

## **American Pragmatism, Evolution, and Ethics**

### **Introduction**

It is hard to miss the fact that the American pragmatists were influenced by evolutionary ideas—especially given Dewey’s famous collection of essays, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (1910). It thus comes as a surprise that several recent works on Dewey’s ethics contain almost no mention of evolution (Lekan 2003; Fesmire 2003; Pappas 2008; Stroud 2011). Jennifer Welchman, in her otherwise excellent book, effectively dismisses the biology connection, claiming that Dewey’s use of terms such as ‘adaptation’ does not indicate “a close acquaintance with, let alone comprehension of, either Darwinian theory or subsequent developments in the life sciences” (Welchman 1995, 121). This position contrasts with that of earlier scholars, who saw the link with biology as obvious and important (Gouinlock 1972, 237-266). Dewey’s contemporaries agreed: Addison Webster Moore’s *Pragmatism and its Critics*, for example, emphasized “the central role of the conception of evolution in the development of pragmatism,” and the last chapter of his book was a dialogue on ethics between an absolutist and an evolutionist (Moore 1910, vii-viii).

Turning to another pragmatist philosopher, Jane Addams, the story is similar. Although Mary Jo Deegan’s *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School* (1988), with its focus on the ecological approach of Chicago sociology, discussed Addams’s evolutionary account of the urban environment, later treatments of her social ethics have tended to neglect this aspect of her views (Seigfried 1996, 1999; Anderson 2004; Hamington 2009; Cracraft 2012).

There have been promising exceptions to this trend. Some recent work on Dewey and Addams has emphasized their progressive evolutionary viewpoint (Teehan 2002; Eddy 2010; Green 2010; Fischer 2013). Likewise, in the most recent version of her *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Dewey’s Moral Philosophy,” Elizabeth Anderson has added this nice summary passage:

Dewey situated reflective morality in a non-teleological Darwinian view of organisms’ adaptation to environmental contingencies. Nature does not supply a telos or rule for human beings, but rather a constantly changing environment to which humans need to adjust by using their intelligence. (Anderson 2014a)

Nevertheless, most work on pragmatism and ethics has left these issues in the deep background.<sup>1</sup>

I suspect that many pragmatism scholars have been wary of evolutionary ethics because of its association, both today and in the past, with conservative political positions. Herbert Spencer is infamous for his “Social Darwinism,” and E.O. Wilson equally so for his sociobiology (Spencer 1884; Hofstadter 1944; Wilson 1978; Kitcher 1985). However, this is just what is most interesting about the pragmatists: they were developing an evolutionary approach to morality that was explicitly opposed to the most famous evolutionary ethics of their day—that of Spencer. In particular, they were working with a richer and more dynamic notion of human evolution in complex social environments, one that has been unduly neglected.

This chapter seeks to remedy this neglect by providing an overview of pragmatist evolutionary ethics—specifically that of John Dewey and Jane Addams—and its intellectual context. To make things manageable, I will focus on pragmatist texts from 1890 to 1910, a period that includes Dewey’s clearest statements of the relation between ethics and evolution as well as Addams’s major works on social ethics. For much of this period, Dewey and Addams were both in Chicago: Hull House, Addams’s settlement house at Halsted and Polk, was founded

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<sup>1</sup> Eddy (2016), a book-length treatment of the evolutionary ethics of Dewey and Addams, appeared as this chapter was going to press. For a review, see Pearce (Forthcoming).

in 1889; a few years later, Dewey became chair of Philosophy at the new University of Chicago, and he remained there until 1904. It was also a tumultuous period socially and economically, with what Alan Trachtenberg (1982) has called “the incorporation of America”: urbanization, immigration, industrialization, depression, and all of the accompanying disputes between capital and labor (Feffer 1993). This social context was directly relevant to the evolutionary approach of Dewey and Addams.

