

BETH L. EDDY

Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics

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This short book is a history of what might be called the Chicago school of pragmatist evolutionary ethics. It places John Dewey and Jane Addams in their late-nineteenth-century intellectual context, emphasizing in particular how they drew on the work of Herbert Spencer, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Pyotr Alekseyevich Kropotkin. Eddy suggests in her introduction that because today's "social climate" is similar in many respects to that of the United States circa 1900, pragmatism may offer "significant insights for our situation now" (p. xi). Her overall thesis is that although the ethical approach of Dewey and Addams was sometimes marred by a commitment to "teleological progress" (p. 38), at its best it defended a "melioristic hope" (p. 119): we try to make the world better, but there are no guarantees. Although the book provides some helpful context for the ethical work of the Chicago pragmatists, Eddy does not convincingly show that Addams and Dewey ever saw progress as "teleological," in the sense of inevitable movement toward a specific end.

After a first chapter describing the rise of evolutionary thinking and the social and religious reaction to it, Eddy's second chapter is an overview of Huxley's account of evolution and ethics. For Huxley, "the natural world is characterized by suffering," and ethics "is a matter of humans trying to minimize that suffering by setting limits upon their instinctual actions or by altering the human environment" (p. 22).

This emphasis on intervention and limitation as central to ethics set him against Spencer and *laissez-faire*: in Huxley's words, "social progress means a checking of the cosmic process" (p. 25). Huxley compared ethics to the cultivation of a garden, in which the gardener selects preferred varieties and suppresses natural struggle. The difference is that in the case of ethics, we lack the "wisdom to direct the gardening" (p. 27). Thus Huxley was implicitly critical of early eugenicists such as Francis Galton.

In Chapter 3, Eddy begins by analyzing an 1898 essay by Dewey in which he criticized Huxley's account. "Dewey," she writes, "viewed Huxley's garden metaphor as one more instance of him seeming to set up humanity as an organism fundamentally different from the rest of the natural world" (p. 34). Dewey insisted that humanity has been an "organ of the cosmic process in effecting its *own* progress" (p. 37). Eddy also claims to identify a shift in Dewey's thinking in the late 1890s away from Hegelian "absolute idealistic progress" and toward a more Darwinian picture (p. 37). However, the key 1897 quotation supporting the former view refers only to *effort* as the "critical point of progress in action, arising whenever old habits are in process of reconstruction, or of adaptation to new conditions" (p. 37), and does not postulate any overarching *telos*; thus it does not provide evidence that Dewey endorsed "absolute" progress at that earlier stage.

Later in the same chapter, Eddy offers several criticisms of Dewey's commitment to progress. First, she attacks Dewey for assuming, in "The Evolutionary Method as Applied to Morality" (1902), that "the origin of a historically continuous phenomenon provides a simplified model for analysis" (p. 42). Eddy reads this as strong progressivism, but it could also be read another way: the history of ethical practices is not a story of inevitable global progress but rather of particular conditions prompting particular social responses. The latter reading is supported by Dewey's claim, not cited by Eddy, that "it is the lack of adequate functioning in the given adjustments that supplies the conditions which call out a different mode of action."¹ Second, jumping forward to the 1920s and exploring a debate between Dewey and George Santayana, Eddy argues that Dewey tended to assume that change would be progressive. Although she claims that Santayana's main critique was that Dewey "sneaks teleology in through the back door" (p. 45), Santayana was actually attacking Dewey's notion of nature. As Eddy writes, Santayana's nature is "an impersonal natural universe" whereas Dewey's is "not a world but a story" (p. 46). None of her quotations demonstrate that the two philosophers disagreed about progress as such, even if Santayana did see Dewey as too Hegelian and humanistic: after all, Santayana's early masterwork *The Life of Reason* was subtitled "the phases of human progress." (Eddy focuses on the 1920s debate, and does not mention Dewey's long engagement with Santayana's work.)² But whether or not Santayana would have endorsed it, Eddy's point is a good one. Dewey's faith in progress (inevitable or not) seems naive from our present perspective, and scholars of his work

need to ask themselves some tough questions: “In a global plutocracy, can social engineering even make a dent on moral progress? Progress for whom? What counts as progress?” (p. 54).

