

Reviews

Religion and the Sciences of Origins: Historical and Contemporary Discussions.

By Kelly James Clark. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 274 pp. US \$25.00.

The author of the book under review here is Senior Research Fellow at Grand State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, who has to his credit a long list of publications in interdisciplinary studies at the crossroads of science, philosophy, and theology. As a philosopher, Clark reflects about these matters today in the interreligious setting of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute of his university.

The interreligious context also figures in this most recent work, but only in marginal ways by occasional references (pp. 64, 106, 178, 205) and by appending one chapter on “Judaism and Evolution” and one on “Islam and Evolution” (pp. 207–43). These chapters, however, are merely tokens, because they are far too sketchy and too random to advance the argument significantly. Nevertheless, they show that similar discourses on creation and evolution are pursued within Judaism and Islam as in Christianity. The main line of Clark’s reasoning unfolds in the preceding twelve conveniently subdivided and systematically arranged chapters, which, except for two, all have a summarizing “Conclusion.” Although this arrangement indicates didactical skill, the author’s sometimes very casual style testifies to a rhetorical gift that works with “catchy hook[s]” (p. 223) in order to attract as broad and general audience as possible. However, the same rhetoric every now and then tends to obscure and trivialize the matters discussed.

The book opens with a broad general recount of the science–religion debate in Western culture with a special focus on the statement by one prominent representative of the so-called New Atheism, Richard Dawkins, that the “existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other” (p. 5). Passionately repudiating this assertion on grounds of the incommensurability of scientific and “metaphysical explanation” (p. 6), Clark wants to show that “theism” does not contradict science, demonstrating his point by discussing those topics which “have received the most attention in the past century” (p. 7) in the said dispute, namely cosmology and evolution.

Before delving into the subject matter, the author attempts to define “science” and “religion” so as to lay a proper foundation for what follows. Although he succeeds in explaining “science,” he fails to do so regarding “religion.” For him it is simply “impossible to define ‘religion’ in a handy, single, useful, and comprehensive way” (p. 23). Yet despite this lacuna he is eager to advance the dialogue by concentrating on “specific scientific claims . . . and their relationship to specific Christian beliefs” (p. 24). Convinced that “the myth of continual and irreconcilable differences” between science and religion “needs to be put to its well-deserved final rest” (p. 25), the author pleads for the application of an “integration model” in this dialogue, which “encourages a healthy give and take between science and religion” (p. 28) of which the present publication gives a neat demonstration.

Clark finds the key to unlock the stalemate of the debate in the Augustinian-inspired “Doctrine of the Two Books,” that is, “the belief that God revealed himself in two ways, the *Book of Scripture* and the *Book of Nature*” (p. 34; original emphasis; see also pp. 41f, 58f, 95f.). He illustrates this with biographical snapshots of outstanding scientists who were able to integrate their findings with their belief in God—Francis Bacon, Newton, Boyle, Kepler, Galileo, and others. When discussing evolution, Clark alerts the reader first to the impact William Paley’s “natural theology” had on Darwin in developing his theory of evolution (pp. 64–68) before offering an informed re-reading of the creation of humans according to Genesis (pp. 68–77). Recounting the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 and the Dover Panda Trial of 2005 (pp. 97–100), he then moves into discussion of the strongly rejected Intelligent Design theory on grounds that “invoking God cannot turn ignorance into knowledge” (p. 104), favoring “theistic evolution” instead, because “a careful reading of the *Book of Nature* teaches that the means of creation was evolution” (p. 105; original emphasis). He goes on to examine issues of divine will and randomness (pp. 106–14), evolutionary psychology of religion (pp. 115–36), evolution, ethics, and morals (pp. 137–64), and the “soul” and “free will” (pp. 165–83). His argument reaches its climax in chapter twelve, where he asks “Is God unnecessary?” (p. 185). Reviewing most recent cosmological discoveries about the “fine tuning” of the universe in a variety of aspects and the even more surprising emergence of life on earth, the author concludes by stating, “Our assessment of the likelihood that God exists . . . will greatly shape where we ultimately end up. For those who are inclined toward God’s existence, the arguments we’ve considered may rationally push them from agnosticism to theism, or, may strengthen and support their already held theistic belief” (p. 206).

