William James's Social Evolutionism in Focus

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Introduction

It is well known that William James's thinking was influenced by evolutionary theory and by Darwin's theory of natural selection in particular. It is easy to misunderstand James's evolutionary thinking, however, if one is tempted to read contemporary evolutionary views back into James. In this article I try to avoid such anachronism by carefully distinguishing James's evolutionary views from some of their nearest conceptual neighbors. I focus in particular on James's social evolutionism, especially as he expounds it in his 1880 essay "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment."[1] By distinguishing James's social evolutionism from sociobiology, from social Darwinism, and from the theory of memes, I underscore the distinctiveness of James's socio-historical theory. I conclude by suggesting that James's understanding of dynamic, evolving populations can still serve as a resource for evolutionary theory, especially as a corrective to a typically reductionistic neo-Darwinism.

In "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," James advances an innovative theory of socio-historical change, and he does so by way of an explicit analogy with Darwin's theory of natural selection. The very first sentence of the essay reads:

> A remarkable parallel, which I think has never been noticed, obtains between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoölogical evolution as expounded by Mr. Darwin on the other. (James, "Great Men" 602)

Specifically, the parallel that James claims to have noticed is that in both cases, change in a system over time is to be explained in terms of the differential treatment of varying elements within a population. In the parlance

of contemporary philosophy of biology, James is claiming that both organic and societal change can be viewed as *selectionist systems*: in both cases, there is a population consisting of variants—elements that differ from one another—that can either be "selected" or not by the relevant features of the environment, thereby shaping the future characteristics of the population in question.[2] As James himself puts it,

> I affirm that the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the "variation" in the Darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short *selects* him. (James, "Great Men" 625)

Although in this passage (as elsewhere) James focuses on what he calls "great men," his point is meant to be perfectly general: there is something about how a person becomes accepted by society or gains social influence that parallels the selection for an organic trait in Darwin's theory. How specifically are these two processes supposed to be the same?

What James Is Not Saying

Rather than directly explicating what I take to be the point of James's analogy, I think it will be instructive to eliminate some erroneous interpretations at the outset. In particular, I would like to distinguish James's position from several views that we might be tempted to project back on James based on our familiarity with contemporary discourses surrounding the relationships between biology and society. This methodology will serve to head off carelessly anachronistic interpretations of James, while also situating James's thinking within a map of neighboring views, so that we can better see what James's distinctive socio-historical theory might have to offer the contemporary scene. Here I differentiate James's socio-historical theory from three views: sociobiology, (one particular type of) social Darwinism, and the theory of memes, in that order.

Given that James is avowedly applying some kind of insight from Darwin to social theory, one might be tempted to think of James's position in the "Great Men" essay as somehow a precursor of twentieth-century sociobiology (or of offshoots like evolutionary psychology). Spearheaded in the 1970s by Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, sociobiology is the interdisciplinary effort of various sciences to provide "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior" (Wilson 4). Because sociobiology views social behaviors as just one more type of trait that comprises an animal's phenotype,

it explains the existence and frequency of such traits using the same methods that neo-Darwinian biologists use to explain any trait, postulating genes that code for various types of social behavior in conjunction with speculative narratives about the utility of these traits in primeval environments. Sociobiology is highly controversial when applied to human behavior, first, because of the danger of naturalizing and thus vindicating questionable attitudes and behaviors such as sexism and violence; secondly, because of its reductionism that neutralizes cultural factors by explaining them away at the biological level; and thirdly, because it enacts its reductionism in an overt attempt at academic imperialism. As Wilson puts it, "It may not be too much to say that sociology and the other social sciences, as well as the humanities, are the last branches of biology waiting to be included in the Modern Synthesis" (4).[3]

To give a sociobiological account of change in a human society is then to give a *literally* Darwinian (or neo-Darwinian) account of the evolution of social behavior. As James states in the first sentence of his "Great Men" essay, however, he is merely interested in noting a *parallel* to natural selection, which is to say an *analogy* or an *isomorphism*: James wants to show that in a certain respect, societies develop in the same way that populations of organisms in Darwin's theory do. That is, James is claiming that there is something structurally similar about the two processes, which is emphatically *not* the same thing as saying that we should always explain social behaviors in terms of the fitness that they may have conferred on our ancestors. James's socio-historical theory is therefore not a type of, or precursor of, modern sociobiology.[4]

The second sort of view that I want to keep distinct from James's socio-historical theory is social Darwinism. Whether James counts as a social Darwinist is (obviously) a matter of definition. Here I distinguish among three definitions of social Darwinism.

