

Lecture Supplement to John Dewey's "The Influence of Darwinism On Philosophy [1909]"^[1]

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Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* was published in 1859, and the title was shortened to *On The Origin of Species* for the 1872 sixth edition. The essay had a transformative effect upon science, culture, and philosophy—one which is still working itself out more than a century and a half later!

In his "Dewey, Democracy: The Task Ahead of Us," Richard Bernstein maintains that:

it is the [Darwinistic] understanding of life and experience as **process**, as **change**, as **organic interaction** that Dewey emphasized. We are neither beings with a fixed human nature which unfolds in the course of time nor are we infinitely plastic and perfectible. **Human beings are continuous with the rest of nature** but have the capacity to develop those beliefs, dispositions, sensitivities and virtues that Dewey called "**reflective intelligence**." Experience itself involves undergoing, suffering, activity, and consummations.^[1]

In short, and as we shall see, an important characteristic of the American Pragmatists' orientation will be a general adherence to naturalism—in the sense in which this term is contrasted with "supernaturalism!" Thus H.S. Thayer notes that

...Darwinism...challenged the idea of a universe created for or directed to some overall final purpose.... The particular conditions and form of change, rather than universal "laws" of growth become the significant item. And particular changes, variations among and within species, were seen as functions of particular adaptive circumstances and purposes or "struggles." The variability of life in nature, the contingencies of successful and unsuccessful adaptations, appeared to render any philosophic attempt to formulate a complete system of natural phenomena or to legislate the goals of nature vain and pretentious. *Chance and design were both features of the world but in neither case deducible from metaphysical principles.* Finally, man's life was seen as set within nature and like all other living forms subject to uncertainty, unprivileged although advantageously equipped for survival.^[2]

In his "The Development of American Pragmatism," John Dewey maintains that a central differentiation between instrumentalism or pragmatism, on the one hand, and traditional empiricism, on the other, is that the former is **forward-looking** (looking at "consequent" phenomena) rather than *backward-looking* (looking at "antecedent" phenomena).^[3] He goes on to maintain that this shows that pragmatism or instrumentalism has metaphysical implications:

the doctrine of the value of consequences leads us to take the future into consideration. And this taking into consideration of the future takes us to the conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished, of a universe which is still, in James' term, "in the making," "in the process of becoming," of a universe up to a certain point still plastic.^[4]

The Text:

Section I:

¶ 1 Dewey notes that "the conceptions that had reigned" for 2,000 years in Western Philosophy emphasized (or assumed) a view which treated the categories of "**the fixed and the final**" as superior to those of "change and beginning (Dewey uses 'origins'). As he notes,

-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.

¶ 2-3 Dewey notes that the half century since Darwin's work had been published has been one of intellectual crisis—while the theological consequences had been (and continue to be a century later) significant.

Section II:

Dewey wants to emphasize the changes which arose in science and philosophy. To clarify this he discusses in detail the pre-Darwinistic intellectual climate which:

¶s 1-6 emphasized a *teleology* wherein each sort of thing is to be characterized by its own *edios* (or *species*)—which Dewey characterizes as applying to (¶-5) “**everything in the universe that observes order in flux and maintains constancy through change.**”

-According to this pre-Darwinian picture 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, thus, underpinned and morals were authorized by one and the same principle and their mutual agreement was eternally guaranteed.

¶ 7 Dewey sees two alternatives for such views: either the *telos* of each kind of thing is to be found *within that thing*, or it is to be found *within some transcendent or supernatural region*. Of course, it was the later alternative that was selected, the former neither underpinning for science n/or authorization for moral and religious endeavors.

¶ 8 He discusses Galileo’s “**transfer of interest from the permanent to the changing.**” He says, however, that

...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 moral and life. When he said of the species what Galileo had said of the earth, *e pur se muove* [**and yet it moves**], he emancipated, once for all, genetic and experimental ideas as an organon [a set of principles for scientific investigation] of asking questions and looking for explanations.

--Now while there clearly is a lot of rhetorical language in such passages (esp. the use of ‘*conquered*,’ ‘*freed*’. and ‘*emancipated*’), the underlying contrast should be clear. We will have to turn later to Dewey’s “evaluations” here (and to the question of the superiority which he alleges applies to the Darwinian perspective), but for now at this introductory stage, it is the contrast which we need to understand and remark upon.

Section III:

Dewey indicates that while the full consequences of the change he is calling our attention to [in 1910] are not fully clear, several implications seem fairly clear:

¶ 4 if all organic adaptations are due simply to constant variation and the elimination of those variations which are harmful in the struggle for existence that is brought about by excessive reproduction, there is no call for a prior intelligent causal force to plan and preordain them.

Section IV:

¶ 1 A Darwinian philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and specific conditions that generate them.

¶ 3 [Then] interest shifts...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 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.

¶ 5 The displacing of this wholesale type of philosophy will doubtless not arrive by sheer logical disproof, but rather by growing recognition of its futility....To improve our education, to ameliorate our manners, to advance our politics, we must have recourse to specific conditions of generation.

¶ 7...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.

¶ 9 In ending the essay, Dewey points out that the “old habits of thought” will not be easily displaced. “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.”

(end)

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I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!

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File revised on 09/27/25

[1] John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” the essay was originally a lecture in a course of public lectures given by Dewey on “Charles Darwin and His Influence on Science,” at Columbia University in 1909. It was then published in *Popular Science Monthly* [1909], and reprinted Dewey’s *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (N.Y.: Henry Holt, 1910). This supplement is to the reprint online at: <http://www.cspeirce.com/menu/library/aboutcsp/dewey/darwin.htm> and the paragraph numbers in each Section are intended to help you find the relevant material as page numbers are not provided in the on-line document. Emphasis has been added to several of the passages.

[2] Richard Bernstein, “Dewey, Democracy: The Task Ahead of Us” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, eds. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Cornell U.P., 1985), pp. 48-59, p. 53. Emphasis added to the citation at several points.

[2] H.S. Thayer, “Introduction,” in his *Pragmatism: The Classical Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp. 11-22, p. 19.

[3] Cf., John Dewey, “The Development of American Pragmatism,” originally published in *Studies in the History of Ideas* v. 2, ed. Department of Philosophy of Columbia Univ. (N.Y.: Columbia U.P., 1925), pp. 353-377. It is reprinted in *The Later Works of John Dewey* v. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1984), pp. 3-21. The citation is to a reprint in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H.S. Thayer, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-47, pp. 32-33.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 33.