This plainly admits that all the intellectual efforts made in the forgoing discussion with their many interesting historical details (conveniently accessible through an index) demonstrate nothing but the thinkability of the existence of God in light of scientific findings. Such apologetic repudiation of atheistic world explanation by people like Willard Van Orman Quine, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins, however, is not really convincing, despite its clever and insightful presentation, because it remains at the level of finding “room” (p. 8) and “intellectual space . . . for God” (p. 43).

Although Clark repeatedly acknowledges the basic differences between a religious (“metaphysical”/“supernatural”) and a scientific explanation of world and life—insisting that when “reading” the “two books” one should avoid letting “one book intrude into the other’s proper domain” (p. 54)—one wonders where this will lead, because allowing religion and science to remain so separate and distinct does not advance mutual understanding. Rather, what is needed is to make the implicit hermeneutic of each approach explicit so that each becomes accessible for discourse. Any perceiving of “nature” as “text” requires familiarity with a particular vocabulary and grammar, just as reading Scripture does. Nothing is “read” in a perceptual vacuum. All such “reading” is a dialectical process availing of a particular hermeneutic; “reading Scripture” is done with the intention of acquiring existential orientation and certainty (faith), while “reading the book of nature” is done to satisfy curiosity and with the purpose of acquiring knowledge about “nature” (science). Both these “readings” are necessary—besides others—for

properly understanding human existence and the world around us as well as to cope successfully with the various challenges and demands of life. Thus, the ultimate issue Clark approaches is how to perceive the contingent complexity of life—the life of the cosmos and the life of conscious human beings—as creation so to be able to act accordingly. Unfortunately, Clark does not advance his argument this far, which makes one question if his book will have its desired impact beyond a circle of avowed theists.

CHRISTOFFER H. GRUNDMANN

Professor Emeritus, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN
 Christoffer.Grundmann@valpo.edu

Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics. By Beth L. Eddy. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. xvii + 135 pp. US \$80.00.

This slim, yet comparatively expensive volume familiarizes readers with a generally neglected discourse among American pragmatist philosophers of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era in the late nineteenth and the emerging twentieth century. Its author, Beth L. Eddy, a pupil of Henry S. Levinson (to whom the book is dedicated) and associate professor of philosophy and religion at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Massachusetts, declares herself a pragmatist, too. She presents her retelling of the discourse to show that “the issues and the concerns at stake” in it “remain as timely today as they ever were” (p. xvii) because they “mirror today’s concerns about the conflict among science, religion, and morality” (p. 103; see also p. 101). Her “motives for telling that story,” however, “are more normative than descriptive” (p. 107; see also p. xvi); and indeed, considering that the book was some fifteen years in the making, the simple fact of its publication indicates that Eddy is on a mission. Her mission is to make the voices of those “pragmatists . . . heard in our climate of oligarchy, plutocracy, and individualism run amuck. Their calls to welcome those who are “other” to us, to realize how much we owe our fellow humans, and their courage to uphold their principles without guarantees of success are treasures we need to draw upon. Their pioneering exposition of the values of democratic moral agency squared with the environment of a nonteleological universe may yet help us out of our problems” (p. xvi).

The book consists of six rather independent chapters arranged in historical sequence, some of which present previously published material and thus prompt certain redundancies. The chapters are (1) “Setting the Stage: Darwin and Nineteenth Century Evolutionary Ethics and Theologies” (pp. 1–20), (2) “T. H. Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics” (pp. 21–32), (3) “John Dewey in Conversation with Huxley and Santayana on Evolution and Ethics” (pp. 33–58), (4) “Struggle or Mutual Aid: Jane Addams and the Progressive Encounter with Social Darwinism” (pp. 59–77), (5) “Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Evolutionary Tension Points” (pp. 79–106), and (6) “Contemporary Controversies over Chance and Teleology” (pp. 107–23); the bibliography and index follow on pp. 125–35.

