Arrest and indictment of J. T. Scopes, instructor of sciences in the Dayton, Tenn., High School, under the law recently enacted by that state prohibiting the teaching of evolution, is a crime against all that is most worthwhile in American life.

Nice! Sprading describes “Montagne” as “former president of the American Philosophical Association, and professor of philosophy at Columbia University”; that was enough to jog my memory to realize that he was talking about William Pepperell Montague (above; 1873–1953), who (to be exact) was president of the Eastern Division of the APA, in 1923–1924, as well as a professor of philosophy at Columbia University from 1903 to 1947.

I can't say, though, that I agree with everything in his article. Montague seems to think that teachers in the public schools should have unfettered discretion in what they teach, writing, “This question of the freedom of teachers to teach what they believe to be the truth is one of supreme importance. ... Those who are now endeavoring to dictate what should and what should not be taught in the schools are traitors to the finest spirit of American life.” However, it seems clear to me, both from the Establishment Clause to the First Amendment of the Constitution and from the practicalities of public education, that

there must be rules about what should and what should not be taught in the schools. The question is not whether rules should exist, but what the rules are and whether they are defensible. Rules—like the Butler Act—requiring teachers to miseducate their students about science, by commission or omission, are, of course, not going to be defensible.

Montague also writes, correctly, “There is no disagreement among educated men as to the fact of evolution. But they are not in agreement as to methods and factors involved.” Such claims, sometimes supplemented by examples of current scientific disagreements in evolutionary biology, are common. But Montague isn’t thinking of scientific disagreements, for he then adds, “For example, it is still a question whether evolution is of an atheistic, materialistic or spiritual nature.” He continues, “There is abundant evidence that evolution is a spiritual force, making for change and improvement in life.” I don’t know whether he means that it’s a spiritual force that, as it happens, results in change and improvement, or that it’s a spiritual force as can be inferred from the fact that it results in change and improvement—either way, it seems dubious that there really is scientific evidence for such a claim.

Philosophically, Montague was a leader of what was called the New Realism, a view in American philosophy in the early twentieth century, which—to be candid—I have little knowledge of and less interest in. I only recognized his name from having seen it mentioned in histories of philosophy; I don’t believe that I’ve ever read a book or even a journal article by him. (I don’t think that I’m unique: the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy mentions him only once, in a bibliographical entry for a book he coedited.) But he was a reasonably important philosopher of his age, and I regret not having known about his taking a stand on the Scopes trial—especially such a forceful stand. (Whitehead, in contrast, offered only the tepid observation, “to-day the doctrine of evolution is an equal stumbling block.” No kidding.) So I end as I began, by offering apologies to his ghost: sorry, Montague!

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