First, if social Darwinism is simplistically defined as "a social theory based significantly on Darwin," then James clearly *is* a social Darwinist. As I have shown, James explicitly draws on Darwin as the inspiration for his socio-historical theory. But this does not say very much, nor does it get to the heart of what most people worry about when they discuss something called "social Darwinism."

Second, consider a more substantive definition of social Darwinism provided by Mike Hawkins. Hawkins defines social Darwinism as a worldview constituted by a set of "interlinked ideas about time, nature, human nature and social reality" (17), central to which are the ideas that temporality and development are real and significant features of the world and that understanding the dynamics of change is therefore key to understanding

nature as well as society. Social Darwinism on this definition has no necessary connection to Darwin's theory, although its prevalence is largely a result of the rise of nineteenth-century evolutionary theories such as Darwin's (in addition to historicist philosophies such as G. W. F. Hegel's). According to Hawkins, social Darwinism is not by itself a fully formed ideology but rather serves as a conceptual foundation for a variety of ideologies, which range from sanguine optimism about the progress of history to a reactionary fear of society's imminent degeneration. That is, social Darwinism for Hawkins is a metaphysics that does not directly entail any specific political or ethical position: once one acknowledges the importance of change, there is still the question of one's attitude toward this change.[5]

On this definition, too, I would argue that James *is* a social Darwinist.[6] James's entire scientific-philosophical worldview is deeply social Darwinist, in Hawkins's sense, because James has a marked tendency to approach biological, social, psychological, and other issues through an examination of the dynamics of systems operating in time, as opposed to viewing nature, society, or mind as static entities subject to timeless descriptions. As any reader of James is aware, it is a central point of James's pragmatism, pluralism, and radical empiricism that the world—and even truth itself—is always *in the making* and can only be understood as such.[7]

The third definition of social Darwinism that I want to consider is the most familiar. Here social Darwinism holds that there are facts about the dynamics of the natural world that directly warrant specific positions in ethics and/or politics. A paradigmatic case of this kind of social Darwinism is the claim that biologists have shown that competition or the "survival of the fittest" is only "natural" and that therefore the economic system of laissez-faire capitalism is justified.[8] What is truly pernicious about this kind of social Darwinism is the way in which it exploits a slippage between a normative and a (purportedly) descriptive sense of "nature," such that humans are somehow in danger of not being natural and therefore must follow certain prescriptions gleaned from evolutionary theory in order to remain or become natural. Supposing that nature is good, and supposing that nature is essentially a struggle for dominance, it is concluded that a society that promotes such a struggle is a good one.

On this definition, I would claim that James is decidedly *not* a social Darwinist, and moreover that he is avowedly *against* any such a position. One way to show James's aversion to this kind of social Darwinism is to contrast James (as James himself did) with his elder contemporary Herbert Spencer. Ever since twentieth-century historians popularized the term "social

Darwinism," Spencer's nineteenth-century writings have retrospectively been considered to be paradigmatic of social Darwinism.[9] It was Spencer after all who originated the phrase "survival of the fittest," while also doing much to ensure that this phrase was taken in a normative sense and not merely a descriptive one.[10]

James's ethical and political views are evolutionary, but in an entirely different sense than the traditional social Darwinist's. Rather than deriving an ethics directly from some postulated characteristic of nature—thus conveniently founding one's ethics on characteristics that one posits in the world—James argues that the best ethical and political ideals emerge through a selectionist evolutionary *process* and are therefore never wholly determinate or predictable. The following early remark, which James gives as an explicit rebuke of Spencer, illustrates James's point:

