PROCEEDINGS OF THE DISCUSSION PANEL ON

PHILOSOPHY AND FREEDOM: THE LEGACY OF JAMES DOULL

Canadian Philosophical Association Congress

Dalhousie University/University of King’s College

Halifax, NS, Canada

June 1-2, 2003

“Not many in Canada can be compared to James Doull as the creator of a philosophical school based in an interpretation of the whole history of Western philosophy. When one adds that his school has continued to reproduce itself for a half century through several generations of students, that it remains central to the life of vibrant institutions, and that this power of regeneration stems from its union of a linguistically and philologically disciplined reading of texts with a total system of philosophy, Professor Doull’s accomplishment is virtually incomparable in our country.”

- W.J. Hankey

“Of all the Canadians of my generation, he certainly has the clearest intellect of any I have known. Nothing I would ever have to say about philosophy will compare to his knowledge of it.”

- George Grant

During his lifetime, James Doull, Canadian philosopher and long-time professor of Classics at Dalhousie University, never published a book. His interpretations of the history of philosophy and his penetrating assessment of the contemporary philosophical landscape were contained in a series of important articles published between 1961 and his death in 2001. With the 2003 publication of Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull, Doull’s work was made available to a wider public for the first time. The collection gathered together his most important articles, along with commentaries on the articles by scholars with whom Doull had worked closely.


2 Quoted in William Christian’s George Grant: A Biography (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 139.
Through what was surely a providential coincidence of events, the Canadian Philosophical Association held its 2003 Congress in Halifax at Dalhousie University and the University of King’s College just as the publication of Philosophy and Freedom was being launched. Given Doull’s profound influence on the institutional life and academic programmes of Dalhousie’s Classics Department and King’s Foundation Year Programme, it seemed only fitting to organize a CPA discussion panel on the occasion of the book’s publication to consider Doull’s philosophical legacy. The panel consisted of eight presentations (seven of which are included in this volume), and was designed for both a general philosophical audience unfamiliar with Doull’s thought, and for those who have spent many years struggling to come to terms with his work. Like the book Philosophy and Freedom, the panel was organized to represent an overview of Doull’s systematic interpretation of the history of philosophy, with each presentation treating some period or question central to his philosophical enterprise. Doull’s legacy as a teacher was in evidence during this event, as most of the panelists were either former students of Doull or students of his students. Many of Doull’s friends, colleagues and former students were also present in the audience, as well as both the editors and most of the contributors to Philosophy and Freedom.

All the papers were originally written to be delivered as oral presentations and they have not been substantially altered from this form, thus explaining the colloquial tone of the contributions. These are “proceedings” in the fullest sense, providing a written record of the discussions that took place over the two days for those who were not present.

Through his lectures, seminars, and articles on philosophy, history, literature and politics, James Doull has made a significant contribution to the study of the humanities in Canada. Those familiar with his work have drawn from it a much richer understanding of the contemporary world, its thought and institutions, by means of a deeper understanding of this world’s historical origins. In light of his work as a founding editor of Animus and the fact that his philosophical vision continues to inform the journal’s raison d’être, it is appropriate that the 2005 issue of Animus be devoted to examining various aspects of James Doull’s thought and its influence.

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Floy Doull opens the issue with a biographical introduction to the theoretical and practical activity of the last two decades of Doull’s life. She explains how his political engagement in opposition to the Trudeauite revolution against the Canadian constitution and in favour of the attempted return to its principles through the Meech Lake Accord was intimately connected with his more theoretical work on recovering an awareness of the ‘Christian Origins of Contemporary Institutions’.

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3 Louis Greenspan’s delightful observations on the philosophical relationship between Doull and George Grant were unfortunately not available for publication

4 Special thanks to Kieva Bearden for her meticulous proof-reading of the entire volume, and to Catherine Wilson and Steven Burns for their help and advice in organizing the panel.
Lawrence Bruce-Robertson offers an illuminating account of Doull’s interpretation of Aristotle. Perhaps no figure besides Hegel (and perhaps Augustine) played a more central role in Doull’s thinking: Doull’s annual Aristotle seminars were legendary among his students in the Dalhousie Classics department, and testified to a life-long engagement with the Aristotelian philosophy, although Doull published only a few very dense pages on Aristotle during his lifetime. Through an analysis of these pages, Bruce-Robertson shows the importance of Doull’s claims that Aristotle’s philosophy emerges as a direct continuation of Plato’s philosophical project; that Aristotle is as thorough-going an idealist as his teacher; and that the various strands of the argument in the Metaphysics, in particular aitiology, osiology, ontology and theology are completely unified. Bruce-Robertson shows how for Doull, all being and nature is ultimately to be explained with reference to God as the first principle.

D. Gregory MacIsaac considers Doull’s Hegelian interpretation of Neoplatonism. He argues that a fuller understanding of Neoplatonism than is available on Doull or Hegel’s account can suggest a plausible middle ground between Hegel and Heidegger on the relation between philosophical thinking and history.

Gary Badcock examines Doull’s conception of the proper relation between religion and secular institutions. Badcock remarks how Doull goes further than Hegel’s view that there can be no true secular institutions without true religion, conversely claiming that one can not have true religion without true secular institutions. Badcock shows how this extension of Hegel’s thought is intimately related to Doull’s interpretation of the development of post-Hegelian history.

David Bronstein tackles the debate between Doull and Jewish philosopher and Hegelian commentator Emil Fackenheim on the question of whether Hegel could remain a Hegelian in the face of the Holocaust. Since the question hinges on whether radical evil can be rationally comprehended, Bronstein defends Doull’s view by focusing on the meaning of thinking and of evil in the Hegelian philosophy.

Eli Diamond discusses Doull’s vision of what it means to be doing philosophy in Canada. He analyzes the relationship between Doull’s dual claim that our situation as Canadians can afford us a privileged access to the Western intellectual tradition, and that recovering a better understanding of this intellectual tradition is crucial for our political survival as a country.

Jamie Crooks examines Doull’s highly unorthodox understanding of Heidegger’s philosophy, and the response it provoked from Doull’s former student and renowned Heidegger commentator Graeme Nicholson. Specifically, Crooks evaluates to what extent Doull’s locating Heidegger within a dialectic of the ideal and natural self in postmodern history and politics distorts the meaning of Heidegger’s thought considered on its own terms.