

Review of *Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics*. By Beth L. Eddy. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016. 156 pp. \$84.00

From the historian's point of view, significant epochs rarely track cleanly onto calendrical units; the "long" 19th century, for example, bleeds into the "short" 20th century, which itself arguably ended a decade or so before the year 2000. From the philosopher's perspective, this disjuncture is potentially even greater, for the topics and problems which arose within the intellectual landscape of the 19th century suggest in some ways that there hasn't been a 20th century at all. The controversies of the 19th century are still ours and its philosophers can appear to be our contemporaries. In *Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics*, Beth L. Eddy takes on the task of tracing the wide-ranging effects of evolutionary theories on religious and ethical discourse in the 19th century, especially within the then newly emerging pragmatist thought; her purpose was to gain insights for an evaluation of the current debate sparked by new atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

In the first of her six chapters, Eddy sets the stage of evolutionary thinking in the 19th century with a synoptic overview of its main currents. Crucial for the dialectical structure of the book is Herbert Spencer's evolutionism, which, instead of taking Darwinism and its introduction of "chanciness and contingency into natural history" (2) seriously, offers a Lamarckian account of the development of nature and society as harmonious parts of a

secularized eschatology. There is no reference to God; rather, Spencer's views were authorized by a crypto-theistic cosmic force branded as the "Unknowable."

In Eddy's narrative, T. H. Huxley functions as the antithesis to this Spencerian thesis. In Huxley's view, discussed in the second chapter, the "cosmic process" is in itself at best amoral, though with regard to the concerns and aspirations of human beings unambiguously immoral—marked by aggressive competition, senseless suffering, and arbitrariness. Such a discourse is far from a depiction of a successful, consistent, and laudable path. Like a gardener who constantly has to tend to his plants, humanity has to actively preserve its "ethical process . . . against the tide of natural selection and any physically inherited instincts" (25), instead of the Spencerian *laissez-faire* approach.

In the subsequent chapters, Eddy introduces John Dewey (Chapters 3 and 5) and then Jane Addams (Chapters 4 and 5) as offering a synthesis of the monism of nature and society (Spencer) and their antipodean dualism (Huxley). Dewey's philosophy is explicated as a critique of Huxley's proto-existentialist bifurcation in favor of an all-inclusive conception of nature. It is written as a critique of the deterministic optimism of Spencer, which Dewey loosens to a meliorism: mankind has to actively achieve the realization of the good by use of experimental social intelligence, which is nevertheless an integral part of nature itself. Additionally, Eddy does not only outline the social reformist thought of Jane Addams by means of actual and "speculative conversation[s]" (59) with Dewey and the anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin. On a deeper level, she argues that Addams needs to be fully incorporated in the canon of classical pragmatist thought. Eddy claims that if Dewey is authoritative for defining this philosophical approach, Addams's philosophy powerfully advocates the overcoming of paternalistic and passive forms of action for the benefit of democratic and cooperative forms.

In her last chapter, Eddy focuses on the latest atheism dispute, the evaluation of which is the ultimate aim of her historical excavations. With regard to the dramaturgy of the book, it is

somewhat surprising that Eddy doesn't refer back to Dewey and Addams, the central characters of her narrative in previous chapters, but rather to George Santayana and William James. James is introduced for the first time at this point by citing his "cautions about human blindness" (118) in order to criticize the egotistical tendency of the individual, groups as well as the whole human species to view themselves as an ontological necessity and the center of universe. In contrast, Santayana has only been cast so far as the skeptical supporting act with regard to Dewey's social mysticism, inherited from Hegel. For Eddy, Dewey (as a social reformer) is focused on success in an exaggeratedly one-sided manner instead of on contingency and tragedy. Thus, it is Santayana who puts the romantic egotism of attainability in its place of ultimate cosmic impotence.

Beyond this *deus ex machina*, one can appreciate Eddy's both innovative and plausible reconstruction of the current debate, making it clear that the real fault line does not run between atheists and theists, but between those who reject any form of contingency (by determinants like God, the selfish gene, the neuronal architecture—or formerly the Unknowable), and those who, like Stephen Jay Gould, recognize the irreducible cosmic, organic, and human reality of contingency, defining it as "the causal power of individual events" (121) and thus defending the plasticity and autonomy of individual life. Eddy's book thus reveals itself to be more than an academic work on one possible genealogy of pragmatism which could easily be further substantiated with F.C.S. Schiller's contingent and fallibilistic teleology developed in critical dialogue with Spencerism and which has to prove itself experimentally *in praxis*.¹ Rather, in accordance with its author's confession ("I think of myself as a pragmatist," xvii), this work is one that also pragmatically *does* something; it fuels engagement and hope of change against lethargy "in our contemporary context of moral malaise and spiritual fatigue" (xvi). Eddy achieves this by disrupting the notions of ethics and evolution, religion, and atheism within a debate now seemingly stuck, in order to rearrange them creatively with regard to contingency and determinism and

thereby to make them more productive as well as to raise them to the level of the discourse of our contemporaries of the 19th century. The work is thus not only of interest to anyone concerned with intellectual history of that period and its thinkers but it is also rewarding to read for anyone interested in contemporary conceptualizations of religion, secularization, ethics, and the impact of biology and evolutionary thought on these issues.

Guido K. Tamponi
University of Potsdam, Germany
tamgui@web.de

NOTES

¹ F. C. S. Schiller, *Riddles of the Sphinx. A Study in the Philosophy of Evolution* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1891).