

Eilon Schwartz

At Home in the World: human nature, ecological thought, and education after Darwin
(New York: SUNY, 2009)

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Eilon Schwartz's book, *At Home in the World: human nature, ecological thought, and education after Darwin*, makes a worthwhile contribution to a rising body of literature that helps to strip Darwin of the unhelpful interpretations under which his work was maligned. Darwin's theory of evolution - and its antecedent developments in the biological sciences - has brought breakthrough after breakthrough and is now accepted as being as close to scientific fact as it is reasonable to go in science. The application of Darwinian thinking to human nature and culture has had a rockier ride. What Schwartz succeeds in doing, with admiral brevity, is to unpack the way Darwin's early interpreters were responsible for creating many of the obstacles that stand in the way of a proper appreciation of what Darwin had to say about human nature and culture; and what a properly Darwinian approach could offer. The lens through which he looks at the debate between the various interpreters of Darwin is that of education.

In terms of a readership I would say that there is just enough here on the history and philosophy of education to interest readers in that field and a great deal to interest any reader wanting an intelligent introduction to the ways that evolution has been interpreted as a means by which human nature, society, and culture has been shaped.

The central claim of Schwartz's book is that "we have evolved as a profoundly social species, biologically related to the rest of the natural world, and at home in the only planet in the universe for which we are adapted to live". And that understanding our situation in this way gives us philosophical insights into education: what it is for and how to go about it.

He begins his examination of these questions by going back to Darwin and extracting the role Darwin saw for something akin to group selection. He quotes Darwin in *Descent of Man* pondering the emergence of morality.

The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable – namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense of conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed as man. (p.11)

What Schwartz teases out is the repugnance Darwin would have had for the view that self interest (conscious or unconscious) was at the heart of our social instinct. To say that humans are social animals, that they are such to their very core, is to describe a fact about human nature not an appearance masking a different nature. To develop a fresh approach to these questions Schwartz examines the historical detail of Darwin's interpreters: Huxley and Spencer as poor guides to this aspect of Darwinsim; and

Kropotkin, Dewey, and Midgley as good guides. Such a structure might suggest a simplistic approach to the question, but the scholarship is there in the detail and this structure does allow for the refreshing focus on education.

Huxley emerges as the most damaging to Darwin's thoughts on human nature. By emphasising competition in evolution he needs to explain the emergence of morality and culture as entirely outside of the evolutionary process thus introducing a kind of dualism that undermines the revolutionary nature of the theory itself. Spencer holds the line with regard to evolution being responsible for cultural development. However, his laissez faire principles carry over an individualistic interpretation of human nature into the social realm and leads to Darwinism being used to endorse all kinds of injustices in the name of social evolution. For both men education needs to reject its traditional aims, methods, and appeal to authority and refocus on an appreciation of what the child is and how it learns naturally, through curiosity, and what is worth learning: scientific facts about the world and the scientific method as a training in rational thought. Both had a role for the humanities: for Huxley this would be the means of training the emotions and learning values, as they were expunged from science, for Spencer emotion and reason had not been separated so the scientific study of the arts was part of a broad functional education.

Kropotkin interprets human nature as evolved through and exemplifying cooperation within a group. He thoroughly endorses Darwin's interpretation of the human being as evolved on earth, an embodied being connected with natural processes and related to everything else. This appreciation of the web of connections is for him an important subject of education and a source for learning humility. Moreover, our embodied natures meant that what he termed the "brain work" of a theoretical education had been overemphasised in the classical education of the elite and needed to be integrated with training the "eye and hand" such that everyone could receive a balanced education. Schwartz then draws out of Dewey's philosophy of education its origins in his appreciation of Darwin's cooperative interpretation of human nature. For Dewey Darwin's theory allows him to tread a line between the idealist excesses of a rationalist transcendental education and one that is merely a crass materialism. Dewey's development of the role of habit in education (and all of life) is the means by which he can develop a realistic middle position that does not reduce human nature to a deterministic biology or suggest that humans are uniquely free to develop themselves or culture in any way they please. As with Darwin, the examination of Dewey allows Schwartz to set the record straight in terms of the misinterpretations of his detractors: such as suggesting that he has no role for tradition or that his pedagogic practise only allows for enjoyment in the moment not a thirst for future learning. It is in Midgley that Schwartz finds the resources to counter the claimed problem of moving from an is to an ought. This allows Midgley's position to be developed into a robust defence of the idea that education can have an aim and that the aim can be based on a Darwinian interpretation of human nature whilst still supporting the development of a culturally rich life for human beings.

With a short book there are always going to be areas where one would appreciate more detail or a greater embedding of the argument within current literature. However, Schwartz has done excellent work here in rescuing Darwin from some of the misinterpretations that socio-biology fostered, which seem to be particularly resilient in public discourse.

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