> Different ideals . . . appear only as so many brute affirmations left to fight it out upon the chess-board among themselves. They are, at best, postulates, each of which must depend on the general consensus of experience as a whole to bear out its validity. The formula which proves to have the most massive destiny will be the true one. But this is a point which can only be solved *ambulando*, and not by any *a priori* definition. (James, "Remarks" 904)

Thus, although James believes that it is through a certain "struggle" that the best ideals emerge, this is altogether different from claiming that struggle *as such* should be adopted as an ideal. In fact one could simply drop the term "struggle" and choose a different metaphor, such as sifting or winnowing, and state James's ethical position equally well. Perhaps the selectionist process of "sifting" through our various ideals over time will eventually vindicate some form of socialism rather than capitalism. For James, at least, it is an open question.[11]

To sum up my discussion of social Darwinism: James is a social Darwinist in the sense of having a social theory influenced by Darwin, and also in the sense of believing in the reality and importance of time and change in nature and in society, but *not* in the most pernicious, familiar, and Spencerian sense of the term, which involves gleaning a substantive ethical or political position directly from facts about nature or natural processes.

Moving on, the third sort of view that I want to keep distinct from James's socio-historical theory is memetics, or the theory of memes. The idea of a meme was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), as a cultural analogue to the gene of biology. Just as Dawkins believes that bio-

logical evolution is best understood in terms of natural selection on genes, he also believes that cultural change is best understood in terms of a selectionist process operating on discrete units of culture, or "memes," examples of which include "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (192). The basic idea is that because we humans have, through our *biological* evolution, attained the general ability to imitate one another (e.g., by evolving certain perceptual and cognitive capacities), we have now set the stage for an analogous system of *cultural* evolution that takes place in and through us. Certain memes catch on, and successful memes are ones that spread very widely and for a long time. Memetic selection is not literal Darwinian natural selection, and memes may even spread despite *decreasing* the Darwinian fitness of individuals: one could imagine a certain cultural vogue for self-destructive behaviors, in an extreme case even for suicide.[12]

Dawkins's theory of memes is closer to James's socio-historical theory than is either sociobiology or traditional social Darwinism. After all, both theories are attempts to provide accounts of cultural change by postulating within society a dynamic system that is analogous in structure to Darwin's theory of natural selection but is not a literal application thereof. There is, however, one key difference between these two selectionist systems: whereas in memetics the variants that are selected upon are bits of culture—"tunes," "catch-phrases," etc.—in James's theory the variants are *whole individual people*, for example, what James calls "great men." For James the relevant process of social selection is one where a *person*, and not some imitable behavior, gains some kind of social ascendancy, although it is perhaps *by virtue of* the specific, meme-like characteristics of a person, in interaction with the socially relevant environment, that such ascendancy is achieved.

There are substantial differences between a selectionist theory of cultural change that takes a meme as its variant and one that instead takes an individual person.[13] In particular, it is not clear that the variants in the latter kind of system could count as what Dawkins calls *replicators*: entities capable of replicating themselves with high fidelity across many generations. It is central to Dawkins's gene-centered view of evolution that evolutionary change should be understood as operating so as to benefit "selfish" replicating genes, which have engineered organisms for the "purpose" of replicating themselves as much as possible. Similarly, Dawkins views memes as a relatively new kind of replicator, using our imitation-prone brains like a parasite in order to replicate themselves maximally. Despite the potentially misleading connotations of this kind of anthropomorphizing talk, one virtue of including Dawkins-

type replicators in one's selectionist theory is that they provide a simple and intelligible way of measuring the state of the population in question, or of mapping its change over time: one simply measures the relative frequency of the various types of replicators and notes how this quantity changes. *Evolution* can then be understood precisely as change in the relative frequencies of different types of replicators in a population over time.[14]

