An Evolutionary Path Through William James

Abstract

Though it is a mere commonplace to say that William James was influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, very little attention has actually been paid to the concrete effects these
ideas had on James’ philosophy. The question I have asked in this paper is—if James was in fact influenced, can these influences be traced out in a concrete way in his philosophy? To this end, I will show just how far-reaching this influence was, just how far the tendrils and roots of natural selection penetrated into his thought. We will see that not only did the natural selection model influence James generally; it was also formative in many of James’ most characteristic and individual philosophical ideas.

New Uses of old powers arise discontinuously both in the bodily and mental natures of the animal and in its individual developments, as well as in the development of the race, although at their rise, these uses are small and of the smallest importance to life. (Wright)

The short passage quoted above can be found at the very beginning of a long essay written by Chauncey Wright called “Evolution of Self-Consciousness.” The idea for the essay was suggested to Wright by Charles Darwin. Published in 1873, it was a very early attempt at what we would today call evolutionary psychology. With a balance and logical rigor often absent from examinations of evolution even today, Wright produced “the most level-headed discussions of his time concerning the philosophical meaning of Darwin’s work.” (Wiener)¹ As we will see as we progress, the ideas latent in this short passage will be immensely important to the formation and structure of the philosophy of William James. The novel use of our powers, whether physical or mental, does not come from above, does not come from some merely antecedent efficient causation, and does not come from our own internal telos. True novelty—and for James the very possibility for choice—arises in the spontaneous, the small, and the simple. William James will take up this structure, a structure he first found in natural selection,² and repeatedly use it in the formation of his philosophy.

It is of course not novel to say that William James was influenced by Darwinian evolution. Saying he was influenced by evolution is simply saying James was alive during the late 1800s.

¹ As an interesting side note, John Dewey wrote the foreword to this book.
² Though there is little space for an in depth explanation of the contemporary scientific understanding of natural selection in this paper, it will be enough to remember that James understood natural selection to be a combination of random, accidental mutations and their encounter with an external environment.
Alone it means almost nothing. *Everyone* in those times was influenced in one way or another by these ideas. Still, every introductory work, every biography of James prominently mentions that quite early in his life “James had thus reached a fairly full acceptance of Darwin’s transmutation theory.” (Richardson) Everyone grants that he was in a front row seat for the introduction of, discussion of, and even the general acceptance of evolutionary theory. Though these influences were indeed formative they are not the subject of this paper.

Rather, the underlying premise of this paper’s examination of James is that every commentator admits the forest—the influence of evolution—but no one explicitly traces out the paths through the forest much less the individual trees of this evolutionary influence. If we take as our first premise what everyone readily admits—that James was in fact influenced by evolutionary thought—can this influence be explicitly traced out in his philosophy? The main assertion of this paper is that this influence can in fact be traced not only through the broad strokes of general influence but also in the individual trees and paths of evolution that meander through nearly all of his philosophy. In essence, William James took the structure he found in natural selection and repeatedly applied it to different philosophical problems; it became the very structural model of his philosophy as a whole.

Even as early as *The Principles of Psychology*, James was starting to believe that many aspects of human behavior, such as the formation and preservation of instincts, could be explained through a natural selection model, “I proceeded at that time to draw a tentative conclusion to the effect that the origin of *most* of our instincts must certainly be deemed fruits of the back-door method of genesis, and not of ancestral experience in the proper meaning of the term…. The evidence for Mr. Darwin’s view is too complex to be given in this place. To my own mind it is quite convincing.” (James 129, 131) A little later in his development, he became
much more specific and carried the natural selection model far beyond simple instinct formation into personal and social behaviors:

(T)he new conceptions, emotions, and active tendencies which evolve are originally produced in the shape of random images, fancies, accidental out-births of spontaneous variation in the functional activity of the excessively instable human brain, which the outer environment simply confirms or refutes, adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys—selects in short, just as it selects morphological and social variations due to molecular accidents of an analogous sort. (James, Writings 641)

