

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

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### Handout #5: Dewey's Assessment of Darwin's Philosophical Influence

John Dewey (1859-1952) was one of the three most influential pragmatist philosophers. He began his career as a Hegelian idealist who thought matter needed mind for its existence 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’s goals (themselves derived from observation of nature’s 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 that 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 government, 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.”

Note the assumption here that we can distinguish between changes in our beliefs about the history of life on Earth and changes in the meanings of those words we use to state those facts as we now take them to be. This is a form of the analytic/synthetic distinction (drawn by Kant), which was undermined by pragmatist philosophers including White. The alternative view is that all changes in belief introduce some change in the meaning of

those words we would use to express the belief. When changes in belief are drastic we then notice these changes in meaning or significance. Since the Darwinian revolution in biology introduced a dramatic change of belief, pragmatists will agree with Dewey that it's appropriate to speak of a change in the meaning of those terms used to express our biological understanding: including "species," "human," and even "animal." If you know contemporary biology you understand these words differently than do those who have, e.g., Locke's understanding of biology.

2. Thesis 2: Dewey has a hypothesis about the change in thinking inaugurated by Darwin. People thought of the different 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 plant or animal was classified by species membership, 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. This was the role Aristotle assigned to biology in his system and, as we’ve seen, this kind of thinking was embraced as late as Locke.

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 on inquiry and practice. 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, uncertain and inchoate. ‘We live in the twilight of intellectual transition’ (8-9).

Questions: Try your best to assess the impact of Darwin’s theory of evolution on our moral thinking. Which conceptions of morality are ruled out by an acceptance of the hypothesis that humans evolved from other apes via processes of natural selection? Can Locke’s theory of natural rights be reconciled with Darwinism? (To anticipate William James: Do we really need a metaphysical basis for those egalitarian beliefs or values that lead us to reject slavery as immoral?)

## **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 intelligent being or force, 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 grounded in it.

“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 approximated through the sensible changes, it also follows that in and through a sensible realm a rational ideal force is working out its own ultimate manifestation. 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).

Questions: We still distinguish what is good for people from what is bad for them. We haven't given up on our notions of health and illness. Is it possible, though, that these things mean very different things to us than they did to our pre-Darwinian founding fathers?

### **4. Social Darwinism: See Greene (Source 8) and Handout 4**

“With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost

skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed.... if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with an overwhelming present evil. We must therefore bear the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind; but there appears to be at least one check in steady action, namely that the weaker and inferior members of society do not marry so freely as the sound; and this check might be indefinitely increased by the weak in body or mind refraining from marriage, though this is more to be hoped for than expected” (Darwin, *Descent of Man*)

Questions: What moral standard does Darwin assume in arguing that the world is worse on the whole because people with physical and mental “handicaps” or impairments are able to reproduce at higher rates than they would in the absence of social welfare programs? What is the relation between the concept of “bad” utilized in the judgment that losing one’s hearing or sight or legs is “**bad** for you” and the concept of “bad” utilized in the judgment that “it is **bad** for society (or society is worse overall) to have people who (because of genetic defect) lack hearing or sight or legs reproduce at a rate equivalent to the rate at which those who lack these defects reproduce? When Darwin says that he “hopes” (though does not expect) that the “weaker and inferior members of society” will refrain from marriage and reproduction, what kind of values does he express or betray? How do these values compare with the values affirmed in our declaration of independence and constitution: e.g. the claim that all men are created equal, or that we are all equal in the eyes of the law? Are either set of values supportable on the basis of biology? If so, which? If not, what other support can we give to a moral view we hope to promote through law and custom?

(1) Darwinian Premise Asserting the Positive Value of “Proper” Biological Functioning: Lacking hearing or sight or legs is **bad** for an animal.

Therefore,

(2) Darwin’s Preliminary Conclusion Asserting the Disutility (or Negative Value) of Biological “Impairments”: A population of animals is better off insofar as its members have hearing, sight and legs.

Therefore,

(3) (Darwin’s Cousin Galton’s) Eugenic Conclusion: We ought to encourage those who have hearing, sight and legs to reproduce and discourage those

who lack these traits from reproducing.

Question: How good are these inferences? What is the relation between biological value and moral value?

Darwin seems to think the inference from (1) to (2) is fine. He just resists the inference his cousin Galton makes from this preliminary conclusion to his ultimate conclusion (3), which is a prescription for eugenics.

“The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature.”

**Philosophical Task:** Assess the steps of the above inference and with it the legitimacy or utility of biological conceptions of value. Does Darwin’s biology and the reflections on society to which it leads him contradict the egalitarian beliefs to which Locke and Jefferson gave voice? Does Darwin’s conception of morality conflict with the ideology articulated in the USA’s founding documents, which posits the equal value of all humans? If we cannot turn to biology for the conceptions of human value we need to construct a moral guide or political ethics, can we just maintain the one we have on the basis of custom? If the idea of the basic dignity of all humans is challenged by those who reject egalitarianism, where can we turn for its defense? Can we rationally maintain that the equal respect due all people is self-evident? Even if this proposition is not self-evident, does it need to be grounded in theology? (The development of pragmatism can be interpreted as: (a) the growing realization that there are no metaphysical foundations for egalitarian or democratic morality and that contemporary biology (unlike its Aristotelian predecessor) either provides grounds for social Darwinism of the sort articulated by Darwin in the passage above (and affirmed by Pragmatist Supreme Court Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes in *Buck v Bell*) or provides no grounds for any morality at all (as per canonical readings of Hume’s criticism of Locke in the famous “ought”/“is” passage in Hume’s *Treatise*).

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

### **(A) 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 stupidity will destroy or forego.” (13-5)

### **(B) A Pragmatic Focus on Explanations of Particular Phenomena and Justifications for Particular Laws and Institutions Rather than a Search for Some Unified Underlying Principle or “First Law” of Morality**

“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 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).

### **(C) 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, necessary causes, universal 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 become more applied, particular, a posteriori and connected to departments of science or less applied, more general, a priori and disconnected from science? (Look at Kuklick’s *History of Philosophy in America* for a set of hypotheses as to why American philosophy doesn’t look exactly as Dewey predicted it would.)

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 normative system over another? What are the premises from which we can argue for or against Bayesian accounts of scientific rationality or Rawlsian articulations of liberal democratic political ideals? 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?