

Philosophy in Review



Trevor Pearce, "Pragmatism's Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy"

Mark Porrovecchio

Volume 42, Number 1, February 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088006ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088006ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Porrovecchio, M. (2022). Review of [Trevor Pearce, "Pragmatism's Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 42(1), 39–41. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088006ar>

Copyright © Mark Porrovecchio, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Trevor Pearce. *Pragmatism's Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy.* The University of Chicago Press 2020. 384 pp. \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780226719917).

Trevor Pearce's *Pragmatism's Evolution* proves that there are still new and interesting things to say about a philosophical movement and method often cited as distinctly 'American'. The book is rich in detail. The front matter contains a list of tables and figures, abbreviations of both manuscripts and scholarly editions utilized, and a note to readers on additional critical annotations and a bibliography that can be found [online](#). After the introduction, the primary substance of the book is made up of seven thematic/chronological chapters, followed by a brief conclusion, an acknowledgments section, and a well-thought-out index. Each chapter features numerous footnotes for those interested in seeking out Pearce's sources.

The 'Introduction' lays out a clear thesis. Pearce argues that 'the pragmatists were deeply engaged with biology from 1860 to 1910 and ... they were enthusiastic participants in a series of debates about the relationship between organism and environment' (5). He frames his discussion of pragmatists by way of *cohorts* and *sub-cohorts* therein. These are defined 'by shared experiences at a similar stage in life' (9); in particular, the experience of attending and graduating from university, and interacting with similar debates about evolution and biology, at roughly the same time. Pearce provides four such cohorts tagged to graduation dates between: 1851 to 1869, with three sub-cohorts; 1875 to 1898, with five; 1900 to 1916, with three; and 1919 to 1939, with four. The result is that Pearce's groupings encompass thinkers that extend far beyond traditional lists of pragmatists.

The first two chapters, 'The Metaphysical Club and the *Origins of Species*' and 'Products of the Environment: Spencer's Challenge', are of a kind. The former provides a fascinating overview of how first cohort pragmatists embraced the works of Charles Darwin, often after a break with biologist Louis Agassiz. Pearce demonstrates how the issue wasn't simply one of religion vs. science given that some early pragmatists, such as philosophers John Fiske and Francis Abbot, saw harmony instead of disjunction (25). Others, such as James and Peirce, were 'tentative in their acceptance of evolutionary idea' (56), perhaps in part due to personal connections to Agassiz. The latter chapter focuses on the degree to which pragmatists felt that Herbert Spencer's philosophical conceptions fit with Darwin's evolutionary observations. There were often generational differences of opinion. Many within the first cohort remained critical; others within the second cohort integrated Spencer's teachings into their own courses (59). In some instances, the dispute seemed to be disciplinary. As Peirce observed, Spencer offered metaphysical breadth, whereas Darwin offered scientific depth (67). In others, the disagreements were personal and misplaced. Pearce does a masterful job of showing how the observations of Darwin and the musings of Spencer weren't as far apart as James suggested. The difference was that James emphasized the role that 'subjective interest' played in shaping 'our interests' (81), while Spencer more often referred back to the primacy of environmental factors in shaping our development (90).

'Evolution at School: Educating a New Generation' focuses primarily on the second cohort's advance through undergraduate and graduate training, and then into teaching. As Pearce notes, by this time evolution had largely been accepted, even by those once connected to Agassiz (102). The result was, at the undergraduate level, pragmatists being trained by those who either implicitly or explicitly endorsed evolution: Dewey by naturalist George Henry Perkins (106);

Jane Addams by geologist Mary Emile Holmes (107); and George Herbert Mead



by botanist Albert Allen Wright (109). By the time they reached graduate school, they continued to grapple with evolutionary ideas. Some, like Josiah Royce, studied directly with Wilhelm Wundt in Germany (127). Others, such as Dewey, came into contact with the critiques of Spencer first advanced by James and also raised by George Sylvester Morris (130). Still others, such as Mead, grappled alongside Royce with the evolution vs. philosophical divide posed in the works of Rudolf Hermann Lotze, often deciding that the theory of evolution ‘had something to contribute to philosophy’ (141). This cohort, while expressing divergent points of opinion, carried into their professional lives ‘the philosophical and social implications of modern biology’ (157).