In the very first line of an essay published in *The Will to Believe* called “Great Men and their Environment,” James makes explicit just where this opportunity for an analogy between the structure of natural selection and social behavior lies, “A remarkable parallel, which I think has never been noticed, obtains between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoological evolution as expounded by Mr. Darwin on the other.” (James, Writings) For James, this remarkable parallel has two aspects. First, the vast majority of all difference, of all change from generation to generation arises because of “internal molecular accidents, of which we know nothing.” (James, Writings 623) The social parallel to these molecular accidents for James are our constantly moving, often spontaneous ideas, emotions, etc. On the other side of the equation, the parallel to the environment for the molecular variation is the social environment. The instincts, emotions, conceptions first emerge as random variations. Only in their contact with their environment or more specifically in their contact with external conditions and other people do they begin to gain their instrumental value. Anachronistically stated, James is proposing an early version of sociobiology.

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3 There is of course no mention of women and in the standard practice of the time James is using men to contain everyone at least implicitly.

4 This essay was originally given by James as a lecture before the Harvard Historical Society in 1880.

5 James is alluding here to the random mutations and when he says -of which we know nothing he means that he (and the science of his day) does know the full explanation for why these mutations occur. More importantly for James, the fact that they do in fact occur is enough to support his further statements.
It is far too easy today to overlook the radical nature of these ideas because we have grown so used to similar statements about psychological and cultural evolution. Essentially he is taking the model of “the natural selection of accidentally produced tendencies to action” (see the diagrams below) and applying it much more broadly to ideas and behaviors and their interaction with the social environment. He is asserting that even in our evolved minds the chain of mental causation does not follow a rational, mind first, step-by-step progression. Rather, we have “the most abrupt cross-cuts and transitions from one idea to another, the most rarefied abstractions and discriminations, the most unheard of combinations of elements.” (James, Writings 641)

Within each mind there is a constant spontaneous production of reactions, images, concepts, and hypothesis that are selected by the environment whether physical or social.

Each and every individual produces these spontaneous images and concepts but most of this variation falls with a relatively stable statistical center. However, it is the genius or great man that pushes forward the new ideas, new inventions, and new science; it is the genius that represents the anomalies in a probabilistic model. James is careful however to maintain the close analogy with natural selection. The genius himself (and it is always himself for James) does not create, does not think up the new and valuable idea, invention or science. The relationship is much more dynamic and reciprocal between the genius and the environment. The genius is educated by the environment but the environment is also changed by the genius (It is here where we see the first hints of a natural explanation for James’s meliorism). The following passages from the same essay will further clarify his position and the strength of the analogy between natural selection and social selection:

*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

6 Here of course with the use of the “genius” or “great man”, James is well-marked as a man of his time with his past firmly planted in Emerson, Carlyle, and Kant.
or destroys, in short it selects him. And whenever it 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 zoological species changes the faunal and floral equilibrium of the region in which it appears. (James, Writings 625)

It is clear that James has used the evolutionary model and applied it to 19th century ideas of genius:

_The conceiving of the law is a spontaneous variation in the strictest sense of the term. It flashes out of one brain, and no other, because the instability of that brain is such as to tip and upset itself in just that particular direction. But the important thing to notice is that the good flashes and the bad flashes, the triumphant hypothesis and the absurd conceits, are on an exact equality in respect of their origin.... The environment preserves the conception which it was unable to produce in any brain less idiosyncratic than my own._ (James, Writings 643)

Through an analogy to natural selection James envisioned a higher level version of selection where the source of novelty was the individual and the selection pressures were the social and physical environment of the individual. The variations—initially all on a neutral footing—were the spontaneous flashes of the individual brain. By themselves, these variations had no intrinsic value; they were absolutely neutral. It literally makes no sense for James to speak of a valuable variation somehow existing before contextualizing it in an environment or to suggest that the future value of a variation is somehow already present externally. A better was to express this relationship would be to say that the variation and the selection were equally necessary aspects of the same dynamic process.

