

Book Review

Evolution's First Philosopher: John Dewey and the Continuity of Nature

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Jerome A. Popp, *Evolution's First Philosopher: John Dewey and the Continuity of Nature*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007. 155 pp. ISBN 0791469606, \$18.95 (pbk.)

Jerome Popp's monograph is a part of the SUNY series in philosophy and biology, and accordingly is narrowly focused upon discussion of an evolutionary model of value theory. As Popp explains at the outset, Daniel Dennett—among others—has proposed that any naturalized moral theory must provide a naturalized account for its own existence. Popp's thesis for this work is that, in conjunction with his long-overlooked insight into the significance of Darwin's thought to the area of epistemology generally, Dewey solved this philosophic problem long ago. This emphasis upon reconciling Dewey's work with Dennett's thought is reiterated in Popp's conclusion that "It is remarkable how Dewey's use of evolution in his arguments has been vindicated by the current thinking in evolutionary theory and by Dennett's philosophic arguments" (140). In other words, the major thrust of Popp's analysis is toward demonstrating the coherence between the thought of Dennett and other contemporary evolutionary theorists and that of Dewey.

To establish the scientific background upon which his analysis builds, Popp devotes chapters 2 through 4 to a review of evolutionary theory generally, including a discussion of the grounding of cognitive theory in understandings of the evolution of the mind, incorporating the works of Dawkins, Dennett, and others. This section provides interesting reading and an insightful synthesis of the areas of evolutionary theory and genetics, ranging from historic sources such as Lama-

rick's thought to recent works in the area of genetics and natural selection, including works of popular science by Matt Ridley.

As Popp explains in chapter 3, “preparedness versus plasticity,” has generally replaced the “nature versus nurture” dialectic in the field. Plasticity, the quality of being able to learn from experience, is a concept that to at least some degree informs the entire discussion that follows. Here, as in many other areas, as Popp demonstrates, Dewey's understanding of cognition holds up well in conjunction with more recent developments. Dewey posited “habits” as the outcome of “unlearned activities,” and accounted for the development of socially constructed meanings as an overlay to innate tendencies. In short, Dewey understood human growth and cognitive development as an evolutionary process, even while he lacked the current understanding of DNA.

In chapter 4, Popp continues to develop Dewey's thought in relation to current theorizing on the evolution of consciousness and human culture, although the majority of the discussion is still devoted to contemporary works. Popp reviews Dawkins's ideas about memes (“catchy” ideas such as tunes, phrases, and fashions that propagate readily through social contact) and their social function. He then clarifies that Dewey's notion of consciousness is active rather than passive—focused upon the deliberate and purposeful pursuit of some goal. For Dewey, according to Popp, “philosophy emerged when thinking became conscious of itself, which means that at some point humans became conscious of their thinking and began to think about their thinking” (66). This accumulation of cultural content, and especially the development of language, may, in the current view, explain the need for the relatively large human brain, along with the emergence of the human mind.

With chapter 5, “Can Evolution Tell Us What to Do?,” Popp begins his analysis of the implications for human decision making, including how Dewey's ideas work in relation to the preceding framework. With regard to the so-called “problem of the normative” for humankind—the ability, and thus the tendency, to evaluate that which surrounds us in terms of right and wrong—Popp argues that Dewey solved this long ago, but that his solution has been overlooked and misunderstood. Dewey's position, per Popp, is that the only standard for judging the “goodness” of growth for the human mind is in its capacity for continued growth.

At this point, Popp reintroduces what I view as his secondary—and from my educational perspective, potentially more compelling—thesis: that Dewey's Darwinian perspective has been widely misunderstood in relation to democracy. This idea is first raised in the introduction; the tendency to give the concept of democracy primacy as an independent good in understanding Dewey is, in Popp's words, “a debilitating mistake.” He continues: “To ignore the Darwinian nature of Dewey's arguments is to get the impression that it is his basic purpose to articulate and justify a conception of democracy as morality” (xi). In fact, says Popp, “Dewey's analysis of democracy is an attempt to enucleate the social conditions that best open the way for intellectual growth . . . thus, democracy is subordinated to growth, which means that the value of democracy is derivative” (85). In other words, democracy is the

means, and intelligence the end. Disappointingly, however, the results or implications of this miscasting of Dewey's thought are not demonstrated or discussed.

