

## **Phil 176/276G: Historical Philosophers—American Philosophy**

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### Handout #6: Dewey's Assessment of Darwin's Philosophical Influence

John Dewey (1859-1952) was one of the three most influential pragmatist philosophers. He began as a Hegelian but came to reject idealism. He is best known for his work in the philosophy of politics and education. He allowed (contra Hegel) that Democratic ideals are not “natural” and liberalism not derivable from a reading of God/nature’s goals or design in the Lockean way. Indeed, he criticized conservative Americans for using liberal slogans to block the kinds of social reforms necessary for a substantive democracy. He maintained that a social form of democratic liberalism—one which acknowledges various “natural” obstacles to substantive liberty—is the best way to achieve high levels of coordination and cooperation in a multi-cultural state divided over moral/political matters. Against skeptics about the utility of gov’t, he argued that we can realize substantive forms of democracy by instituting reforms aimed at devolving power. He is therefore most famous for his proposals to give students, teachers and parents a more active role in schools, neighborhood councils and other institutions responsible for the civic policies that most affect us.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-political/>

### **Dewey's Argument in “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy”**

1. Thesis 1: Darwin didn't just reveal the origin of our species by explaining how natural phenotypic variations and natural mechanisms of selection among organisms displaying these phenotypes might yield the diversity of species we observe today. Instead, when he did this, Darwin changed the very ideas people associated with “species” and “humanity.”
2. Thesis 2: Dewey has a hypothesis about the change in thinking inaugurated by Darwin. People thought of species as “eternal” or pretty much constant in their characteristic traits. This made it possible for people to describe human nature as some stable set of anatomical and psychological features, tendencies and capacities. And this in turn made possible the hypothesis that certain of these traits best enabled human functioning and other traits inhibited that functioning. These were biological/moral theories of the virtues and vices. The presumption of the eternity of species also

grounded Locke's claims about God's purposes in designing humanity and the rights we have to life, liberties and property on this basis of this humanity, which of course distinguishes us from the other animals (who lack the relevant slate of rights).

"In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion" (1).

3. Thesis 3: The "clamour over religion"—the outcry that arose from the seeming incompatibility of Darwinism and Creationism—obscured a deeper effect Darwin had on (a) "science itself" and (b) basic moral philosophy.

"The theological outcry he [Darwin] discounted from the start, hardly noticing it save as it bore upon the "feelings of his female relatives." But for two decades before final publication he contemplated the possibility of being put down by his scientific peers as a fool or as crazy; and he set, as the measure of his success, the degree in which he should affect three men of science: Lyell in geology, Hooker in botany, and Huxley in zoology.... Although the ideas that rose up like armed men against Darwinism owed their intensity to religious associations, their origin and meaning are to be sought in science and philosophy, not in religion." (2-3)

#### **4. Dewey's Account of Pre-Darwinian Science**

Each species of plant or animal or kind of thing was classified by species, which both distinguished it from other things and was used to denote a "set of powers" instantiated in a single "substance" therein explaining the observable distinctness of one type of thing from another. Dewey notes how ideas about proper functions for an eternally fixed type of thing were developed into concepts of good and bad for members of each species. Applied to the human species these ideas were instrumental in moral and political thinking.

Criticism: Dewey clearly goes overboard when he credits Darwin with exploding all metaphysics. But then Dewey walks this back a bit and represents Darwin as a high point in a trend, beginning with Copernicus, of thinkers rejecting eternal Platonic categories that can be defined in advance. Once we accept Darwin's view of biology we must allow that change is the only constant. All categories are provisional, pragmatic ways of capturing one's current stage in the history of the universe. After Darwin, these ideas secured an application to morals and politics, though it is unclear where this revolution will take us.

“Without the methods of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and their successors in astronomy, physics, and chemistry, Darwin would have been helpless in the organic sciences. But prior to Darwin the impact of the new scientific method upon life, mind, and politics, had been arrested, because between these ideal or moral interests and the inorganic world intervened the kingdom of plants and animals. The gates of the garden of life were barred to the new ideas; and only through this garden was there access to mind and politics. The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life. When he said of species what Galileo had said of the earth, *e pur si muove*, he emancipated, once for all, genetic and experimental ideas as an organon of asking questions and looking for explanations...The exact bearings upon philosophy of the new logical outlook are, of course, as yet, un- certain and inchoate. ' We live in the twilight of intellectual transition” (8-9).

## **5. Darwin’s Philosophical Consequences: Undermining Design v. Change — Mind v. Matter**

Dewey claims that pre-Darwinian science and morals were fundamentally idealist in character. By viewing nature as the design of an intelligence, premises were provided to supply scientists and moralists with inferences from observable phenomena to the laws, scheme or blueprint used by the intelligence to construct reality.

“The expulsion of fixed first and final causes from astronomy, physics, and chemistry had indeed given the doctrine something of a shock. But, on the other hand, increased acquaintance with the details of plant and animal life operated as a counterbalance and perhaps even strengthened the argument from design” (11).

When Darwin revolutionized biology, he set in motion a process that effectively undermined natural theology and moral philosophy.

