

Review of *Darwinism and Pragmatism: William James on Evolution and Self-Transformation*, by Lucas McGranahan. New York: Routledge, 2017. 186 pp. \$150.

The history, legacy, and challenge of evolutionary biological theories for philosophy, particularly Darwinism, might yet be something we need to reckon with in a still more serious and explicit manner. An often-overlooked figure of central importance to this debate is William James, but any examination into his import on this topic necessarily leads to the contentious issue of whether or not there is a fundamental coherency to James's thinking. For this reason, Lucas McGranahan's *Darwinism and Pragmatism* is an important contribution to both James scholarship in general as well as to Routledge's series, "History and Philosophy of Biology." While Dewey is most often thought of as "Darwin's philosopher"—and certainly McGranahan makes adequate reference to Dewey's importance—McGranahan's work serves as a reminder that James's philosophy was every bit as much an attempt to wrestle with (as well as a product of) the nineteenth century debates over evolutionary theories of biological origins. McGranahan's work embodies the Jamesian spirit by sitting comfortably in the nexus where philosophy of science enmeshes with the "more" beckoned in several other discourses: social philosophy, psychology, theology, and political theory, among others.

James scholars will undoubtedly find much to consider in this fine work, but McGranahan's purpose is clearly to offer "more" than an intramural discussion of Jamesian interpretation. It is at once a

critique within the philosophy of science about the meaning and application of Darwinism as well as a compelling argument for the continued significance of the pragmatist theory of truth and a radically empiricist attitude towards life.

The subtitle of the book, *William James on Evolution and Self-Transformation*, aptly characterizes the linear nature of the argument. If novelty and self-transformation are truly possible on naturalistic grounds, that must also be demonstrated as such from within the Darwinistic fold. McGranahan's overriding concern is thus two-fold: (1) to argue that a proper (pragmatic) interpretation of Darwinism does not foreclose the possibility of something genuinely new coming forth in human life but indeed helps to make sense of evolutionary theory in general; and (2) to show that James's "double-barreled Darwinian psychology" yields a viable theory of self-transformation that gives both a center *and* structure to James's thought. In drawing attention to both the revolutionary naturalistic grounds of James's thinking and the possibilities of both personal and collective transformation, McGranahan argues that James is "an essentially moral or ethical thinker."¹ That is, James embodies the best of the tender-minded intellect keen on the possibility of an ethical theory, but he does so through a tough-minded examination of the "brute facts" that yield this very possibility instead of assuming it a priori.

In order to give a full-throated defense of this interpretation of Darwinian biology, the whole of James's philosophy has to be considered. McGranahan opens his book with a concise and powerful narrative about the challenge of Darwinism, concluding with what he calls the "Received Image of Darwinism." This, in effect, is a paradoxical situation in which dominant interpretations of Darwinism enshrine, rather than challenge, the ideals of mechanistic, Enlightenment science. McGranahan then notes that "the Received Image of Darwinism assimilates the science of life to an Enlightenment model of physics that is no longer universally accepted even in physics," thus failing to actualize the maturity of its own science by becoming self-aware of its own epistemology.² But, he asks, "What if this occurred in the immediate wake of

Darwin's Origin and we simply ignored it?"³ The purpose, thus, of McGranahan's work is to offer "an alternative to the Received Image of Darwinism through an examination of the writings of seminal American thinker William James."⁴

McGranahan does this in the introduction by articulating James's Pragmatic Image of Darwinism. Although it is a *way* of interpreting Darwinism, those already familiar with James's thought will quickly see how it is characteristic of his whole philosophy—hence the deep impact that evolutionary debates had on James. This pragmatic image of Darwinism is characterized by an emphasis on inherent individuality and the contributions that creatures make to their environment ("Internalism and Constructionism"); a generalization of evolutionary logic, particularly selectionism, to illuminate patterns at various levels of analysis; the fallibility and indeterminacy of truth; and the conviction that reality is dynamic and continuous. He notes, however, that James's Pragmatic Image does not contradict the fundamental philosophical challenges of Darwinism but is rather a particularly "*Darwinian* way of responding to Darwinism, not ostrich- in-the- sand behaviour."⁵ In other words, "A philosophy developed in immediate response to Darwin may yet provide a useful corrective to a calcified neo-Darwinism."⁶

The idea that *there is a center* of James's thinking is of course somewhat contentious. McGranahan is clearly aware of this and self-consciously positions his argument. For McGranahan, self-transformation is the key that unlocks the very possibility of an ethical theory, and he interprets James's philosophy as centered on a generalization of selectionism that opens up this possibility. It is no coincidence, then, that James's major neuroses dealt with the possibility of freedom. While much has been made about James's "Emersonian powers of provocation" (as Cornel West portrays it) and his Promethean emphasis on personal will, there remains the oddly understated fact that, for James, "the possibility of freedom" was always "posited against the background of despair."⁷

