

A Centennial Retrospective of John Dewey's “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy”

Matthew J. Brown

November 22, 2009

1 Intro

This is a year of big anniversaries. As you already know, it is the bicentennial of the birth of Charles Darwin, and the sesquicentennial of the publication of his “Origin of the Species.” America’s great philosopher, John Dewey, was also born in the same year Darwin’s famous work was published. One hundred years ago John Dewey gave a public lecture commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Darwin’s great work, published later that year, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy.” Today, I will look back at that essay, attempt to clarify what lessons Dewey thought philosophy had to learn from Darwinism and why, assess how we’ve done so far and where we might go in the future. In this way, I hope to celebrate and learn from these two important figures.

The classical American pragmatists—Peirce, James, and John Dewey, are often said to have been strongly influenced by Darwin. They were among Darwinism’s early sympathizers, in times where anti-Darwinism was much more common. And they didn’t fall prey to the most pervasive misunderstandings of evolutionary theory. Of course, they did not necessarily have the understanding of Darwinism that we have today, so if I say things about Darwin or evolution that sound a bit strange to your ears, be patient; my focus today is not whether Dewey got Darwin exactly right, but what Dewey tried to teach us about the

impact of Darwinian *thinking* on philosophy.

2 The Essay

Dewey begins by pointing out the well-known fact that “[The] Origin of the Species’ marked an epoch in the development of the natural sciences.” But he wants to remind us of something we might overlook: that the very combination of the terms “origin” and “species” “embodied an intellectual revolt and introduced a new intellectual temper.” Indeed, Dewey discusses at length the use of the term “species” in classical science and philosophy. The reigning ideas in philosophy for over two millennia have “rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality.” Because Darwin’s work successfully treated “species,” previously a *paradigm* of what is fixed and perfect, as having origins, as changing, and as passing out of existence, “Origin of the Species,” Dewey tells us, is bound to *radically transform* logic and epistemology.

Significant to Dewey’s claims about the radical and transformative nature of Darwinism is his understanding of religious opposition to it. Today, as in the first fifty years after “Origin,” there is a great clamor from certain religious groups against evolutionary theory. We might be inclined to interpret these complaints as part of the clash between religious and scientific ways of thinking, but Dewey thinks the focus on religion is a red herring. While lending some fervor and emotion to the controversy, its sources are *scientific*. Religion, says Dewey, is an emotional consecration of *currently held* views. It follows that the religious controversy will remain with us until science and philosophy fully and adequately internalize the lessons of Darwinism to the point that new conceptions can make their way into the culture (doubtless a slow process).

Why was “Origin” a revolt against the traditional idea of species? Well,

the Greeks were impressed with living things. From a seed or an egg, rapid and *orderly* changes move in a definite direction. In order to account for this, they posited that each has a form, *eidos*, species directed toward the same *telos*, end. The concept of species was not confined to biology; it could be applied to any natural phenomena that exhibit order and organization through flux and change, from the seasons to the heavens to the whole of Nature itself. Further, the concept of species was not only crucial to the understanding of nature, but to the theory of knowledge and the logic of science. As Dewey put it, (5 MIN)

Change as change is mere flux and lapse; it insults intelligence.
Genuinely to know is to grasp a permanent end that realizes itself through changes, holding them thereby within the metes and bounds of fixed truth.

To know is to know the unchanging thing that underlies change — the species. So, we inherit from ancient science and philosophy the idea that *real* knowledge is knowledge of what is essentially unchanging, the underlying principles, essences, laws, or unobservable things that order and govern the flux we see. While we may laugh at scholastic versions of this logic (dormative virtues and the like), much the same logic persists today in various areas of inquiry.

Darwin did not initiate the revolt against these classical conceptions of nature and knowledge. Dewey shows how physical scientists like Galileo and Descartes shifted the focus from permanence to change. Darwin's achievement is significant, however, because he made the bridge for this logic from the inorganic world to biology, and thus to human life, mind, morals, and politics. Thus, says Dewey,

When [Darwin] said of species what Galileo had said of the earth,
[And yet it moves], he emancipated, once for all, genetic and ex-

perimental ideas as an organon of asking questions and looking for explanations.