The beginning of the chapter will provide some necessary background, discussing earlier works to which Dewey and Addams were reacting. First, I will give a brief overview of Spencer’s evolutionary ethics, along with a few contemporary criticisms. I will then present Thomas Henry Huxley’s account of the relationship between ethics and the struggle for existence. The biological basis of Huxley’s position was attacked in different ways by Dewey and by the anarchist Pyotr Alekseyevich Kropotkin, whose views influenced Addams (Eddy 2010). In the third part, I will analyze Dewey’s “evolutionary method” in ethics, a dynamic functionalist approach. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, I will discuss Addams’ account of social ethics as an evolved response to the new environment of the industrial city. The evolutionary ethics of Dewey and Addams, developed around 1900, may seem a historical curiosity. Nevertheless, several philosophers inspired by Dewey—in particular Elizabeth Anderson and Philip Kitcher—have recently argued that a similar approach to ethics is our best option today.

### **Spencer’s Evolutionary Ethics**

Herbert Spencer introduced the idea of organism-environment interaction to the English-speaking world and popularized the term ‘environment’ (Pearce 2010a, 2014b). His ethics was

built on the idea of a correspondence between organism and environment. As he reminded readers in *Data of Ethics* (1879), he had defined life in *Principles of Biology* as “the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations” (Spencer 1864, 80; quoted in Spencer 1879, 19). For Spencer, the success and complexity of this organism-environment correspondence indicates a species’ position on the evolutionary scale:

The life of the organism will be short or long, low or high, according to the extent to which changes in the environment are met by corresponding changes in the organism. Allowing a margin for perturbations, the life will continue only while the correspondence continues; the completeness of the life will be proportionate to the completeness of the correspondence; and the life will be perfect only when the correspondence is perfect. (Spencer 1864, 82; also in Spencer 1855, 376)

More evolved species, said Spencer, are able to meet a wider and more complicated set of environmental challenges.

At the beginning of *Data of Ethics*, Spencer applied this lesson to conduct, or “the adjustment of acts to ends” (Spencer 1879, 5). On Spencer’s view, conduct evolves as purposive acts lead to an improved correspondence with the environment. Spencer claimed that the highest form of conduct is not strictly individualistic, since the life of the species matters to evolution as well. Echoing the libertarian principle of his earlier work *Social Statics*, he praised “adjustments such that each creature may make them without preventing them from being made by other creatures” (Spencer 1879, 18; cf. Spencer 1851, 103). Even this was not the limit: “a still higher phase” in the evolution of conduct, for Spencer, is “mutual help in the achievement of ends . . . either indirectly by industrial co-operation, or directly by volunteered aid.” This “mutual aid,” said Spencer, “increases the totality of the adjustments made, and serves to render the lives of all more complete” (Spencer 1879, 19-20). Thus the highest species—humanity chief among them—have complicated cooperative societies.

But what does this evolutionary history have to do with ethics as traditionally conceived? On Dewey's later reading, Spencer's ethics offered three advances. First, it argued "that certain acts *must* be beneficial because furthering evolution, and others painful because retarding it," thus providing a "fixed objective standard" for happiness. Second, it reconciled intuitionism and empiricism by showing that "certain moral ideas now innate or intuitive" are the result of human evolutionary history. Third, it reconciled egoism and altruism by demonstrating that evolution tends toward their coincidence:

The being which survives must be the being which has properly adapted himself to his environment, which is largely social, and there is assurance that the conduct will be adapted to the environment just in the degree in which pleasure is taken in acts which concern the welfare of others. (Dewey 1891, 67-71)

In other words, evolution has built us as so as to take pleasure in unselfish acts.

Of course, Spencer was aware that people often behave in selfish and antisocial ways. But this will not be the case, he insisted, for "the completely adapted man in the completely evolved society." This "ideal social being" is one whose "spontaneous activities are congruous with the conditions imposed by the social environment formed by other such beings" (Spencer 1879, 275). As he put it several decades earlier in *Social Statics*, "the ultimate man should be one who can obtain perfect happiness without deducting from the happiness of others" (Spencer 1851, 413). The only reason we have not reached this point is that "the new conditions to which adaptation has been taking place have themselves grown up but slowly. Only when a revolution in circumstances is at once both marked and permanent, does a decisive alteration of character follow" (Spencer 1851, 414; on the notion of circumstances, see Pearce 2010a; Pearce 2010b). Right and wrong today, what Spencer called "relative ethics," is thus to be judged from the point of view of "absolute ethics"—that is, the "ideal code of conduct" that will guide the behavior of the fully evolved man in his "ideal social state" (Spencer 1879, 275, 280).

