

## William James, Darwinian Theory and Personal Evolution

**Lucas McGranahan (2017) *Darwin and Pragmatism: William James on Evolution and Self-Transformation*. New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-84893-596-9, Pages, 186, price: \$120 (Hardcover)**

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There is no shortage of scholarship on pragmatism and Darwinian evolution. Lucas McGranahan's slim volume is nonetheless a worthwhile contribution. It is so, first, because it is difficult to overstate the influence of Darwinian thinking on William James, the primary focus of the book; second, because McGranahan's Jamesian analysis goes some way in disrupting standard Darwinian views, while simultaneously highlighting critical but obscured aspects of the theory as originally posited; and third—and perhaps most interestingly—because McGranahan dedicates a chapter to examining similarities and differences between James and Friedrich Nietzsche, who likewise drew on evolutionary theory in his writings on individual self-transformation.

The book is organized into five chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The introduction lays out a pragmatic reconstruction of Darwinism, against which McGranahan contrasts a more standard reductive and mechanistic interpretation, obviously at odds with James' philosophy. Chapter 1 moves on to James' Darwinian inspired psychology, and Chapter 2 discusses social implications and particularly how James' position allows us to rise above mere biology, while not dismissing its importance to understanding the human condition. Chapter 3 looks at ethics and self-transformation in the context of James' sensorimotor theory. Chapter 4 explicates similarities and differences between James and Nietzsche's visions of individuals, along with their ability to find purpose in a universe without preordained or inherent meaning—all of this in the context of evolutionary theory. Chapter 5 focuses on James' later work, and the concluding chapter scrutinizes James within the broader context of early and late modern philosophical and scientific movements.

One of McGranahan's central goals in the book is to establish that Darwinism influenced pragmatism and especially James. This is an uncontroversial position. However, some offer a

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superficial picture, focusing on the pragmatic position that adaptability to life measures the meaning and worth of our ideas, which evolve to meet changing needs. While not wrong *per se*, such interpretations fail to differentiate Darwinian outlooks from other accounts of transmutation that were circulating around the time that Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace first proposed their theories. McGranahan appreciates this and also that it was not the utilitarian connotations of Darwinian theory that most impressed James. What in fact captivated James most was the idea of indirect evolution, that is, the Darwinian insistence that nature has independent cycles of causation. This means that variations occur for reasons that are random in regard to their adaptability. Then, in a second cycle of operation, environmental pressures either reinforce or extinguish variations.

Throughout much of the book, McGranahan discusses the centrality of this idea to James' thinking. It infused James' understanding of mind—for example, his position that interests lead us to selectively notice or ignore sensory variations supplied by the environment, meaning we determine in some measure how the world affects us. It shaped James' epistemology, which holds that we progress by focusing on some piece of reality independently of others. It also permeated his pluralistic metaphysics, that is, his proposal that the mosaic components of the universe have a tremor of independence, such that one bit of reality may move independently of others. This overall picture has a range of moral implications. Among much else, it repudiates environmental determinism and makes a case for indeterminism, hence opening the door for the possibility of freewill. Summing up, McGranahan suggests that James defended selective processes within the sensorimotor system, while also accepting those predicted by evolution by natural selection, albeit always downplaying deterministic interpretations of the theory. He observes, moreover, that probabilistic aspects of indirect evolution were consistent with James' vision of indeterminate truth, fallible knowledge, and open-ended dynamic reality.

Near the end of the book, McGranahan argues that James used Darwinian reasoning to respond to the reductive, mechanistic, and deterministic received image of Darwinism. But in the process, James arguably reclaimed important facets of the theory, as originally posited. Three interrelated points stand out. First, James recovered anti-reductive aspects of Darwinian theory, which explicitly advocates investigating things in interrelated and ever-increasing circles of complexity. Though James recognized the need to isolate targets of investigation, this ecological approach is at the heart of his thinking and indeed the bulk of classical pragmatism. Second and with other pragmatists, James maintained that we are not passive recipients of our environments since we actively rearrange them. Third and along similar lines, James abstracted an idea emphasized by more recent researchers, namely, that organisms actively shape their own evolutionary trajectories. Thus, as Stephen Jay Gould has argued, the availability of a certain kind of food will only shape the evolution of bill shape if birds have an ability to eat it and an interest in doing so, with the added nutrition allowing those better suited to the task to propagate more. James made exactly this point on a phylogenetic level. He also adapted it to an ontogenetic level, maintaining that interests dictate what aspects of the environment we notice and therefore what features affect us within the span of our own lifetimes.

In Chapter 4, McGranahan turns to a detailed comparison of James and Nietzsche. With James, Nietzsche accepted descent with modification. Unlike James, however, he tended to lump Darwinism and inheritance of acquired traits together, which are not in fact mutually exclusive, as Darwin himself recognized. In this, he broke with James, who favored Darwinism and detested inheritance of acquired traits, which he associated with Herbert Spencer's neo-Lamarckian evolutionary empiricism and the view that the environment impresses itself

upon passive recipients. That said, Nietzsche criticized neo-Lamarckian positions for just this reason, but made the mistake of assuming that Darwinian theory implies the same. Both thinkers were interested in rescuing the individual from assemblages of environmental and physical forces, though Nietzsche did not believe in freewill; and both, along lines more consistent with virtue ethics, focused on the development—or one might say, the evolution—of personal character, as opposed to advancing systems for differentiating right from wrong actions. Both emphasized that we develop by pushing and expanding out, meeting resistance, the combination of the two bringing form and indeed purpose to our lives that would otherwise not exist. While laying out such parallels, McGranahan concludes that James and Nietzsche offered different visions for humanity. James sought a utopia that would nourish existing social and metaphysical needs. By contrast, Nietzsche longed for a post-human being to go over or under extant metaphysical and ethical ideals. Though not alone in comparing pragmatism and existentialism, McGranahan's contribution is helpful because scholarship on this topic remains unjustifiably scant, and unlike many of today's hyper-specialists, he is versed in both movements.

While the majority of the points in McGranahan's book are not especially original, and while McGranahan does not for the most part claim that they are, the same is so in the bulk of scholarship, despite pretensions to the contrary. Given that the publisher explicitly pitches this book at advanced undergraduates, graduates and early career scholars, the writing could be less dense, though the book is arguably also suited to more senior researchers interested in a review of the role of Darwinism in James' work. Moreover, insofar as indirect evolution is at the heart of the book and indeed James' writings, the nature and implications of this position could be laid out in a clearer way.

That said, as an aggregated whole—particularly with the chapter on James and Nietzsche—McGranahan's book offers a novel contribution. It should be of interest to almost any James scholar, along with those focusing on pragmatism in general, as well as its specific implications for metaphysics, moral theory and philosophy of mind. It should also be helpful to those working on the history and philosophy of biology, psychology and evolutionary theory, and educators teaching in these areas may find chapters useful in their preparations or as assigned readings.

**Compliance with ethical standards**

**Conflict of interest** No conflict of interest.