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 ***The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy (review)***

Michael Eldridge

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

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*Michael Eldridge*

One must not read Rogers' title as claiming that no one anywhere knows the Dewey presented in this fine, informative, illuminating, and engaged book. Certainly many readers of this journal will recognize the Dewey he has uncovered. Rogers' perspective, however, is a novel one. Think of an artist or photographer whose portrait of a familiar figure **[End Page 508]** enables the viewer to appreciate the subject in a way that s/he has not quite realized before. The subject is a familiar one but the new take is one that while not startling is nevertheless fresh and worth of study.

Although Rogers credits many present and past members of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy—Thomas Alexander, Raymond Boisvert, Vincent Colapietro, Colin Koopman, John Shook, John Smith, and myself—as well as two who are well regarded by us—Hans Joas and Robert Westbrook—, his audience is not those who have spent their lives with Dewey and other classic American philosophers. Rather he is addressing the concerns of a wider audience, one which has only in recent decades become acquainted with Dewey and has tried to deal with Dewey in terms of contemporary intellectual issues. This audience has yet to discover Rogers' Dewey.

The book is organized in two parts, with two chapters in the first part and three in the second. The last three chapters are where Rogers addresses the topics indicated by the sub-title: "Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy." The first part sets the stage for this discussion with an original account of the spiritual crisis occasioned by Darwin and Dewey's response to it. The second chapter then focuses directly on Dewey's Darwinian-responsive theory of action and inquiry.

Concerned to show that Dewey was not just a secularized liberal Protestant, Rogers puts Dewey in conversation with the prominent nineteenth century orthodox Christian theologian Charles Hodge and his liberal Protestant opponents. Dewey's response to this religious crisis, Rogers insists, was not confined to the late nineteenth century period of

Dewey's life but continued to be of concern throughout his career (47), even after he ceased to regard himself as Christian. This cultural and personal crisis shaped Dewey's theory of human agency. Dewey steered clear of Hodge's pessimism and the liberal Protestant's optimism, finding hope in Darwin's explanation of our place in the world rather than in the despair of many and the overly assertive humanism of others: "In placing *transactionalism* at the core of our biological anthropology, Dewey attempts to make us feel comfortable with a picture of ourselves as beings that do and suffer, resist and are frustrated. With our doing this, the art of living is defined not by our ability to escape our condition, but rather how well we can successfully navigate and improve it" (51).

The foregoing will not strike many of us as a novel account of Dewey's sense of agency, but in situating him within late nineteenth-century developments Rogers provides a vivid account of Dewey's lifelong orientation. Also worthy of note, indeed it must be stressed, is Rogers' distinctive concern to show Dewey's humility, his sense of contingency. "Dewey's account of self-assertion," writes Rogers, "is more circumscribed than that of the liberal Protestants because he accepts the contingency that Darwin reveals, but it is not as crippling as [the] spiritual sickness" (59) to which some succumbed. **[End Page 509]**

I will not present the situational, deliberative, transformative and fallibilistic theory of inquiry developed in the second chapter, contenting myself with readers' familiarity with this pragmatic approach and this summary statement by Rogers: "In this chapter, I have intended only to explicate Dewey's conception of inquiry in the context of his philosophy of action, ... What this account ultimately commits us to can be discerned only through a consideration of the specific subject matter of religion, ethics, and politics" (100). It is because the latter three chapters, to which I now turn, display Rogers' account...

## NOTES

1. All major texts are translated by now, with the exception of the *Principles*. A fresh translation of *Pragmatism* (by N. Ferron, Foreword by S. Madelrieux, Flammarion, 2007) and the first translation of the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (by G. Garreta and M. Girel, Agone, 2005, Flammarion 2007) were published recently, as well as: *La philosophie de l'expérience. Un univers pluraliste* (PU), tr. S. Galéti, Paris, Les empêcheurs, 2007, *Introduction à la philosophie* (SPP), tr. S. Galéti, Paris, Les empêcheurs, 2006, *Précis de Psychologie* (P Briefer), tr. N. Ferron, Paris, Les empêcheurs, 2003, and *La Signification de la vérité* (MT), collective tr., DPHI, Lausanne, L'Age d'homme, 1998, in addition to numerous reissues.

2. Lapoujade 2007 and 2008.

3. With the exception of Debru et al. 2008 and editorial works by Serge Nicolas (see for example his revised edition of James's texts on emotions, *Oeuvres*, I, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006).

4. Op. cit., 488.

5. Op. cit., 489.

6. Op. cit., 5.

7. Op. cit., 490.

8. Which echoes G. E. Myers' project, which is only referred to in a note, p. 10.

9. Op. cit., 174.

10. Op. cit., 175.

11. W, *Essays in Philosophy*, 123–124.

12. The clearest analysis to my knowledge is in MS Robin 300.

13. Alston 1955. For a more recent and fresh treatment, see Hookway 1997.

14. Op. cit., 361.

15. Op. cit., 173.

16. Op. cit., 371–73.

17. Taylor 1996, p. 35.

18. Op. cit., 282.

19. See the transition between Part II and III, p. 348, where Part III seems to follow for the sake of mere exhaustiveness ("le portrait de la philosophie de James que nous avons retracé ne serait pas complet si . . .").

20. Op. cit., p. 178. I cannot enter here in the discussion of the claim that there is a shift in James from psychology to philosophy.



MELVIN L. ROGERS

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New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, xxi + 328 pp., Index

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