Spencer's contemporaries were unconvinced. Josiah Royce asked the obvious question:

Why is this coming state the highest? Does any one say: *Because it will come at the end of the physical process of evolution?* Nay then, if every more advanced state is to be more acceptable, by such reasoning the sprouting potato or the incubating egg will always be more acceptable than the fresh potato or the fresh egg. *Highest, as last, or as most complex, or even as most permanent, cannot be in meaning identical with the morally highest that we want defined for us.* (Royce 1885, 75-76)

In other words, even if we accept that evolution is tending toward the state described by Spencer, why should the actions of people in that state be our benchmark for moral valuation?

Samuel Alexander, for his part, criticized Spencer's idea of "good conduct as an adaptation or adjustment to environment" (Alexander 1889, 267). Spencer's notion of adaptation was too static, according to Alexander:

Morality is rightly described as an adaptation of man to his social environment. But in using this conception we have to guard against the danger of slipping in an assumption that the environment is itself something fixed and permanent, according to which, as he gradually discovers its character, he must arrange his conduct—which is, to use a homely expression, the cloth according to which he must cut his coat. (Alexander 1889, 271)

On Alexander's more dynamic view, "the act of adaptation can only be understood as a joint action of the individual and his environment, in which both sides vary together"; moral progress occurs because "the act of adjustment implied in good conduct itself alters the sentiments of the agent, and creates new needs which demand a new satisfaction" (Alexander 1889, 271, 277). Spencer's "ideal social state" was not specifiable, according to Alexander, because these "new sentiments and new ideals of character . . . cannot be forecast in detail" (Alexander 1889, 268-269). Thus although Spencer's evolutionary ethics was acknowledged as pioneering, it was also widely criticized—and Dewey was familiar with these criticisms (see Dewey 1891, 77-78).

## **Ethics and the Struggle for Existence**

Spencer and Thomas Henry Huxley were friends and members of the same dining club, but they disagreed about the implications of evolution for politics and society. Spencer had infamously argued in *Social Statics* that state education and other positive government interventions undermined natural adaptive processes:

Let us never forget that the law is—adaptation to circumstances, be what they may. And if, rather than allow men to come in contact with the real circumstances of their position, we place them in artificial—in false circumstances, they will adapt themselves to these instead; and will, in the end, have to undergo the miseries of a re-adaptation to the real ones. (Spencer 1851, 353-354)

For Spencer, the struggle for existence is a good thing: it pushes us toward the ideal social state mentioned above.

Spencer and Huxley debated the issue of government regulation in the early 1870s, with Huxley accusing Spencer of misconstruing the analogy between organisms and societies (Huxley 1871; Spencer 1871). Huxley returned to the topic in 1888, arguing that the struggle for existence was a central feature of primitive rather than civilized society (for political context, see Helfand 1977, 161-170). In primitive times, said Huxley, “life was a continual free fight, and beyond the limited and temporary relations of the family, the Hobbesian war of each against all was the normal state.” “The ethical man,” in contrast, “devotes his best energies to the object of setting limits to the struggle.” On Huxley’s view, “the chief end of social organization” is to mitigate or abolish the struggle for existence (Huxley 1888, 165-166). He pointed out, however, that the misery of the urban poor was leading people to question the success of that organization and even the end itself:

The animal man, finding that the ethical man has landed him in such a slough, resumes his ancient sovereignty, and preaches anarchy; which is, substantially, a proposal to reduce the social cosmos to chaos, and begin the brute struggle for existence once again. (Huxley 1888, 171)

In their earlier debate, Spencer had insisted he was no anarchist; after all, he was in favor of negative governmental regulation (Spencer 1871, 638). But from Huxley's point of view, opposition to institutions such as state education was a turning away from civilization—and although Spencer and Huxley were not all that far apart when it came to biology and ethics, this essay effectively ended their friendship (Richards 1987, 314-316).