Just barely under the surface of James’s thought about evolution is a temperamental preference for and barely checked enthusiasm for instability and change. Where normally in his era the sides in a discussion of evolution would settle into either those who focused on the statistical averages as the truest possible description of reality and those who attempted to regain a lost certainty through a thorough mechanical explanation, James fit into neither category. As he liked to say of himself, he was a possibility man. He wanted to avoid this dichotomy and instead stress that it is sometimes the rare and unusual variation that leads to a valuable
adaptation. James was quite aware of the probabilistic turn in the descriptions of nature after the introduction of Darwin’s theory. Whereas many commentators such as Spencer chafed at the loss of absolute certainty this probabilistic turn implied, James in a characteristic flash of oppositional thinking realized that any generalized statement of probability also implicitly contained outliers and statistical fliers. While the statistical center contained the mass of humanity, there would always be those statistical exceptions, those anomalies that eventually became of value just because they were not like that center. Though all the stability was in the center and all the instability and risk on the fringes, James still decried the center and insisted that individual difference is:

(\text{The zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet. It is the theatre of all we do not take for granted, the stage of the living drama of life; and however narrow its scope, it is roomy enough to lodge the whole range of human passions. The sphere of the race’s average, on the contrary, no matter how large it may be, is a dead and stagnant thing, an achieved possession, from which all insecurity has vanished….The moving present in which we live with its problems and passions, its individual rivalries, victories, and defeats, will soon pass over to the majority and leave its small deposit on this static mass, to make room for new actors and a newer play. (James, Writings 650) }

This fascinating contention of James’ was just as firmly based on evolutionary thought as was the descriptive power of probabilistic statements based on a statistical average. Just as certainly as most variation will occur around a probable center, there will also just as certainly be difference and divergence from this center. His unique insight was that if all variation is value neutral until \textit{selected for} then we have just as much right to focus our praise and attention (and later on as we will see our free choice or faith) on the outliers as on the center. He saw this model borrowed from natural selection in the following way (it should be obvious that James is envisioning a \textit{directional} selection):
In the first figure the selection has selected against only the outliers on the left side whereas in
the second figure the arrow highlights the outliers—not the statistical center—which in James’s
view will now be responsible for change and progress. In our human society this change would
happen through the genius whose “discovery depends altogether on the number of these random
notions and guesses which visit the investigator’s mind.” (James, Writings 642)

The analogy between natural selection and our own progress as a society for James is
now complete. The forest of evolutionary influence, the general framework of the influence is
now in place. In natural selection, James found a natural justification for plurality in random
molecular mutation; he found room for plurality and possibility to come into society through the
genius; and he also found space for this genius to have a genuine choice and a melioristic effect
on the external environment. This is the general framework that James found in natural
selection. We will now examine a specific use of this model in the problem of determinism and
free-will.

Speaking of this perennial philosophical problem, James says, “I know of no subject
less worn out, or in which inventive genius has a better chance of breaking open new ground.”
(James, DoD 587) To that end, James breaks the various opponents in this well known
discussion of determinism and free-will down into two radically different faiths, “What divides
us into possibility men and anti-possibility men is different faiths or postulates—postulates of
rationality. To this man the world seems more rational with possibilities in it, -to that man more
rational with possibilities excluded.” (James, DoD 592) A determinist for James has a strong—
no—an unquestioned, belief that every aspect of reality, present and future, is (at least
potentially) predictable. An indeterminist believes—just as strongly—that there is room (at least potentially) however small for genuine possibility, genuine novelty, and genuine choice.

Determinism in its barest form for James is simply “the antipathy to the idea of chance.” (James, DoD 592) For a determinist, there is no sense in denying that if we had all of the available data we could not reliably predict any potential outcome no matter how distant. James believes that this resistance to the idea of chance is usually tied to a simple misconception that chance somehow equals irrationality, that chance is mysterious, mystical, or unknowable. This of course is not what James means by chance. Rather, we find in the following passage that his initial idea of chance almost exactly mirrors his random concepts, images, and behaviors—before selection by the environment. Pay close attention to the two points of reference that begin to connect determinism to the natural selection model—randomness and value neutrality:

