

Posudek oponenta na doktorskou disertaci

Gerald Ostdiek: Darwin's Ontology. The Consequences of Reciprocity

(Posudek vypracoval A. Markoš)

Shrnutí: Práce mapuje reakci právě vznikající harvardské školy mladých filosofů (Wright, Peirce, James, Fiske a další) na publikaci Darwinova *Původu druhů* (1859). Autor argumentuje, že právě tato škola (zejména pak C. Wright) položila filosofický základ pro Darwinovu teorii a jím ovlivněna se vyvíjela k pragmatické filosofii a k sémiotice. Podrobnější rozbor níže; na tomto místě jen konstatuji, že práce splňuje předpoklady doktorské disertace a doporučuji její přijetí.

Summary: The work maps the reaction of the emerging school of young philosophers at Harvard (Wright, Peirce, James, Fiske et al.) to the publication Darwin's *Origin of species* (1859). The author shows that it the school (especially C. Wright) constituted a philosophical ground for Darwinian theory; the other way around, Darwin had deeply influenced the group and its development towards pragmatic philosophy and semiotics.

The author shows how an ontology matching Darwin's views was developed in Harvard, and poses this ontology in a contrast to misinterpretations it received on the continent, especially in the milieu of German metaphysical tradition. The new ontology, as stated right in the Introduction "posits that subject (this-ness) is in constant re-negotiation with, and dependent upon an incorporation of, object (that-ness); and that this mutuality is reciprocal, continual, and scale thick." "Categories of being are only species, that is, they are mutable, accidental, and contingent." (p. 5) On such a scene „in issues of *life*, everything that is, is *a posteriori*; there is no 'track' to follow, no 'form' to mirror, and no 'place' at which it all comes to a rest – except as living beings carve out some momentary respite through individual acts of minding of/in the world.“ (193) Truth is enacted in given contexts, not relying on eternal, constant rules and assertions; this “differentiates Darwin's science from both the Newtonian certitude that had patterned biology into/upon a teleology of mechanism and necessary causation, as well as the religious certitude that turns initial postulations (abductions) into god-given truths.“ (200) such an „ontology demands that we dump eschatology all together, and replace it with process and chance, love and emergence, and a world wherein consequence matters.“ (205) „...what-was and what-might-be become what-is, which is the habituation of event into form. In reference to animal forms, this is the precise topic of *Origin*.“ (213) „The success of *our* responses (our interpretations, our minding of our situation, our *life*) depends on the quality of our action herein, which is our ability at reading, singing, dancing, moving, loving, (insert metaphor here) – *incorporating* us within the world, and the world within us. And to be sure, in no way does any of this ease our responsibility for our choices in the world; rather it vastly increases it by recognizing that our choices *are in the world*.

They are consequential.“ (217) This „demands that we give up our childish fascination with permanence, essence, ‘first’ principles, ‘final’ causation, and the whole general apparatus of traditional religion and philosophy.“ (225) „...life normatively and *formatively* compels us to believe (which is to act) with uncertain footing.“(156) The author contrasts this view with the “traditional ontology”:
„Thinkers operating therein tend to default, often unwittingly, to a simple and vulgar realism, even in their most abstracted metaphysics.“ (5)

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After the introductory chapter *Ontology for the living*, Ostdiek brings us to the scene of late 1850s and 1860s, with the turmoil aroused by the publication of the *Origin of species*. In the chapter *Origin and encounters* we get an overview of the correspondence between Darwin and a group of Harvard thinkers, especially Chauncey Wright. On such a background, Ostdiek develops his main argument: only this nascent school of young philosophers and mathematicians (that is to develop later into pragmatism) was apt to disclose the real philosophical potential of Darwinian teaching (and vice versa: the somewhat uncanny subtitle of the thesis points towards the influence Darwin had on the school). This in a sharp contrast with continental thinkers (and scientists) who tried (and succeeded) to squeeze Darwin into the straitjacket of well-established metaphysics and Cartesian science – this way of reception was dubbed “German Darwinism” by Wright; in following chapters Ostdiek shows that this tradition prevails up to contemporary systems, be it, e.g., Neodarwinism, or Christian creationism.¹