Huxley's comment about preaching anarchy was likely also a veiled reference to the Russian anarchist Pyotr Alekseyevich Kropotkin, then living in London, who a year earlier in the same journal had claimed that “anarchy proves to be in accordance with the conclusions arrived at by the philosophy of evolution” (Kropotkin 1887, 243). Kropotkin had also pointed out that despite its author's denials, Spencer's evolutionary philosophy tended toward anarchism, which Kropotkin glossed as “the no-government system of socialism” (Kropotkin 1887, 238, 244).

After reading Huxley's essay, Kropotkin went on the offensive, attempting to undermine the biological basis of Huxley's position in a series of papers much discussed by historians (Kinna 1992; Girón 2003; Borrello 2004, 16-22; Harman 2010, 9-37; Eddy 2010; Hale 2014, 206-251). Huxley had claimed that “from the point of view of the moralist the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiator's show,” and that “primitive men” had been engaged in a “war of each against all” (Huxley 1888, 163, 165; quoted in Kropotkin 1890, 339). Recall that on Spencer's view, “mutual aid” was the highest phase of the evolution of conduct (Spencer 1879, 20). Kropotkin went further, claiming that mutual aid was important not just among civilized peoples but across the animal kingdom:

Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle. Of course it would be extremely difficult to estimate, however roughly, the relative numerical importance of both these series of facts. But if we resort to an indirect test, and ask Nature ‘Who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another?’ we at once see that those animals which



acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. (Kropotkin 1890, 339-340)

In the most obvious example, “the ants and termites have renounced the ‘Hobbesian war,’ and they are the better for it” (Kropotkin 1890, 344). Kropotkin found similar lessons in human evolutionary history. Huxley had claimed, as we saw above, that the family was the only respite for “primitive men” from the “Hobbesian war” (Huxley 1888, 165); Kropotkin countered that “societies, bands, or tribes—not families—were . . . the primitive form of organization of mankind and its earliest ancestors” (Kropotkin 1891, 540). Marshaling evidence from both biology and ethnology, Kropotkin denied Huxley’s claim that an all-consuming struggle for existence characterized pre-civilized life. On Kropotkin’s reading of the natural world and human history, cooperation was just as important if not more important than competition (for the broader Russian context of this claim, see Todes 1989).

Several years before Kropotkin’s “mutual aid” series, Huxley had declined to engage him in the same journal on another issue: “I have neither brains nor nerves, and the very thought of controversy puts me in a blue funk!” (Huxley to James Knowles, 1 June 1888, in Huxley 1900, 2:212). Huxley did not debate Kropotkin even after the Russian’s explicit attack, but he did return to the topic a few years before his death. He argued in a famous lecture on “Evolution and Ethics” that

the practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. (Huxley 1893, 33)

That is, ethics is directly opposed to the cosmic evolutionary process.

But how could society and ethics be truly independent of evolution, as Huxley seemed to imply? In a “Prolegomena” to his lecture, published a year later, Huxley tried to clarify his position with an extended analogy. Huxley asked his readers to imagine the weeds and gorse of the downs, which “by surviving, have proved that they are the fittest to survive.” This is the “state of nature,” the result of the cosmic process. But if someone walls off an area of the downs and plants a garden, its existence depends on human intervention:

That the “state of Art,” thus created in the state of nature by man, is sustained by and dependent on him, would at once become apparent, if the watchful supervision of the gardener were withdrawn, and the antagonistic influences of the general cosmic process were no longer sedulously warded off, or counteracted. (Huxley 1894, 9-10)

Just as in this case the “horticultural process” is antithetic to the cosmic process, so in society the “ethical process” combats the cosmic process (Huxley 1894, 13; cf. Huxley 1893, 34). Huxley even argued that in “the most highly civilized societies,” where “the ethical process has advanced so far as to secure every member of the society in the possession of the means of existence, the struggle for existence, as between man and man, . . . is, *ipso facto*, at an end” (Huxley 1894, 35-36).