As this point is the most subtile one of the whole lecture, and at the same time the point on which all the rest hinges, I beg you to pay particular attention to it. What I say is that it tells us nothing about what a thing may be in itself to call it ‘chance.’ It may be a bad thing, it may be a good thing. It may be lucidity, transparency, fitness incarnate, matching the whole system of other things, when it has once befallen, in an unimaginably perfect way. All you mean by calling it ‘chance’ is that this is not guaranteed, that it may also fall out otherwise. (James, DoD 593)

In the natural selection model, the random concepts and hypotheses are completely value neutral—their utility, adaptive power, or inventiveness did not occur prior to their reciprocal selection by the genius and the external environment. In this extension of the model, chance is being equated to the random concept formation. Also like the earlier model, variations have no value until selected; chance has no value until it takes one path or another.

In “The Dilemma of Determinism” he explains this same idea with a personal example, “What is meant by saying that my choice of which way to walk home after the lecture is ambiguous and a matter of chance as far as the present moment is concerned? It means that both Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street are called; but that only one, and that one either one, shall be
chosen.” (James, DoD 593) This is the first step of his attack on determinism. In the general explanation of the natural selection model we saw how for James biological evolution generally and natural selection specifically must inexorably lead to the conclusion that there is real plurality (variation) and possibility (process) in the world.⁷ On the surface of this argument and of this example, James wants to show that there are actual possibilities in people and in the environment. His deeper point—and one that is often overlooked in mechanical explanations of any sort—is that if evolution is to be our model and we are going to expand that model into the behavioral or social realm we must see that all of biology including sociobiology (to read a modern word backwards) is contingent.

James pointedly says (please pay close attention to the seamless transition from natural selection into social selection):

*Evolutionists should not forget that we all have five fingers not because four or six would not do just as well, but merely because the first vertebrate above the fishes happened to have that number. He owed his prodigious success in founding a line of descent to some other quality—we know not which—but the inessential five fingers were taken in tow and preserved to the present day. So of most social peculiarities. Which of them shall be taken in tow by the few qualities which the environment necessarily exacts is a matter of what physiological accidents shall happen among individuals. (James, Writings 635)*

There is a very involved series of ideas being connected together by here by James. In the earlier essay “Great Men and Their Environment,” James had put forth the idea that it is the genius and their peculiar ability to see possibility and hypothesis where others did not that caused them to have such a profound influence on social history “He acts as a ferment, and changes its constitution, just as the advent of a new zoological species changes the faunal and floral

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⁷ The idea of James that could be most useful to today’s philosophers of biology is contained in his understanding of the implication of random variation in a process. If one accepts the model of evolution it must always be kept in the forefront of the mind that our best explanations are always of frozen snapshots and never of the process as process. The theory attempts to explain a dynamic process but our particular explanations of particular organisms are fixed—and thus deficient—explanations of a dynamic process. Unlike most philosophers who have looked at evolution or used evolution, James understood this implication of evolution right from the start.
equilibrium of the region in which it appears.” (James, Writings 625) In “The Dilemma of Determinism” it is just this position that James is attempting to popularize and spread out amongst all of society.

He has pretty convincingly shown that the social environment is contingent. By this he means to say that all of the various, divergent, spontaneous ideas we have can potentially have a melioristic effect on our environment. From his viewpoint, this is simply a historical fact. Now he wants to push the analogy a little further. In essence, he suggests that whereas the environment normally defines the value of our original, spontaneous social concepts through a sort of natural selection; we can push this a little further and instead self-select from amongst these original and spontaneous concepts those that we believe will pragmatically serve our society or us.

This idea is not as far from evolutionary thought as it might at first appear. The first chapter of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* is devoted to understanding “Variation Under Domestication” and he concludes the chapter by saying about artificial selection (artificial selection of plants and animals by humans) that “Over all these causes of Change I am convinced that the accumulative action of Selection, whether applied methodically and more quickly, or unconsciously and more slowly, but more efficiently, is by far the predominant power.” (Darwin 476 -My italics for emphasis) James is suggesting a similar type of self-selection of ideas. But instead of focusing our selective power on other organisms, he is suggesting that we can and do focus these selective powers on our own ideas and behaviors.