The means-ends mode of analysis is carried into the following section regarding situational ethics, still a part of the jam-packed chapter 5. Popp notes that Dewey has been accused of advocating a form of situational ethics, then continues:

[T]he counterargument is that situational ethics ignores evolution, because each situation in which we find ourselves is not unique unto itself. One situation grows out of another. Both history and the future, as far as we can know either, form elements of the 'situation' that is the context of the moral judgment" (89-90).

This perspective, focused upon the species rather than the individual or group of individuals, is also seen in his comment some pages earlier: "Most of the ethics literature is focused on the individual and not the species, but evolution is about species more than it is about individuals" (79). The groundwork for this line of argument is laid much earlier in the book, when Popp reminds the reader that natural selection takes place on a species level, rather than an individual one. Popp further argues that Dewey advocates for each situation to be evaluated not only as an end, but as a means to further ends. While this has been criticized as an infinitely regressive approach to valuation, Popp believes that this ignores Dewey's Darwinian grounding; regression is halted by evaluating the course of action in light of the consequences for continued intellectual development for individuals in conjunction to the development of the species as a whole—Dewey's *real* supreme good.

I find this portion of the discussion unsatisfying due to what seems to me to be a too ready dismissal of the complexities of particularity. Dewey himself articulated his focus on particularity in a variety of ways and over many years, in comments ranging from, "Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them" (MW 10: 43), to "Attainment of the relatively secure and settled takes place, however, only with respect to *specified* problematic situations; quest for certainty that is universal, applying to everything, is a compensatory perversion" (LW 4: 182). The rejection of value judgments that go beyond a specific and immediate setting permeates every level of Dewey's thought, and Popp's apparent argument that situational ethics can be evaded through instrumental evaluation carried out at a species level and thus across time and space seems to me to not robustly engage Dewey upon this point.

Dewey's perspective on diversity is considered in relation to the need for innovation in chapter 6, "Democracy and The Baldwin Effect." Here, Popp furthers the case for plasticity, since complex society leads to emergent dilemmas and the need for novel problem solving. This requires that democracy exist as more than just a majority-rules system of government, but as one "whose sociopolitical organizations are such that they actively promote intellectual growth for all of their members and create the social conditions that support the greater use of intelligence in the forma-

tion and solution of problems encountered” (102). In something of a passing note, Popp proposes that this vision requires a media and a social system of association that promote interaction with diverse perspectives, the intent of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Again, this is a compelling line of discussion for the educator, but remains largely outside the focus of this work.

Popp's final chapter is devoted to an analysis of how Dewey's liberalism differs from earlier, pre-evolutionary forms. One section, “Why Nondemocratic Schools are Miseducative,” sets out the explanation of Dewey's preoccupation with education as the vital ingredient in his end goal of continued intellectual growth: “He sees educational institutions as social structures aimed at the development of intelligence . . . and the role of any teacher or parent is to give direction to these [pre-existing] tendencies while adhering to the principles of the ethical way of coming at life” (129). Popp then turns to the attacks made on Dewey for thus undermining the principles of a classical liberal education, à la Jefferson. Here, as in previous chapters, excerpts from, and discussion of, authors other than Dewey are extended, while Dewey's own thought is characterized briefly, rather than developed at length.

This work provides a systematic evaluation of Dewey's evolutionary thinking that will be of great interest to those working in the history and philosophy of science, and especially in value theory. For educational philosophers, as well as for educational practitioners, there are suggestions for lines of inquiry into a range of contemporary issues; however, given the focus of this work these remain less developed. Ultimately, also, I was left still wishing for an assessment of what Dewey might offer that remains unaddressed by contemporary theorists such as Dawkins, Dennett, and others.

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