Dewey thinks that we cannot yet be certain of the consequences of this revolution, and so he has to venture a certain kind of prophecy. Here are its main features.

I. Anti-teleology

First, Darwin undercuts the idea of teleology of nature. The classical notion of species carried with it the notion of a *purpose* underlying the changes of the organism, then extrapolated into nature as such. This argument from design survived the expulsion of teleology from the physical sciences because it seemed so strong in biology and human affairs. It took Darwin to destroy it. Dewey insists that Darwinism even undermines the form of religious naturalism which insists that natural selection might be the *mechanism* by which God's design is carried out. (Michael Ghiselin argued something similar last night.) Dewey concludes that,

[Darwin] holds that since variations are in useless as well as useful directions, and since the latter are sifted out *simply* by the stress of the conditions of struggle for existence, the design argument as applied to living beings is unjustifiable (my emphasis)

And, so, it is inapplicable to nature in general. While few philosophers would argue today that nature exhibits design or purpose, the idea survives in altered form. The assumption that the nature of the universe is rational, that the world has a pre-existing, intelligible structure, is no less pre-Darwinian superstition than the notion that the universe serves a divine purpose. Overcoming such superstition will require philosophers to overcome their discomfort with messy pictures of the world.

II. Anti-absolutism

Second, Dewey argues that Darwinism leads to anti-absolutism.

Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them... Interest shifts from the wholesale essence back of special changes to the question of how special changes serve and defeat concrete purposes.

Philosophy must ascend from the abstract to the concrete, must relinquish illusory universals for actual particulars. This has an impact on both the content of philosophy and its methods. Philosophers must take up new topics. Epistemology and logic must shift from being ideal theories of the nature of knowledge and inference to the study and improvement of the myriad, evolving ways of knowing and thinking. Moral philosophy must shift from providing abstract theories of the Good to providing actionable recommendations of how to live and how to decide what to do. Metaphysics must admit the messiness of chance (10 MIN) and complexity. Philosophy of language must eschew the attempt to explain in abstract terms the nature of language as such, and turn to the uses of language for communication, social coordination, and imagination.

Dewey provides a radical picture of the world, in which change, impermanence, and ontological heterogeneity figure prominently and the rough and tumble of ordinary experience is taken seriously. This isn't to give into irrationalism, for we can focus on existing conditions and the discovery of the processes of change in order to help intelligently guide our practices.

III. Experimentalism

What's more, philosophy won't just change its focus and ideas if it allows itself to be influenced by Darwinism; it will also change its very way of doing business.

Dewey suggests that we must forsake *wholesale* philosophy,

the classic type of logic [that] inevitably set philosophy upon proving that life *must* have certain qualities and values-no matter how experience presents the matter... [This] habit of derogating from present meanings and uses prevents our looking the facts of experience in the face; it prevents serious acknowledgment of the evils they present and serious concern with the goods they promise but do not as yet fulfil. (my emphasis)

We must replace this with a kind of philosophy that takes seriously the myriad forms of experience and proceeds *experimentally* to alter concepts and practices in hopes of ameliorating some of the difficulties that we encounter. Experimental philosophy will not amount to giving surveys about philosophical ideas (though such methods might prove useful from time to time); rather, it will be the attempt to *live* one's philosophy, to try it out and see how it works.

IV. Our Intellectual Responsibilities.

The Darwinian revolution has a further implication, says Dewey.

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.

In every area and every age, philosophers concern themselves with materials of life, with fundamental conceptions of broadest relevance. We can, and traditionally have, beat a retreat with such conceptions, rendering them impotent

by idealizing or transcending them, by making philosophy a narrow and technical specialization. The lure of scholasticism is ever-present. Dewey offers an alternative vision, in which philosophers involve themselves in pressing difficulties, unearthing their intellectual roots, discovering the origins and consequences of deeply held convictions, and providing direction in resolving or overcoming the conflicts such convictions cause in cultural life.