In any case, James put forth this fascinating idea derived from his evolutionary model for two reasons. The first was that he was sure that if natural selection was a valid model of biology and the social was part of biology then the same probabilistic model that applied to evolutionary
biology must also apply to the social realm. If this was in fact the case, then any absolutist statements about the social realm were just as incorrect as they would be about the biological realm. The entire probabilistic logic of Darwin’s theory of evolution was a reaction against just the sort of absolutist, essentialist thought the proponents of determinism—such as Spencer—were still pushing forward. The second reason was much more visceral and experiential. It just seemed to be the case that an individual could have an apparently random thought that could be taken up and used to improve their own life or the lives of society in general. It just seemed to be the case that it is just those sorts of spontaneous and hypothetical thoughts that would characterize the thought of the genius. If we combine the ideas from these two essays we have been using, “The Dilemma of Determinism” and “Great Men and Their Environment” the arguments would be something like the following (though not as strong as his earlier arguments they are relatively strong):

Contingent Ideas are (at least potentially) melioristic
 Individuals have Contingent Ideas
 Individuals are (at least potentially) melioristic

Individuals are (at least potentially) melioristic
Self-selection occurs in Individuals
Self-selection is (at least potentially) melioristic

So when James envisions an individual making such a self-selected melioristic choices, he envisions them framing the possibility like this, “And whether the world be the better or the worse for having either chances or gifts in it will depend altogether on what these uncertain and unclaimable things turn out to be.” (James, DoD 595) And if we do in fact push this analogy as James is suggesting, if we do in fact become self-selective then actual feelings such as regret, or satisfaction will not be attributed after the fact to actions we were previously determined to make. Rather, the actual feelings of regret or satisfaction will be a dynamic part of our decision
process, a dynamic indication of our own genius interacting with our social environment. James himself followed the model in the formation of his philosophy:8

Take, then, the yoke upon our shoulders; bend our neck beneath the heavy legality of its weight; regard something else than our feeling as our limit, our master, and our law; be willing to live and die in its service—and at a stroke, we have passed from the subjective into the objective philosophy of things, much as one awakens from some feverish dream, full of bad lights and noises, to find one’s self bathed in the sacred coolness and quiet of the air of the night. (James, DoD 605)

Bibliography


8 Though there is no space for a detailed examination of the use of this model in other areas of his philosophy, I will briefly mention where it most certainly reappears. The first and most obvious area is within his explanation of concept formation and use in the essay “Percept and Concept—Import of Concepts.” In this essay, he theorizes about how we evolved the use of concepts in order to adapt better to “a big blooming buzzing confusion.” (James, P&C 233) The adaptation out of this confusion enabled us to have a faculty “for its use in practically adapting us to a larger environment than that of which brutes take account. We harness perceptual reality in concepts in order to drive it better to our ends.” (James, P&C) Importantly for the formation of pragmatism, this is also one of the main places where the pragmatic rule integrates with the evolutionary model.

This model also turns up quite explicitly in James’s famous (and controversial) essay “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth.” In this essay, there are repeated explanations of reality and truth being “everlastingly in process of mutation” and truth being simply another adaptive process connected with life. (James, PCT 439) The model also repeatedly appears in the “Sentiment of Rationality” where “The utility of this emotional effect of expectation is perfectly obvious: ‘natural selection,’ in fact, was bound to bring it about sooner or later. It is of the utmost practical importance to an animal” and “The fittest conceptions survive, and with them the names of their champions shining to all futurity” and “That the course of destiny may be altered by individuals no wise evolutionist ought to doubt. Everything for him has small beginnings.” (James, SoR) I could go on into several other essays—most notably “The Will to Believe”—where the same pattern is repeated but these multiple examples taken from some of James’s most important essays should demonstrate just how widespread was the use of this model. Not only was the model taken up and used by James in his earliest work it was used and re-used again and again.