Unlike Dawkins's memes, individuals in James's socio-historical theory would not seem to count as replicators. Whereas my behavior of wearing a red hooded sweatshirt might be said to instantiate a meme that replicates itself when you imitate my fashion by donning such a sweatshirt yourself, it is difficult to see how an *individual person* could be said to replicate him- or herself under any circumstances whatsoever. One can have children, and one can influence these children, or even nonrelated individuals, to adopt one's behaviors, but none of this amounts to producing an exact copy of oneself in the fashion of a Dawkins-type replicator. Therefore it is clear that to be *selected* in James's socio-historical theory cannot mean *to be replicated*, as it does in Dawkins's theory of memes. For an individual to be socially selected on James's view must mean something entirely different.[15]

What James Is Actually Saying

Individuals and not memes are the focus of James's socio-historical theory because it is the role of individual people in history that is James's primary concern in the "Great Men" essay. James's point in using the term "selection" to refer to the process of gaining social influence is therefore not meant as a statement about individuals' ability literally to replicate themselves, but rather as a way to stand up for the importance of individuals in the movement of history.

James does this in particular by focusing on what he considers to be Darwin's greatest insight, which is the *nondirectedness of variation*.[16] By this I mean the idea that the organic variations upon which natural selection selects are not themselves produced in such a manner as to bias them toward being useful. The nondirectedness of variation sets Darwin's theory of natural selection apart from the earlier evolutionary theory of Lamarck, where adaptations are induced in response to environmental situations, thus biasing them toward being useful at their inception.[17] In James's words:

> It was the triumphant originality of Darwin to see this, and to act accordingly. Separating the causes of production under the title of "tenden-

> cies to spontaneous variation," and relegating them to a physiological cycle which he forthwith agreed to ignore altogether, he confined his attention to the causes of preservation. (James, "Great Men" 622)[18]

Having made this point about biology, James then makes his parallel point about society:

> The causes of production of great men lie in a sphere wholly inaccessible to the social philosopher. He must simply accept geniuses as data, just as Darwin accepts his spontaneous variations. (James, "Great Men" 625)

Thus the central point of James's "Great Men" essay is that, just as in evolutionary biology an organic trait cannot be explained wholly in terms of the shaping influence of the environment, in sociological theory the unique cognitive and behavioral characteristics of a person cannot be explained wholly in terms of external social influence. In both cases, the variants bring something new to the table that the environment can only *select* upon and not *produce*. This is why James claims that societal change is the

> resultant of two wholly distinct factors—the individual, deriving his peculiar gifts from the play of physiological and infra-social forces . . . and, second, the social environment, with its power of adopting or rejecting both him and his gifts. (James, "Great Men" 629)

A key result of this separation of variations from selecting mechanism for James is that we now require, not merely an *externalist* story of how the social environment shapes the individual, but rather an *interactionist* story of how societies and individuals shape one another.[19] As James puts it: "How does the environment affect them, and how do they affect the environment?" (James, "Great Men" 625). By definition, the individual affects the environment most strikingly in the case of what James calls a "great man," who is just someone who manages to become selected by the social environment in such a way as to influence society greatly. Again, James provides a biological analogy:

> And whenever [the environment] adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way. He acts as a ferment, and changes its constitution, just as the advent of a new zoölogical species changes the faunal and floral equilibrium of the region in which it appears. (James, "Great Men" 625)[20]

This passage highlights the dynamic, interactionist quality of James's biological as well as social views. Although in evolutionary biology the environment

exerts selection pressures that shape the characteristics of successive generations of individuals within a population, the individuals also physically alter the environment in which they live, affecting the conditions with which they and other organisms must continue to cope. Analogously, although one's society shapes one's beliefs and behaviors to a high degree, individuals still have unique, sociologically inexplicable characteristics and thus the ability to shape society rather than merely be shaped by it. In both cases, the variants and the selecting agency redirect each other in an endless dynamic feedback process.