“‘Hegelianism Needs to Be Darwinized’: Evolution and Idealism’ takes up an issue raised in the previous chapter in relation to Lotze: the feasibility of merging evolutionary ideas with philosophical approaches. As the title implies, the question was whether or not Hegelian idealism could be wedded to naturalism generally, and pragmatic naturalism more specifically. On this point, Pearce’s position is clear: pragmatists such as Mead came to see Hegel and Darwin as ‘focusing on different aspects of the same nineteenth-century idea—development or evolution’ (168). In unspooling this interesting hybrid, a pragmatist like Dewey, taking from philosophers Edward Caird and Samuel Alexander, came to see reciprocity at work in the scientific and philosophical conceptions of adaptation; that is, that ‘organism and environment are codetermining’ (172). Others, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, reached similar points of accord by way of the teachings of Royce (180).

‘Weismannism Comes to America: The Factors of Evolution’ places Spencer in tension with German biologist August Weismann. At stake was ‘the question of how biological variation was produced’ (197). Pearce is quick to note that some who were initially receptive to Weismann were likely already ill-disposed to Spencer, attributing to his approach too much emphasis on ‘mechanical factors’ (209). But, amongst pragmatists, opinions varied. For James, neo-Darwinism won the day (211). Peirce, skeptical as he was of both Spencer and Weismann, staked out a neo-Lamarckian position (224). Dewey, alongside Du Bois, while remaining cautious, embraced a form of ‘social heredity that involved ‘intelligently evolving environments’ (246).

As with the first two chapters, ‘Pragmatist Ethics: Evolution, Experiment, and Social Progress’ and ‘Pragmatist Logic: Evolution, Experiment, and Inquiry’ can be read as parts of a whole. Pearce argues that ‘the pragmatists saw both ethics and logic, along with moral and epistemic progress, as evolutionary and experimental’ (327). Regarding the first, he details the various ways in which pragmatists—Addams at Hull House (258); Dewey’s primary school at the University of Chicago (265); Du Bois’s work regarding the Philadelphia College Settlement (266)—framed social reforms as scientific attempts to provide practical solutions. He is also clear in stating that this approach carried with it risks, leading some pragmatists to entertain eugenical ideas about progress, a point to which we will return shortly. Regarding the second, Pearce notes differences of degree among the pragmatists regarding logic, as well as criticisms that their viewpoints engendered. But he also argues that Peirce, James, and Dewey all shared the view that logic was ‘connected to experiment’ and wedded ‘to evolutionary progress’ (213).

The ‘Conclusion’ cashes out the obvious: Spencer’s influence on pragmatists cannot be understated—even as they often passionately criticized his positions—when it comes to their thinking about evolution (332-33). Pearce also notes that his cohort-based approach opens up the range of pragmatic voices included, the implications of which extend across a range of contemporary disciplines (334). A final point of note is that pragmatists, even when wrong and

occasionally labeled as naïve, were committed to actions which engaged ‘social and moral progress’ (339).

Of course, there are going to be quibbles with any book. Cases in point? The time-jump to 1985 at the end of chapter four, though interesting, feels like an extraneous break in continuity. The fifth chapter toggles back and forth a bit too much when it comes to pragmatists, their respective allegiances, and the conceptualizations with which they best aligned. The seventh chapter begins with an extended three-point response to challenges that Pearce then addresses ‘albeit indirectly’ later in the chapter (291). There is, however, a more problematic aspect to the book, even if Pearce clearly flags this as a narrative predicated on pragmatism as an American philosophy. This issue can be framed in one of two ways. First, there is a discussion of Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr.’s involvement in the first cohort relating pragmatism, but there is no mention of his involvement in the now-infamous *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927), U.S. Supreme Court case. Second, Pearce clearly excludes any significant discussion of non-American pragmatists, noting however that, ‘to the extent that the relevant events [covered in the book] are global, cohorts can be global as well’ (9). He then helpfully lists some of those he excludes. At least two of these names stood out: F. C. S. Schiller and Giovanni Papini. Schiller, the foremost British pragmatist of his day, was a devotee of eugenics. The Italian Papini, influenced by the works of both Schiller and James, ended his career as a controversial advocate of fascism. As with Holmes, Jr., these two figures in the pragmatic canon most certainly temper Pearce’s optimistic view of pragmatism’s approach to questions of biology and evolution, while also qualifying the idea that pragmatism was an ‘American’ philosophy. It also reads as a somewhat deliberate way to side-step a larger debate, given that Chapter Six includes a section entitled ‘Eugenics and Civilization’, where Pearce rightly questions some of the underlying assumption expressed by thinkers such as Dewey Addams, and even Du Bois.

Those observations aside, there is quite a bit to recommend in *Pragmatism’s Evolution*. Pearce provides a detailed overview of pragmatism that takes a fresh look at some well-trodden ground. As such, it will surely engage ‘historians of philosophy . . . [and] historians and philosophers of biology’ (19), no less those claiming an interest in pragmatism more generally.

Mark Porrovecchio, Oregon State University