While insiders to the debate will easily find their way through the maze of arguments and issues presented, uninitiated readers might best start studying chapter six first because this provides a contemporary context by situating the discourse within the science versus religion debate, especially involving the “New Atheists” (Dennett, Lewontin, Gould, Dawkins, Pinker, Wilson). Noticing that the “heat and venom of the arguments” in this discussion “points toward something deeper at stake . . . than the typical stakes of an academic debate” (p. 107) and judging that this is “*not* a dispute” about “the existence or non-existence of God” or “between science and religion,” Eddy identifies as the root cause of the fiery arguments “the choice . . . between *a world with all-powerful forces at work in it . . . and a world with a historically continuous vision of the good,*” which is a “forced choice *between one sort of divinity or another,*” but which is also, according to Richard Rorty, “a choice between metaphysical comfort and moral anxiety” (quoted p. 108; original emphasis). What the discussion is actually about “are existential issues involving *differences in ultimate human hopes and fears* which bend people toward either a propensity to emphasize the human capacity for predictability and control versus the propensity to highlight the need for human humility and hope for meliorist agency” (pp. 108f, original emphasis).

Since dealing with questions of ultimate concern means *de facto* dealing with religious questions, Eddy calls all the pragmatists she features “religious” (p. xiii; see also p. 119), meaning not a conventional religiosity but “religious naturalism,” that is, acknowledgment that “humans are wholly described in naturalistic terms, if not strictly in biological ones,” and also that there are “limits of our scientific powers to control the natural world and bend it to human wishes” (p. 109). This attitude, she says, makes one not only humble but also open toward religious traditions and their diverse visions of the good and the beautiful, something the New Atheists simply miss. The author, thus, shows how Thomas H. Huxley, Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams (the “undersung member of the first generation of American pragmatists” [p. 60] and Eddy’s favorite subject of study [see p. xv; 59]), and George Santayana challenged the established justification of the appalling social inequalities in the United States of their times. They did not advocate more charity but a radical change in conceiving of the situation. While Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism provided “the robber barons of the day with a sense of spiritual justification” (p. 12) making laissez-faire capitalists like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and George Pullman argue that “the survival of the fittest” is, in Rockefeller’s words, “merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God” (quoted p. 13), the pragmatists, who all embraced Darwin’s insights, opposed such biased deterministic reasoning on grounds of the dynamic interplay between the individual and the environment. They held that no environment is unalterably given. According to John Dewey, the environment is rather “an open universe” where “uncertainty, choice, hypotheses, novelties and possibilities” abound (p. 30) and where contingency and unpredictability reign over history. Since humans interact with and thereby constantly change their social as well as their natural environment in random ways, there is well founded hope that matters change also for the better as sometimes happens in evolution. Hence, advocacy for “meliorism—the pragmatic faith that this is possible” (p. xvii) and pleading

“the case for tolerance of moderate meaninglessness in the world” (p. 119) is at the core of Eddy’s project.

Meliorism is actually Eddy’s “normative claim,” presented in typical pragmatist fashion by humbly not declaring to have written the definite account of pragmatism—an untenable essentialist statement—but by telling “particular stories of its history and genealogies for particular purposes” (p. 110). Not giving in to desperation but getting actively engaged in the little which one can do “for the better in the world” as long as one is alive is a conscious expression of the “melioristic hope” (p. 119) “against all hope” (p. 121), which pragmatists want see cultivated not just through words and reflection but the more so by acting accordingly, to which especially the life and work of the 1931 Peace Nobel Laureate Jane Addams and John Dewey bear impressive testimony.

The style of Eddy’s book is dense, at least in most of its parts. While this shows the author’s intimate familiarity with her research material, it sometimes makes it difficult for the reader to comprehend properly what she is referring to. The focus on minute details of and differences in argument in the pragmatist discourse is often done at the expense of neglecting the larger philosophical and historical context—for instance, Marxism and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia—consideration of which would have emphasized pragmatism’s distinctly American approach to social issues. Further, there is no mention of or reference to more recent work which would have allowed for a distinction between and critical discernment of pragmatism over against utilitarianism (e.g., Peter Singer’s *Practical Ethics* [1980]). Despite these rather substantial omissions, the book remains an important contribution to the history of mind and social theory and action and will serve well as a textbook in higher level college classes on these topics.

CHRISTOFFER H. GRUNDMANN

Professor Emeritus, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN
Christoffer.Grundmann@valpo.edu

REFERENCE

Singer, Peter. 1980. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.