Chapter 4 is a reconstruction of what a conversation about evolutionary ethics between Addams and the Russian anarchist Kropotkin might have been like—and it may actually have happened, since Addams hosted Kropotkin at Hull House in 1901 (p. 59). Eddy’s thesis in the chapter is that although Addams and Kropotkin were very critical of Spencer’s individualism, they still assumed a “unilineal account of history” very much like Spencer’s (p. 60). Kropotkin famously argued—against Huxley among others—that cooperation and mutual aid were more important in evolution than competition and violent struggle (pp. 60-61). Addams, for her part, “saw the industrial city as a favorable environment for moral progress” and promoted a new social ethics as more appropriate to modern life (p. 71). Eddy is right that Spencer influenced both Kropotkin and Addams. Kropotkin probably even picked up the phrase “mutual aid” from the English philosopher, for whom it described the highest phase in the evolution of conduct.³ But the thesis of Eddy’s chapter (setting Kropotkin to one side) depends on showing that Addams embraced something like Spencerian unilineal progress, and the cited evidence does not show this. For example, Addams’s “lateral progress”—not climbing a mountain by oneself but reaching out to encourage the whole village to move a few feet higher—is incremental but not obviously inevitable (pp. 74-75).

The next chapter, on the role of evolution in the ethics of Dewey and Addams, is the best in the book. The idea at the center of their approach, says Eddy, was that “both social organisms and their environment [are] dynamically changing over time, causing a need for constant readjustment and adaptation in ethics” (p. 84). She identifies both thinkers as “Hegelian idealists: Dewey as the professional philosopher and Addams *de facto* through active social practice” (p. 86). The main difference between them was that Dewey thought struggle was necessary to moral progress whereas Addams “emphasized cooperative endeavors” (p. 87).

In the last part of the chapter, Eddy argues that the rise of the mutation theory in evolutionary biology after 1900 contributed to a move in pragmatism “away from a Hegelian model of progressive change toward a nonteleological model of less predictable change over time” (p. 97). There are two problems with this story. First, the texts do not support any shift in Dewey’s thinking on this point. In “Evolution and Ethics” (1898), Dewey was already mocking Spencer’s view 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.”⁴ A decade later he was certainly more explicit about abandoning the idea “of a fixed and static moral end,” but Eddy does not demonstrate that he had ever embraced this idea.⁵ Second, there is no evidence that either Dewey or Addams was familiar with the work of Hugo de Vries, the main

advocate of mutationism in the early 1900s and Eddy's key figure on the biology side of the shift. De Vries is not mentioned anywhere in Dewey's corpus, and Dewey did not even use the term 'mutation' until 1920 (and Dewey did sometimes mention biologists by name—for instance August Weismann in several 1890s texts).⁶

In her final chapter, Eddy examines the role of contingency in human history, comparing those who (like Dewey) emphasize human control and those who (like Santayana) stress the role of impersonal chance. She argues that the former provide a kind of "metaphysical comfort" whereas the latter produce "moral anxiety" (p. 108). She ends up arguing "for melioristic hope over spiritual comfort and security" (p. 119), and suggests—following evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould—that contingency is what gives us "a license to participate in history" (p. 121).

Eddy's book is worth a read: especially useful are her skepticism about the optimistic outlook of Dewey and Addams and her focus on the notions of organism, environment, and adaptation. But as detailed above, many of her claims go beyond the evidence presented, especially in treating the pragmatists as more committed to some final goal of ethics than they really were. She also sometimes fails to cite earlier scholarship—the work of David Marcell, most importantly.⁷ Despite these flaws, by highlighting the roles of Spencer, Huxley, and others, Eddy provides some much-needed context for pragmatist evolutionary ethics.

Trevor Pearce
UNC Charlotte
tpearce6@uncc.edu

NOTES

1. John Dewey, "The Evolutionary Method as Applied to Morality," in *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 2 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 35.

2. Richard Marc Rubin, "Metaphysics as Morals: The Controversy between John Dewey and George Santayana" (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2000).

3. Herbert Spencer, *The Data of Ethics* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 19–20.

4. John Dewey, "Evolution and Ethics," in *The Early Works, 1882–1892*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 47.

5. John Dewey, "Intelligence and Morals," in *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 4 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 37.

6. Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," in *The Early Works, 1882–1892*, ed. Boydston, vol. 5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 99n.

7. David W. Marcell, *Progress and Pragmatism: James, Dewey, Beard, and the American Ideal of Progress* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974).