When Kropotkin claimed that mutual aid played a key role not only in modern societies but throughout the biological world, he was attempting to undermine Huxley and Spencer’s restriction of this feature to “civilized societies” or the “higher phase” of ethics: where the two English thinkers saw a break, Kropotkin saw continuity. Dewey published a response to Huxley in 1898 that made a different argument in favor of continuity. He summarized Huxley’s view as follows: “The *rule* of the cosmic process is struggle and strife. The rule of the ethical process is sympathy and co-operation. . . . The two processes are not only incompatible but even opposed to each other” (Dewey 1898, 323). But whereas Kropotkin had undermined Huxley by arguing

that cooperation was also a major factor in the cosmic process, Dewey focused instead on the “man against nature” image that Huxley seemed to be promoting.

Exploring the garden analogy further, Dewey suggested that we should not see the garden as somehow opposed to nature:

We do not have here in reality a conflict of man as man with his entire natural environment. We have rather the modification by man of one part of the environment with reference to another part. Man does not set himself against the state of nature. He utilises one part of this state in order to control another part. (Dewey 1898, 325)

Social progress, said Dewey, does not involve “building up an artificial world within the cosmos” (Huxley 1893, 35); it “consists essentially in making over a part of the environment by relating it more intimately to the environment as a whole; not, once more, in man setting himself against that environment” (Dewey 1898, 326). Thus we should not think of the struggle for existence as having ended—it has merely changed as the environment has changed. As social and ethical beings, we live in an environment that is largely our own creation, and thus Dewey could use Huxley’s own words against him:

The conditions with respect to which the term ‘fit’ must *now* be used include the existing social structure with all the habits, demands, and ideals which are found in it. If so, we have reason to conclude that the “fittest with respect to the whole of the conditions” is the best; that, indeed, the only standard we have of the best is the discovery of that which maintains these conditions in their integrity. The unfit is practically the anti-social. (Dewey 1898, 326; internal quotation from Huxley 1893, 33)

According to Dewey, then, whether in modern society or anywhere else in the biological world, fitness is relative to the environment (cf. Huxley 1893, 32). Instead of interpreting the term ‘fit’ “with reference to an environment which long ago ceased to be,” we need to acknowledge that “the environment is now distinctly a social one, and the content of the term ‘fit’ has to be made

with reference to social adaptation” (Dewey 1898, 328; for more on the Dewey-Huxley debate, see Teehan 2002).

Both Kropotkin and Dewey, therefore, fought against any radical separation between earlier and later phases of human evolution. Kropotkin used empirical data in an attempt to show that cooperation has always featured in the success of humans and other animals: we should not see cooperation as having replaced competition with the advent of ethics. Dewey argued that the struggle for existence—the cosmic evolutionary process—continually changes its form as organisms interact with and modify their environment: we should not see ethics as having stopped evolution, or society as separate from nature.

### **Dewey’s Evolutionary Method**

Dewey was profoundly influenced by Spencer’s account of the organism-environment relationship, even though he ended up with a quite different picture (James 1904, 2; Godfrey-Smith 1996, 66-130; Pearce 2014b, 23-27). He also followed Spencer in thinking of good conduct as adaptation to environment: the moral situation according to Dewey is often one where “an act which was once adapted to given conditions must now be adapted to other conditions. The effort, the struggle, is a name for the necessity of this re-adaptation” (Dewey 1898, 333). But Dewey’s ‘readaptation’ and ‘readjustment’ were a deliberate counter to Spencer’s ‘adaptation’ and ‘adjustment’—like Alexander, Dewey had a more dynamic and dialectical vision of the organism-environment relation (Pearce 2014a; see also Sullivan 2001, 12-40).