Two chapters that follow sketch the ferment of mid-19th century in the US: concentrating on the explanation how the “pragmatic a priori” got developed – as a contrast against categorical a priori characterizing classical philosophy since Plato. Especially the central concept of *fitness* seems to be understood in America in a different way as in England (Spencer) or on the Continent. What follows is the analysis (or a reconstruction?) of the philosophy of C. Wright. However marginal he may seem when compared with his peers W. James and C.S. Peirce, it’s especially him who started (via his correspondence with Darwin, and digesting his ideas for the others) the endeavor of American pragmatism and Peircean semiotics. This mainstream argumentation is interspersed by another motif – *religio* and religion, showing how Wright et al. struggled with the problem, in a vain effort to harmonize, or explain, their views confronted with the worldview of the mainstream population (problems like *novelty*, *fitness = truth*, or what later Gould & Lewontin named *spandrels*).

The rest of the dissertation is centered on the subsequent development of “German Darwinism” on one side, and the thinking of James and Peirce on the other. The chapter entitled *The many problems of German Darwinism* is a centerpoint of the whole text, exposing the turmoil evoked by efforts to reconcile Darwin’s Ontology with classical science and religion. It is to be regretted only, that thinkers called here “Germans” have little say in the analysis, so very often the whole intellectual effort of the

¹ I regret only that the dating of letters exchanged is not always clear; we get the reference like [Wright 2000, page], but I suspect that the quotes do not follow in a chronological order, hence such a reference is of little use for the reader who has no access to the collected works by Wright.

Continent falls under the label of “bad guys”, together with religious fundamentalists. After all, they struggled in their own way with (1) the demands of scientific determinism, (2) historical contingencies, and (3) the labyrinths of religious traditions and beliefs; even when we look backward, we cannot tag unequivocally the winners and losers! I feel that the polemics with “Germans” could have been better founded: in many places it has an air of a caricature (e.g. Haeckel, Dawkins...). It is also to be regretted that Ostdiek has not backed his polemics by the arguments of his colleagues at the Department – in several places they could have come out much stronger!

The last two chapters are devoted to W. James and C.S. Peirce – we get a plastic image of the development and struggles of both thinkers, including many idiosyncrasies (like Peirce’s claim of inventing the principle of natural selection himself).

In the light of all this, I should ask who is the real begetter of the theses of Darwin’s Ontology, as quoted above (I praise them highly)? I have doubts how could they be derived from material gathered in the dissertation – I suspect that the formulations come not from Wright et al., but from – Ostdiek himself. This is why I started this review by a collection of quotes: I feel that those statements cannot be derive directly from arguments Ostdiek presents in their support: they result from his own interpretative effort. Take the characteristics of Wright as given by Ostdiek, with what Wright wrote the preamble to *German Darwinism*. He observes two kinds of how evolution is treated in the literature: “[T]hose which treat of it as a theorem of natural history from a Baconian or scientific point of view, either mainly or exclusively (confining themselves to scientific considerations of proof), and those which treat of evolution as a philosophical thesis deductively, and as a part of a system of metaphysics.”

Such a division, states Ostdiek, separates the names of Darwin and Spencer. But does it indeed? Wright’s stance is that of science, of course, whereas the second one is that of “German Darwinism” – and here my confusion begins: (1) what has natural history in common with rigorous scientific method?; (2) What is the principal difference between “Baconian” and “German” scientific metaphysics? After all, it was not Darwin and his English followers, but Germans who established Darwinism on the Continent as a *scientific*, i.e. not historical, method (e.g. Weismann). But (3) Darwin’s ontology as defined by Ostdiek (see above) doesn’t fit to either Baconian or German science: it is yet another, and the most important player in the contest. After all, “scientific considerations of proof” is not easy to gain in reconstruction of historical events – be it history of the mankind, or evolution of life. “German Darwinists”, from Haeckel (not Haeckle!), Spencer or Schmidt, up to Dawkins (!) are not easy to sort into groups as defined by Wright; even creationists and proponents of the ID would fit into the corral.

If so, what kind of filter our author has, to be able to filter Darwin’s Ontology out of Wright et al.? Or is it his own inference seemingly supported by irrelevant literature? Or is it a back-projection from the later literature of pragmatism? I have a strong feeling that the filter represents Ostdiek’s main contribution to the topic.

Conclusion: I consider the present dissertation by G. Ostdiek as a valuable contribution to the understanding of the evolution of evolutionary teaching – if abridged and pruned of unnecessary divertimentos it deserves publication as a book. I fully recommend it to the learned Committee to be accepted as a Ph.D. Thesis.

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