3 How are we doing?

Having attempted to draw out the major lessons of Dewey's landmark essay, I want to conclude with a brief and *opinionated* assessment of how we've done in the intervening century. I'm afraid to say, as far as *I* can see, philosophy as a whole appears not to have come very far in realizing the lessons of Darwin that Dewey expounded. I think there *are* glimmers of hope, and I would love to hear more glad news if anyone can point to it.

The most retrograde areas of the discipline appear to be the studies of language, knowledge, and existence. The characteristic concerns of philosophy of language include questions about how sentences represent facts in the world, the semantic nature of proper names, and the question of how to parse vague language. These treatments generally assume that the interesting or fundamental bits of language are those that *represent* the world, that we can talk about language as such, independently of particular languages, cultures, and contexts, and that the clarity and determinacy of formal logic is somehow the "normal" state of linguistic affairs. Philosophers of language rarely consider any detailed information about the human beings who use language and what they use it for. There is little hope of progress in solving the myriad problems of language and communication that trouble human lives. We can find hope, however, in the small but growing interest of philosophers in cognitive linguistics and related (15 MIN)

fields, and the even more nascent interest in the science of communication.

Epistemology is in no better position. We can consult no less an authority than the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which tells us that when considering the “justified true belief” account of knowledge, the condition that we can only know what is *true* “has not generated any significant degree of discussion. It is overwhelmingly clear that what is false cannot be known.” Absolutism, the need for the fixed and the final, are assumed from the outset. The entries on “Epistemology” and “Analysis of Knowledge” include no mention of fallibilism or any meaningful discussion of science. What we’d like to see, from the Darwinian point of view is rather theories of how we think and how we might think better; of how we learn and how we might improve learning through education.

Metaphysics is plagued by the worst kind of excesses. The criteria by which metaphysical hypotheses are judged include how well they fit to classical logic, their reasonableness or conceivability, whether they “make good sense,” that is, whether they fit our prejudices and give us intellectual comfort. What passes for “naturalism” is usually the misuse of science to render ordinary existence *less* meaningful, to render values, goods, and experience itself mysterious, instigated by those who find comfort in the desert landscapes of mathematics, formal logic, and the equations of physics. Anti-naturalism, on the other hand, is an “intellectual atavism,” as Dewey would say.

Ethics appears to have done little better. Today, ethical and political theory are still largely concerned with ultimate and absolute principles or systems in a perfect, crystalline unity. Attempts at more naturalistic or piecemeal theorizing is met with the charge that no specific value can have standing without relation to some ultimate criteria of value. There is reason to find hope in recent work by political philosophers like Amartya Sen, who argues not for an ideal conception of justice, but for a relational theory of justice that helps us compare alterations

to *actual* states of affairs; and Raymond Geuss, who hopes to replace ideal political theory with philosophically rigorous real politics.

The progress of philosophy of science has been the most hopeful. Philosophers now take seriously the details of actual scientific practice, contemporary and historical. In some cases, philosophers even successfully contribute to the progress of the sciences, by doing much-needed theoretical, conceptual, and critical work. The greatest danger here, however, is that philosophers will mistake their distinctive intellectual responsibilities for those of the scientists they study. It is the scientists' job to engage in the specialized task of solving problems that contribute to our knowledge of biology, physics, economics, etc. It is the philosophers' duty to examine, as Dewey says in a much later work, "The place of science in life, the place of its peculiar subject-matter in the wide scheme of materials we experience." To make the lessons of science available for new fields, for logic, for education, for morals and politics is a task that we cannot afford to leave undone.

(STOP here
unless time
allows.)

Progress will be slow and hard, because, as Dewey notes,

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.

The key will be to subdue the insistence that philosophy's responsibility is to some set of eternal questions:

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.