Hence despite the criticism detailed above, Dewey thought that Huxley was inspired by a great truth about morality: it involves conflict and tension. Dewey sided with Huxley against

Spencer on this point, echoing Royce's ridicule of Spencer's ideal social state as one in which there is "nothing but a tedious cooing of bliss from everybody" (Royce 1885, 74):

There are many signs that Mr. Huxley had Mr. Spencer in mind in many of his contentions; that what he is really aiming at is the supposition on the part of Mr. Spencer that the goal of evolution is a complete state of final adaptation in which all is peace and bliss and in which the pains of effort and of reconstruction are known no more. (Dewey 1898, 334)

For Dewey, however, the conflict was not between the ethical process and the cosmic process, as Huxley would have it, but instead between past and present:

This, I take it, is the truth, and the whole truth, contained in Mr. Huxley's opposition of the moral and the natural order. The tension is between an organ adjusted to a past state and the functioning required by present conditions. And this tension demands reconstruction. (Dewey 1898, 333)

This idea of reconstruction—and the related notions of readaptation and readjustment—was at the heart of Dewey's "evolutionary method" in ethics.

Dewey's most thorough review of this method was his two-part article "The Evolutionary Method as Applied to Morality" (1902). He began the essay with a long detour into the philosophy of science, linking the experimental method in science and the evolutionary method in ethics. Experiments, said Dewey, are designed to isolate "the exact conditions, and the only conditions, which are involved in [a phenomenon's] coming into being," and are thus applications of a genetic method. Knowledge of these conditions fulfills the promise of science—"intellectual and practical control" (Dewey 1902, 108-109). That is, if we know how to generate a given phenomenon, we can intervene to create or maintain it. But what of the distinction between the natural and historical sciences, with which Dewey would have been familiar? (Tufts 1895) The conditions that make possible the formation of water from its constituents seem quite different from the conditions that led Julius Caesar to cross the Rubicon. Dewey insisted, however, that this difference has more to do with our interests than with reality.

After all, each molecule of water that we experimentally generate is strictly speaking unique. It is just that “we do not care scientifically for the historical genesis of this portion of water: while we care greatly for the insight secured through the particular case into the process of making any and every portion of water.” In contrast, at least in some of our moods, we care less about the causes of civil war in general than we do about Caesar’s particular case: “There is a peculiar flavor of human meaning and accomplishment about him which has no substitute or equivalent” (Dewey 1902, 111). Thus according to Dewey, the experimental method and the evolutionary/historical method are both versions of the genetic method.

How can this method be used in ethics? For Dewey,

history, as viewed from the evolutionary standpoint, . . . is a process that reveals to us the conditions under which moral practices and ideas have originated. This enables us to place, to relate them. In seeing where they came from, in what situations they arose, we see their significance. (Dewey 1902, 113)

Dewey thought, for example, that the early stages of the history of ethics “provide us with a simplification which is the counterpart of isolation in physical experiment” (Dewey 1902, 124). The evolutionary method assumes, said Dewey, “that norms and ideals, as well as unreflective customs, arose out of certain situations, in response to the demands of those situations” (Dewey 1902, 356). For example, in an earlier essay Dewey had claimed that the opposing schools of Hellenistic philosophy were a response to social changes, nicely illustrating the evolutionary approach:

With the growth of the Macedonian and Roman supremacies, the welfare and customs of the local community came to mean less and less to the individual. He was thrown back upon himself for moral strength and consolation. . . . Both [the Stoic and Epicurean schools] are concerned with the question of how the individual, in an environment which is becoming more and more indifferent to him, can realize satisfaction. (Dewey 1894, 881-882)

In short, social norms and ethical theories are responses to the environment.

This historical analysis was of more than merely antiquarian interest: “We are still engaged in forming norms, in setting up ends, in conceiving obligations. If moral science has any constructive value, it must provide standpoints and working instrumentalities for the more adequate performance of these tasks” (Dewey 1902, 356). If we understood the function and adequacy of historical norms and theories, wrote Dewey, this could help us “guide and control the formation of our further moral judgments”; “whatever . . . can be learned from a study of the past, is at once available in the analysis of the present” (Dewey 1902, 357, 370). In a discussion of moral intuitions, for example, Dewey argued that

if we can find that the intuition is a legitimate response to enduring and deep-seated conditions, we have some reason to attribute worth to it. If we find that historically the belief has played a part in maintaining the integrity of social life, and in bringing new values to it, our belief in its worth is additionally guaranteed. But if we cannot find such historic origin and functioning, the intuition remains a mere state of consciousness, a hallucination, an illusion, which is not made more worthy by simply multiplying the number of people who have participated in it. (Dewey 1902, 358)

That is, moral intuitions are empty unless they can be explained as successful responses to concrete environmental problems, either today or in the past.