Chapter 1, "Individuals in Evolution: James's Darwinian Psychology," will be of particular interest to historians of the

sciences and those interested in James's own intellectual development. McGranahan presents a detailed examination of James's *earliest* writings, both signed and anonymous, that demonstrate not only the deep impact of the debates between evolutionary theories (Lamarckian, Darwinian, Spencerian, among others) but also James's own evolution through them. Perhaps surprising to some, James engaged evolutionary debates in writing throughout the 1860s and 1870s, well before Dewey's career began to take off. What McGranahan solidifies vis-à-vis his argument is the emergence of James's pragmatic image of Darwinism: that "environment" alone cannot fully explain individuals, that they contribute to the construction of their environment, and that an "uncertain science" can be "paradigmatic of all knowledge."⁸

McGranahan then generalizes this argument in Chapter 2, "Individuals in History: Social Evolution without Social Darwinism," beyond the confines of intra-biological debates. Although short, this chapter is necessary in order to show how "James's social evolutionism differs in important ways from social Darwinism, sociobiology and the theory of memes."⁹ The differentiation is not merely to distance James from ethically problematic arguments but also to show how each alternative rests on problematic philosophical bases that don't properly take into account the role of the individual and the philosophical implications of narrow neo-Darwinism. The pragmatic image of Darwinism for which James argues thus offers a much-needed corrective.

McGranahan continues a robust textual defense of his interpretation in Chapter 3, "Self-Transformation: Habit, Will and Selection," by tracing this influence and coalescence of ideas through what we might call James's middle writings:

These writings—especially *The Principles of Psychology*, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*—represent the core of James's thinking. As such, they provide necessary background for interpreting his other writings on such topics as pragmatism, belief and radical empiricism.¹⁰

This is at once on target for his overall argument and also provocative in that it helps to demonstrate how “James the psychologist” and “James the philosopher” are but two sides of the same coin, not two distinct and separable phases of a life. Likewise, this connects also to the existential foundations of James’s thought: “James’s philosophy is rooted deeply in his spiritual crisis of the late 1860s and early 1870s.”¹¹ This lens gives a more holistic understanding to the often-misconstrued (and sometimes lampooned) idea of the Will to Believe while also situating James within the historical context of ideas that impacted him most, namely, selectionism, Renouvier’s understanding of freedom, and Bain and Carpenter’s understanding of self as a plastic bundle of habits. From this emerges a key understanding of James’s mature philosophy of science. In McGranahan’s words:

The willingness to accept the results of empirical inquiry has been a huge advance for society, insofar as this has been achieved. To understand the scientific method in terms of the pragmatic method, however, means contextualizing scientific inquiry within the greater span of human concern.¹²

Chapter 4, “Character Ideals and Evolutionary Logics in James and Nietzsche,” may be the most important contribution this work offers to the history of James scholarship simply for the dearth of detailed comparisons between the two figures. Accordingly, McGranahan aims for this chapter to make up for this historically missed connection. He is quick to note and clear that James did not have a very charitable understanding of Nietzsche, but the two figures nonetheless share an incredible amount in their disposition, concerns, arguments, and historical location. This chapter is no mere comparison, however, but puts forward an important argument about the nature of the self as an evolutionary product that mediates purposively in a dynamic, non-linear engagement with the environment. While both figures were deeply influenced by evolutionary logic, they do indeed split in their interpretation and application of this logic:

Nietzsche therefore does not follow James in using Darwinian non-directed variation as ammunition against externalism. On the contrary, Nietzsche's reason for critiquing Darwinism is the same as James's reason for celebrating it: a belief that agency must be reconstructed, not erased, in the science of life.¹³

This directly impacts their subsequent ethics, which of course differ considerably:

If James embeds self-transformation in a socially shared cooperative project, Nietzsche's ideal is an elite individual that negates humanity's metaphysical needs through ascetic self-overcoming. This reflects James's location of significance in the purposive mediation of ascending levels of individual and social structure for the purpose of creating a maximally inclusive world, as opposed to Nietzsche's prizing of the ennobled supra-historical individual.¹⁴

Once again, this leads directly to a more general level of analysis where, in Chapter 5, "Higher-Order Individuals: Truth and Reality as Organic Systems," McGranahan examines James's philosophical commitments in light of this evolutionary background over against Idealism. This allows for a conception of "the most inclusive realizable whole" that is grounded naturalistically and spawned from idiosyncratic conditions and thus impacts the very meaning of the Good and the content of the world. The real gem of this chapter is that it demonstrates the direct connections between evolutionary logic and the revolutionary nature of James's thinking about the nature of truth (pragmatism, humanism, meaning and function, and objective or absolute truth) and the nature of reality (pluralism, radical empiricism, and panpsychism).

