
Where is gratitude? Michel Serres, John Dewey and environmental ethics

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Abstract

Comparing Michel Serres and Dewey is kind of audacious. Bruno Latour, sure. He explicitly mentions Dewey. Latour may have been inspired by Serres, but Serres works with tropes and figures different from, if not at odds with Pragmatism: Hermes, the Hermadrophite, the *tiers instruit*, the Harlequin, The Northwest Passage, the parasite. He is also dismissive of the social sciences, whereas psychology and sociology are central to the Pragmatist heritage. When it comes to the philosophical tradition, Serres simply moves his own way, blending, mixing, splicing elements from earlier epochs. The Pragmatists were more tied to Modernity and what they, especially Dewey, saw as the work of bringing Modernity to its proper fruition. They predated Serres' "polychronic" approach which sidesteps Modernity and its linear time line.

Still, despite major differences, there are points of overlap. Both Serres and Dewey wrote early books on Leibniz. Each thinker takes seriously the work of the natural sciences. Both also accept, Serres more enthusiastically, that the humanities and the sciences can work together. Both resist the lineage associated with mind-body dualism. Finally, inclusionism (if I may invent a word) is central to the ethico-political ideals of each.

Although Serres and Dewey can be put into conversation on a variety of topics, I will focus on environmental issues, with Serres' book *le contrat naturel* as a starting point. In particular, I will highlight two themes: the gift and the contract. Serres combines them in his work. Dewey, as I read him, has little to say about gifts. This might seem surprising in light of Dewey's association with his longtime anthropology colleague Franz Boas and in light of the fascination Marcel Mauss expressed about the final lectures given by Émile Durkheim on Dewey. The reverse fascination, that of Dewey about Durkheim and Mauss, seems to have been non-existent. 20th century French philosophers, by contrast, inspired by Mauss, have made the topic of 'gift' more central. Derrida's writings on the gift are, for example, well known in the US. Serres, too, makes *le don* an integral part of his argument, and, in this regard, may offer some way of filling a lacuna within Pragmatist thinking.

On the other hand, fan of Modernity though he may have been, Dewey constantly rejected social contract language. Its assumption of atomistic individualism was not at all congenial to the Hegelian, "social organism" strand which remained a permanent influence on his thinking. Thus, Serres' tactic of extending the social contract to include a "natural contract" would most likely have been resisted by Dewey.

Each man, I will suggest, has something the other needs. Serres makes much of the gift,

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but within a context that is not that consistent with the assumptions that underlie contract theory (individualism and a rationalism that defines reason as essentially calculative). By contrast, Dewey's criticisms of social contract thinking indicates his commitment to a social ontology more conducive to discussions about the "gift." However, because the kind of discussions occasioned by Mauss are not at all part of his intellectual landscape, Dewey remains limited as a source for moving beyond typical ways of discussing obligation in the context of environmental ethics.

How would a discussion centered on issues related to environmental questions go? How would each contributor deal with obligation, with particularism, with expanding what Royce called the "beloved community," to encompass plants, animals, minerals? Is there room for a language of rights when talking about plants and animals? If not, what language is most congenial? Finally, in terms specific to our two interlocutors, can the notion of the gift or an extended notion of the social contract suffice as a general context for guiding questions and responses relating to environmental issues?

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