Dewey also used his evolutionary method to understand moral progress:

It is the lack of adequate functioning in the given adjustments that supplies the conditions which call out a different mode of action; and it is in so far as this is new and different that it gets its standing by transforming or reconstructing the previously existing elements.

Moral progress occurs when we demand “that a way of conceiving or interpreting the situation cease to be *mere* idea, and become a practical construction” (Dewey 1902, 368). It is only through “failure from the standpoint of adjustment,” and subsequent readjustment, “that history, change in quality or values, is made” (Dewey 1902, 367). The winners in this process, according

to Dewey, are those values that actually help us to resolve our current social problems; the losers are “surds, mere survivals, emotional reactions” (Dewey 1902, 370).

Dewey’s picture might be styled *dynamic functionalism*. He thought that moral norms had specific functions at their origin, and that sometimes those functions persisted. But just as Darwin took the traditional notion of adaptation in biology and made it dynamic, Dewey argued that the function of moral norms is rarely static: not only do we inevitably discover that they do not meet all of our needs, those needs themselves change as we build new and more complicated social institutions and environments. Dewey often used technological metaphors: “The logic of the moral idea is like the logic of an invention, say a telephone” (Dewey 1902, 366). As Dewey wrote in an earlier work, “the invention of the telephone does not simply satisfy an old want—it creates new. It brings about the possibility of closer social relations, extends the distribution of intelligence, facilitates commerce” (Dewey 1891, 208). The new device solves certain problems and meets certain needs, but it also changes the environment and thus creates new problems and new needs. Adjustment leads to readjustment, as technology and environment “vary together,” in Alexander’s phrase.

Specific ethical decisions do make use of moral theories, said Dewey, but only as tools for addressing a particular concrete problem (or type of problem): “theory is used, not as a set of fixed rules to lay down certain things to be done, but as a tool of analysis to help determine what the nature of the special case is” (Dewey 1892, 595). Thus in another of Dewey’s earlier works, he claimed that in deciding what to do in a difficult new ethical case we should draw on moral theory in the same way that an engineer building a tricky new sort of tunnel employs the rules of mechanics: these rules and theories do not dictate our action; they inform it, along with all the specific facts of the case, our individual and social goals, and so on (Dewey 1892, 594-595). In



Dewey's dynamic functionalism, then, we can think of morality as an evolving technology, with innovations that stand or fall on the basis of how well they help us adapt to the ever-changing social environment.

### **Addams' Social Ethics**

Hull House, the settlement house that Jane Addams co-founded in a poor immigrant neighborhood of Chicago in 1889, was a response to a new social environment—"an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city" (Addams 1893, 22). The task of the settlement residents was to arouse "the social energies which too largely lie dormant in every neighborhood given over to industrialism," and thus she stressed "its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation, its readiness to change its methods as its environment may demand" (Addams 1893, 23). Like Dewey, Addams was influenced by evolutionary ideas. In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, which Marilyn Fischer (2013) has described as "an evolutionary idealist text," Addams used the Spencerian language of adaptation and adjustment, although (like Dewey's) her picture was more dynamic: "to attain individual morality in an age demanding social morality, to pride one's self on the results of personal effort when the time demands social adjustment, is utterly to fail to apprehend the situation" (Addams 1902, 2-3). As this quotation indicates, Addams argued that a shift from individual ethics to social ethics was needed as a response to the new environment of the modern industrial city.

In a chapter on the relationship between parents and daughters, for instance, Addams wrote of the tension between familial and social obligations. She praised the historical institution

of the family, but declared that in “periods of reconstruction” we must “enlarge the function and carry forward the ideal of a long-established institution.” More specifically, she argued that

the family in its entirety must be carried out into the larger life. Its various members together must recognize and acknowledge the validity of the social obligation. When this does not occur we have a most flagrant example of the ill-adjustment and misery arising when an ethical code is applied too rigorously and too conscientiously to conditions which are no longer the same as when the code was instituted, and for which it was never designed. (Addams 1902, 78-79)

Since more and more daughters were receiving a full education, said Addams, it no longer made sense to deny them their role as citizens of the world. What was needed, according to Addams, was “an adaptation of our code of family ethics to modern conditions” (Addams 1902, 82-84).