In the final chapter of the book, "Conclusion: Divided Selves and Dialectical Selves," McGranahan explicitly engages the important work of Richard Gale—a move to which he hints at the beginning and here brings his argument full circle. It is also here that McGranahan deals with the specter of James's archenemy: Hegel. The purpose of the book is to reconfigure the meaning of

individuality in a post-Darwinian world, which supports neither myopic economic individualism nor hierarchical social Darwinism.¹⁵ This illuminates the fundamentally ethical character of James's thought:

James built an ethics of self-transformation upon this Darwinian structure. . . . Indeed, the crux of James's ethics and his entire melioristic philosophy is that individuals may in this way spiral their ideals both centripetally into themselves and centrifugally into a broader cooperative social world.¹⁶

This is inherently a dialectical process of dynamic feedback, but it is also re-grounded in naturalistic, radically empiricist-pluralist terms, rather than in a kind of Hegelian monism.

McGranahan also ties these themes to the mystical components of James's thinking. That is, the center and structure of James's thinking is grounded in our inescapable creatureliness, explicated best by a pragmatic philosophical interpretation of Darwinism that simultaneously opens up the possibility of growth and self-transformation that reaches beyond the constraints of the environment (internal and external) in which we find ourselves. The grasping for "more" is a psychological need and also fuels a metaphysical belief about the nature of the universe. Gale concludes that James fails to reconcile the "pragmatic" aspects of a Promethean creatureliness with the mystical dynamism of a universe enfolding itself uniquely and thus ends up with a fundamentally divided and unsystematized philosophy. For McGranahan, however, this is precisely what makes James's philosophy so robust and relevant in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps understandably for any work as strong and well-researched as McGranahan's, its very strength becomes the basis of a weakness as well: It leaves the reader wanting more. This is, of course, a bit of a shabby criticism, since there are always judicious choices that have to be made, but when taking out endnotes and references, the text comes in at less than 150 pages. McGranahan's work is one of possibility: He is arguing from a naturalistic basis for

the *possibility* of transformation, but he only hints at what the purpose or goal of that transformation is. On the most abstract level we may wonder, “For what?” The possibility of becoming “more” unleashes the strenuous mood, but to what end? Admirable as it may be for a purely descriptive account of self-transformation, one wonders also if the processes of growth and transformation can be given a structure or if there is, even when put in melioristic terms, a kind of end goal to it. On this point McGranahan is relatively mute, to which we might reply with a paraphrase of Nietzsche: Humans can endure just about any “what” if they have but the “why.”

On a more practical level of scholarship, another strength-turned-weakness is McGranahan’s engagement with panpsychism and James’s conception of God in Chapter 5. The many lives and legacies of James’s thought rule out any truly systematic engagement with his thought for all but the very few works, so it is always commendable when a work primarily focused on the naturalistic components of James’s thought makes space to consider theological questions. Nevertheless, it remains surprising that neither Whitehead nor the robust tradition of process theology and/or emergentism were addressed at any point, while Karen Barad’s important work on the subject was. Without these interlocutors this section felt arbitrarily truncated (though certainly not *wrong* in any real sense). Likewise, in addressing the importance of James’s legacy in psychology vis-à-vis self-transformation, McGranahan does not give much explanation of why he only engages humanistic and positive psychology. This is especially surprising given his serious engagement with the work of Eugene Taylor, a James *and* Jung scholar whose work did more than any other to show the lines of influence between James and depth psychology in general. Myriad psychologists could easily address the themes that McGranahan touches upon: Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, Carl Jung, Ernest Becker, and even Erik Erikson, among others.

McGranahan offers a fine work that is provocative and well-defended. It comes highly recommended, and the criticisms should

be taken as fodder for more robust future engagement of Jamesian thought.

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NOTES

¹ Lucas McGranahan, *Darwinism and Pragmatism: William James on Evolution and Self-Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 11.

² McGranahan, 4.

³ McGranahan, 5.

⁴ McGranahan, 5.

⁵ McGranahan, 5.

⁶ McGranahan, 7.

⁷ McGranahan, 8.

⁸ McGranahan, 49.

⁹ McGranahan, 57.

¹⁰ McGranahan, 72.

¹¹ McGranahan, 72.

¹² McGranahan, 88.

¹³ McGranahan, 109.

¹⁴ McGranahan, 97.

¹⁵ McGranahan, 156.

¹⁶ McGranahan, 157.