Conclusion

The point of James's "Great Men" essay is not literally to apply Darwin's theory of natural selection to social behaviors, as in sociobiology; nor to derive a substantive ethical theory from some posited attribute of nature, as in traditional social Darwinism; nor to provide a selectionist theory of the spread of imitable behaviors, as in Dawkins's memetics. Rather, James is primarily interested in drawing a parallel to one specific aspect of Darwin's theory, which is the idea that the environment can only *select* upon variants and not *produce* them. This separation of variants from selecting mechanism then helps to underwrite James's position that individuals are capable of introducing real novelty into the world. James takes this to imply, moreover, that explanations given in terms of the achievements of individuals constitute at least one legitimate mode of socio-historical explanation: the times make the person, but so too does the person make the times.

To borrow a metaphor from Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, James repudiates the idea that the environment is like a rigid lock that individuals are continually shaped to fit into like a key (98).[21] Whether in the biological or socio-historical case, individuals help to change the very shape of the lock that they are trying to fit, in an endless process of dynamic feedback. I believe that it is this dynamic understanding of natural systems, in conjunction with a pluralistic framework that takes seriously multiple levels of analysis—biological, psychological, socio-historical, etc.—that constitutes the strength of James's overall evolutionary worldview, while differentiating it from more common reductionistic positions like sociobiology or Dawkins's gene-centered view of evolution.

NOTES

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1. A lecture James gave to the Harvard Natural History Society, which was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October of 1880. The title was shortened to "Great Men and Their Environment" in later printings, which is why it appears this way in my references below. The essay was also translated into French and published as "Les grand hommes, les grandes pensées et le milieu" in *Critique Philosophique* in 1881.

2. In *The Dialectical Biologist*, Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin usefully contrast selectionist (or "variational") systems with "transformational" systems such as the one posited by Lamarckism, where change is effected by the cumulative transformations of something rather than by the selective elimination of variants in a system (ch. 3). Also see "The Trials and Tribulations of Selectionist Explanations," in which Ron Amundson provides a critical discussion of the nature and limits of selectionist explanations in general, as well as "William James and the Broader Implications of a Multilevel Selectionism," in which Jonathan Schull provides a broad overview of selectionist reasoning in James's works in particular.

3. Here Wilson refers to the theoretical innovations of the 1930s and 1940s, when the theory of natural selection was fortified by Mendelian genetic theory and new statistical methods in population genetics. For more on this time period, see Peter Bowler's *Evolution: The History of An Idea*, chapter 9.

4. This is not to say that James never engages in anything like sociobiology or evolutionary psychology. James claims in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, for example, that the disdain we feel for the meekness of the "saintly" type of person is probably "a negative result of the biologically useful instinct of welcoming leadership, and glorifying the chief of the tribe" (295). This is a Darwinian explanation for a social behavior: respecting power has been useful in the past, causing those who do it to survive and reproduce more frequently than others. This sort of explanation is different from what James is up to in "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," however, and the fact that he is willing to give *both* types of explanation shows that even when he engages in (literally) Darwinian explanations of social behavior, he does so in a pluralistic spirit.

5. Hawkins is especially interested in the two-faced or "janiform" quality of social Darwinism, such that nature can be seen alternatively as a model for human behavior or as a threatening force that needs to be counteracted. This alternation between attitudes constitutes the principal theme of his *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*.

6. Hawkins includes James in his list of social Darwinists as well (120).

7. See "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" for James's social theory, *The Principles of Psychology* for James's Darwinian evolutionary psychology and selectionist account of individual learning, *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth* for James's dynamic theory of truth, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* for James's metaphysics, and *A Pluralistic Universe* and the postscript to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for James's speculations about the emergence or a spiritual reality in and through the dynamic activities of the natural world.

8. This case is so paradigmatic that I am tempted simply to define *it* as social Darwinism, although that is not necessary for my purposes here.

9. The irony is that Spencer developed his own evolutionary theory based on *Lamarckian* principles, prior to Darwin's 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*. See for example Spencer's 1857 "Progress: Its Law and Cause."

10. To do justice to Spencer's ethical and political vision would require an analysis of his *Data of Ethics* (1879), in which he predicts a utopia of pure gentleness and altruism. This does not change the fact, however, that he believes that the *path* to such a utopia is paved by a certain hardness toward the less evolved among us. For more on Spencer, see Mark Francis's impressive recent work *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life*.