In another chapter, echoing a letter quoted by Kropotkin in his “mutual aid” series, Addams noted that “a very little familiarity with the poor districts of any city is sufficient to show how primitive and genuine are the neighborly relations” (Addams 1902, 19; Eddy 2010, 31; cf. Kropotkin 1896, 928). In the neighborhood where she worked, poorer residents were often outraged by the calculating approach of charities. Charity methods, said Addams, were thus condemned as being too scientific, but for her they were “not scientific enough.” Before they “had become evolutionary and scientific,” botany and geology had consisted of dry classification; charity work, according to Addams, was in a parallel “pseudo-scientific” stage, one that said “Don’t give” unless certain boxes were checked. The solution was “to apply this evolutionary principle to human affairs,” that is, to understand the new social conditions of urban poverty and jointly reconstruct both our ideals and those conditions:

The young woman who has succeeded in expressing her social compunction through charitable effort finds that the wider social activity, and the contact with the larger experience, not only increases her sense of social obligation but at the same time recasts her social ideals. (Addams 1902, 64-69)

Our virtues, said Addams, needed to be socialized.

In her next book, *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Addams argued more explicitly for “the ideals of genuine evolutionary democracy” (Addams 1907, 60). She was in favor of more “local self-government,” and like Dewey, saw political institutions as adaptive techniques:

As the machinery, groaning under the pressure of new social demands put upon it, has broken down . . . , we have mended it by giving more power to administrative officers, because we still distrusted the will of the people. We are willing to cut off the dislocated part or to tighten the gearing, but are afraid to substitute a machine of newer invention and greater capacity. (Addams 1907, 34-35)

She also declared that the demand by the well-off for protection from “the many unsuccessful among us” betrayed ignorance of “the historic method”—it was “not to have read the first lesson of self-government in light of evolutionary science.” Politics, she said, needed to adapt “to new and strenuous conditions” (Addams 1907, 63). Drawing from her experience at Hull House, for example, she attacked the exclusion of immigrant communities from local government. Public health problems such as tuberculosis could not be solved, Addams wrote, without “the intelligent cooperation of the immigrants themselves.” The immigrant, she continued, represents the “type which is making the most genuine contribution to the present growth in governmental functions, with its constant demand for increasing adaptations” (Addams 1907, 74-75). Thus while Dewey was teaching Addams’s work and inserting the evolutionary method into ethics textbooks, Addams was putting the method into practice in Chicago (Dewey 2010; Dewey and Tufts 1908, 321-322).

## **Conclusion**

In Spencer’s evolutionary ethics, good conduct was successful adjustment to the environment. Huxley attempted to argue that ethics was opposed to the evolutionary process, but Kropotkin and Dewey replied that he was working with an overly simplistic notion of

evolution—one that neglected the widespread importance of cooperation and ignored “the evolution of environments” (Dewey 1898, 339). Dewey’s dynamic functionalism saw ethics as an adaptive technology, modifying the environment even as it changed in response to it. Addams put a similar view to work in her social activism, arguing that ethics and politics had to change in response to the new conditions of industrial life.

Although an update and defense of Dewey and Addams’s views would require a chapter of its own, it is worth noting that several philosophers have recently adopted similar theories. Elizabeth Anderson, for many years, has argued in favor of a pragmatist approach to ethical inquiry in which our morals are continually modified in light of “our experiences in living out the lives our ethical principles prescribe for us” (Anderson 1998, 16). In a more explicitly evolutionary vein, Philip Kitcher’s book *The Ethical Project* (2011) pursues a neo-Deweyan functionalist approach to morality. Both Anderson and Kitcher emphasize moral progress and “experiments in living” (Anderson 1991; Kitcher 2011, 104-137, 209-252; Anderson 2014b). Thus the experimental evolutionary approach of Addams and Dewey is still a live option today.

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