“The classic notion of species carried with it the idea of purpose. In all living forms, a specific type is present directing; the earlier stages of growth to the realization of its own perfection. Since this purposive regulative principle is not visible to the senses, it follows that it must be an ideal or rational force. Since, however, the perfect form is gradually approxi- mated through the sensible changes, it also follows that in and through a sensible realm a rational ideal force is working out its own ultimate mani- festation. These inferences were extended to nature: (a) She does nothing in vain; but all for an ulterior purpose, (b) Within natural sensible events there is therefore contained a spiritual causal force, which as spiritual escapes perception, but is apprehended by an enlightened reason. (c) The manifestation of this principle brings about a subordination of matter and sense to its own realization, and this ultimate fulfillment is the goal of nature and of man. The design argument thus operated in two directions. Purposefulness accounted for the intelligibility of nature and the possibility of science, while the absolute or cosmic

character of this purposefulness gave sanction and worth to the moral and religious endeavors of man. Science was underpinned and morals authorized by one and the same principle, and their mutual agreement was eternally guaranteed” (9-10).

## Dewey’s Account of the Changes Darwinism will Ultimately Bring to Philosophy

### **(1) A Pragmatic Focus on Current Moral/Political Problems:**

“In the first place, the new logic outlaws, flanks, dismisses—what you will—one type of problems and substitutes for it another type. Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them...When Henry Sidgwick casually remarked in a letter that as he grew older his interest in what or who made the world was altered into interest in what kind of a world it is anyway, his voicing of a common experience of our own day illustrates also the nature of that intellectual transformation effected by the Darwinian logic. Interest shifts from the wholesale essence back of special changes to the question of how special changes serve and defeat concrete purposes; shifts from an intelligence that shaped things once for all to the particular intelligences which things are even now shaping; shifts from an ultimate goal of good to the direct increments of justice and happiness that intelligent administration of existent conditions may beget and that present carelessness or I stupidity will destroy or forego.” (13-5)

### **(2) A Pragmatic Focus on Explanations of Particular Phenomena Rather than a Search for Some Unified Underlying Principle**

“In the second place, the classic type of logic inevitably set philosophy upon proving that life must have certain qualities and values—no matter how experience presents the matter—because of some remote cause and eventual goal. The duty of wholesale justification inevitably accompanies all thinking that makes the meaning of special occurrences depend upon something that once and for all lies behind them....Were it a thousand times true that opium produces sleep because of its dormitive energy yet the inducing of sleep in the tired, and the recovery to waking life of the poisoned, would not be thereby one least step forwarded. And were it a thousand times dialectically demonstrated that ' life as a whole is regulated by a transcendent principle to a final inclusive goal, none the less truth and error, health and disease, good and evil, hope and fear in the concrete, would remain just what 1 and where they now are. To improve our education, to ameliorate our manners, to advance our politics, we must have recourse to specific conditions of generation” (16-7).

### **(3) By Destroying the Idea of God’s Plan and the Idea of History as an Intelligent Process Naturally Leading to Some Desired End, Darwinism Places Greater Intellectual Responsibility on Us to Articulate Ends We Find Worthy and the Means to their Achievement**

Finally, the new logic introduces responsibility into the intellectual life...if insight into specific conditions of value and into specific consequences of ideas is possible, philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis...a philosophy that humbles its pretensions to the work of projecting hypotheses for the education and conduct of mind, individual and social, is thereby subjected to test by the way in which the ideas it propounds work out in practice. In having modesty forced upon it, philosophy also acquires responsibility” (15-16).

Dewey admits that this is an optimistic hypothesis. He allows that many philosophers have “dug in” by denying the relevance of science to the kinds of a prioristic philosophy they generate from grand assumptions about eternal structures, causes, ends and the like.

“The very conquest of the biological sciences by the new ideas has led many to proclaim an explicit and rigid separation of philosophy from science” (19).

But he predicts that this reactionary move cannot last forever.

“Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories. They are habits, predispositions, deeply engrained attitudes of aversion and preference. Moreover, the conviction persists—though history shows it to be a hallucination—that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place. Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new intentions, new problems, is the one effected, by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the *Origin of Species*” (ibid.).

Task: Consider your experience studying contemporary philosophy and assess Dewey’s prediction in light of this experience. Has philosophy because more applied, particular, a posteriori and connected to departments of science or less applied, more general, a priori and disconnected from science?

Questions: If Darwin prevents us from using observations of nature to frame epistemological, moral and political ideals and theories, where can philosophers turn for the premises they need to argue for the superiority of one system over another? What are the premises from which we can argue for or against Bayesianism or Democracy? Even if we allow a kind of *pluralism* in methods and results—so that philosophers can develop ideas and ideals without feeling a burden to argue for the superiority of these particular ways of thinking in comparison to all alternatives—don't we still need some notion of (objective or quasi-objective *constraints on theorizing*)? How else can we distinguish philosophy from poetry and fiction on the one hand and philosophy from science and journalism on the other? What, according to Dewey, is post-Darwinian philosophy supposed to look like? Does he imagine philosophers conducting “experiments in living” (to use Mill's phrase)? Are we to test philosophical ideas by realizing them in practice and then evaluating the results? Can we assign authority to this process if we think of the evaluation in question as wholly subjective?