11. James in fact suggests in "The Moral Equivalent of War" that he believes that some form of socialism, or "socialistic equilibrium," constitutes the best system (1289).

12. Dawkins also acknowledges certain disanalogies between memes and genes: memes do not have *alleles*, which is to say they do not necessarily vie for existence with specific alternative memes the way that genes are believed to; and memes seem to exhibit *blending* inheritance whereby they shade continuously into one another, as opposed to the *particulate* inheritance of genes that prevents such loss of identity over generations (ch. 11).

13. Peter Godfrey-Smith discusses the differences between these two types of theories in *Darwinian Populations and Natural Selection* (150–51).

14. This is not to say that measuring this is easy, nor even that we have a coherent story to tell about what constitutes a gene, let alone a meme. In *What Genes Can't Do*, for example, Lenny Moss criticizes the idea that there is a univocal gene concept that covers both (1) a gene that "codes for" a specific phenotypic trait and (2) a gene that is physically locatable in a specific, continuous stretch of DNA.

15. There is, however, another aspect of James's thinking that is more analogous to Dawkins's memetics than is the socio-historical theory put forth in "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment." This is James's pragmatist theory of truth as put forth in *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*. Here James argues that an idea is made to be true by surviving through a certain process of verification. I would argue that it is fair to call this a selectionist epistemology, and that it is roughly similarly to Dawkins's memetics (except that Dawkins does not take himself to be redefining truth). Jonathan Schull gestures toward this similarity in the conclusion to his "William James and the Broader Implications of a Multilevel Selectionism."

16. I follow Ron Amundson's "The Trials and Tribulations of Selectionist Explanations" in choosing this particular locution.

17. James went from believing in both natural selection and the inheritance of acquired characteristics ("Lamarckism") to rejecting the latter and accepting only the former. James first rejects Lamarckism in print in the final pages of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), whereas in "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880) he claims only

that "Darwin's first achievement was to show the utter insignificance in amount of these changes produced by direct adaptation" (James, "Great Men" 623). Darwin himself had allowed for both natural selection and the inheritance of acquired characteristics and never fully rejected the latter. For the development of Darwin's views on heredity and variation, see Rasmus Winther's "Darwin on Variation and Heredity."

18. It is actually false that Darwin ignored the "causes of production" of variation, and James knows this. In fact Darwin put forth a comprehensive theory of variation and heredity called "pangenesis" in his 1868 *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, a book James reviewed twice (James, "Two Reviews"). Thus James admits in a note that Darwin *does* attempt to account for the origin of variations, although he still celebrates the fact that the theory of natural selection does not *depend on* the theory of pangenesis (James, "Great Men" 622n2).

19. The distinction between externalism, internalism, and interactionism is a major theme of Peter Godfrey-Smith's *Complexity and the Function of Mind in Nature*.

20. Through the figure of the great man, James can be viewed as attempting to salvage a kernel of truth from the "great man" tradition of historiography, which tells history in terms of the deeds of important (and generally male) figures. One thing that sets James apart from this tradition, however, is that in his hands, the "great man" style is purged of the element of divine inspiration or fate that other nineteenth-century writers like Thomas Carlyle seem to find in the lives of their subjects. A great man for James is just someone whose traits happen to be taken up and developed within his or her contingent, socio-historical circumstances in such a way that manages to feed back into these very circumstances and change them. Whether this happens is largely a matter of happenstance or luck, rather than fate.

21. In this way James's view might be said to prefigure what Levins and Lewontin call a "dialectical" approach to biology. According to the latter authors, an organism's environment (or niche) is both physically altered by *and conceptually dependent on* the organisms that populate it (97–106). That is, in addition to the fact that organisms effect physical changes in their environments—for example, by consuming resources, excreting waste, and building structures to inhabit—it would seem that a population's niche cannot even be *defined* without specifying what is salient to the organisms under discussion.

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