Beth L. Eddy


Review of _Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics_

In _Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics_ Beth L. Eddy does American Pragmatism a service by exploring many of the debates concerning evolutionary science prevalent during the formative years of classical Pragmatism. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, of course, is an important period for both evolutionary theory and for American Pragmatism. Many questions and ideas—especially in ethics—remained open. Eddy’s concise and readable book focuses mostly on the assimilation of evolutionary theory by John Dewey, Jane Addams, and Pragmatism’s interlocutor and ally, George Santayana. Eddy clearly lays out how evolutionary science, in its infancy, was part of the public and philosophic debate. Various interpretations of naturalized ethics as well as the meaning of evolution itself were up in the air. Moreover, Eddy argues that how these questions found resolution in the past matter for our contemporary thought. Eddy’s book will be of interest not only for those who have an interest in the history of Pragmatism but also for scholars interested in how ideas from the sciences are digested in the complex milieu of society.

Eddy presents a narrative that emphasizes the freshness of evolutionary thought in the decades around the turn of the twentieth-century. Readers of Pragmatism or of history would do themselves a disservice if they were to take the revolutionary findings of Darwin without some context. Darwin’s thought was not, as we might be tempted to imagine, simply a controversial idea that was either accepted or rejected. Rather, the meaning, context, and implication of Darwin’s thought—given a complex matrix of philosophical, moral, and religious commitments—led to many live options of belief. Furthermore, until the early twentieth-century, the absence of genetic theory left room for older evolutionary theories (such as Lamarckian evolution) to still hold some sway. In some ways, Eddy’s book reminds the reader that a scientific upheaval demands that philosophers work to theorize in the light of the problems created by new scientific understanding.

In the first chapter, “Setting the Stage: Darwin and Nineteenth-Century Evolutionary Ethics” Eddy outlines how Darwin’s theory was applied to ethics in the United States during a time of great social change and turmoil. Of course, the social Darwinists led by Spencer play an important role in this story. Spencer’s social Darwinism is a vital point of resistance to the progressivism of both
the Pragmatists and those concerned with progressive theological evolution. As demonstrated by the diverse interpretations of evolution, ethicists argued for both laissez faire and progressive ideals couched in the belief that our social lives develop on an evolutionary model. Of course, plenty of teleology and pre-conceived beliefs found their way into this thought. In this context, discourse took up the findings of natural science and attempted to argue (in many cases naively) that society and ethics should conform or are reducible to natural processes. In her next chapter, “T.H. Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics,” Eddy looks at the thought of “Darwin’s bulldog” as it related to ethics. In many ways, Huxley provides a counterpoint to both the Pragmatists and to the social Darwinists by holding that ethics was a separate human activity about which natural processes should not invade.

Moving onto the Pragmatists in chapter three, “John Dewey in Conversation with Huxley and Santayana on Evolution and Ethics,” Eddy discusses Dewey’s synthesis of evolution and ethics. For Dewey, “humans work against the forces of natural selection to lend help to others who are struggling” but do not violate natural laws by doing so (p. 35). She argues that, quoting Dewey, altruistic activity is “the modification by man of one part of the environment with reference to another part” (ibid). While biological life is a “precondition” of moral life, Dewey is careful to argue that there is no naïve reduction of ethics to biological life such a Spencer suggests. Further, the Pragmatists do not leave biology disconnected from ethics as Huxley does. Eddy then discusses Santayana’s criticism of Dewey’s thought. Santayana claims that Dewey retains a Hegelian metaphysics even in light of Dewey’s professed naturalism. Santayana worries that Dewey’s naturalism “foregrounds its own contingent norms, activities, politics, and ideals, neglecting dependence upon an impersonal natural universe” (p. 46). Thus, we see, a diversity of Pragmatist theories of evolutionary ethics, with Santayana arguing a view that involves much more chance than the view of the early Dewey. I will say more about this later.

One of the strengths of Eddy’s work, in this reviewer’s opinion, is the treatment of Jane Addams’s neglected role in the founding of Pragmatism. Addams’s role is especially important as it concerns the social philosophy forwarded by Pragmatism. In the fourth and fifth chapters, Eddy discusses how Addams was intimately involved—often as the originator of ideas—in the development of Pragmatist ethics. In chapter four, “Struggle or Mutual Aid: Jane Addams and the progressive encounter with Social Darwinism,” Eddy considers Addams with the Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin. Kropotkin, who spent time lecturing in Chicago as a guest of Addams, argues that evolution does not show a history of overall conflict but rather one of mutual aid. Humans are natural when we are cooperative. Addams, albeit in a different tone, agrees.