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Dissertation Abstract

Evolutionary Pragmatism: The Darwinian Structure of William James's Thought

My dissertation argues that William James's fragmented-seeming body of writings forms a coherent whole when viewed from the perspective of a type of explanation that he abstracted from Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection: *selectionism*, or the explanation of systemic patterns in terms of the interaction of variants with a selective environment. This theoretical structure provides the underlying backbone of James's biological, sociological, psychological, epistemological, and ethical writings, allowing him to generate a series of theories analogous to, but independent of and not reducible to, natural selection. The point of James's selectionism, I contend, is to grant an active role to the individual in its own development, rather than portraying the individual as a passive "key" molded to fit an environmental "lock." In this way, James's position resonates with critical viewpoints in current philosophy of science that portray organisms, and especially humans, as co-constructing the physical and cultural worlds they inhabit, as opposed to a more typical neo-Darwinism that characterizes selection as the sorting of passive variants by an autonomous, controlling environment.