

The Corruption of Scientific Theory: Darwinism and Nazi Eugenics

Since its inception in 1859, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection has been nothing but trouble. It has caused riotous debates among seemingly placid people, partitioning them onto either the side of creationism or, what it has come to be affectionately called, Darwinism. The theory has called to question the very origins of our species, lowering the esteemed status of the human race to lowly origins among a group of monkeys and apes. It has called to question the existence of God, explaining that no God created our species as we are now, but that we have simply undergone the process of evolution by natural selection over millions of years to reach the status as the dominant species of the planet. The theory also called to question, and this perhaps most gravely, the origins of human morality. Are our morals purely social institutions that have been carefully molded by religion and a consensus decision on what is right or wrong? Or are they simply inherited characteristics, akin to our hair color, that have been passed down for generations, helping our species survive and flourish in the way that it has? But perhaps the most troubling legacy of Darwin's theory is its many misinterpretations and the grave repercussions of these missteps. The process of eugenics, for example, is considered a branch of Darwinism (as Darwin's cousin, Sir Francis Galton, upon reading the *Origin of Species* officially established it as a scientific institution), and its application has led to some of the most controversial and truly horrific moments in the history of the human race. The most poignant example of the application of eugenics is undoubtedly its use by the National Socialist Party of Germany (commonly known as the Nazi Party), who used a skewed version of Darwinism to justify the murdering and sterilization of millions of people in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Darwin's theory suggests many things for the human race, but does it recommend this accelerated selection? Did Darwin suggest that to truly

allow for the increased progress of the human race, the elimination of organisms with less favourable traits was necessary? Was it Darwin's intent to call for a renewed vigor in the struggle for existence, pitting man against man in an evolutionary battle for supremacy? These questions, though troubling, are necessary if we are to truly understand what implications about the human race Darwin made, and ultimately what he intended for us to do with them in the future.

In order to evaluate whether Darwin's ideas were truly misinterpreted, it is first necessary to look at what Darwin said in both *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, published in 1859, and in his later work *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871. Darwin introduced his theory of evolution by means of natural selection in *Origin*, first establishing variation in domestic organisms and the inheritability of these slight individual differences, and then extrapolating this idea to say that “[these] individual differences are highly important for us, as they afford materials for natural selection to accumulate, in the same manner as man can accumulate in any given direction individual differences in his domesticated productions” (Darwin and Wilson 478). Darwin, having established variations and the accumulation of these traits in nature, alludes to the inevitable conclusion that organisms “in order to become in any degree permanent, necessarily have to struggle with the other inhabitants of the country, the species which...yield offspring which... [are] in some slight degree modified” (Darwin and Wilson 483), referring to the “struggle for existence.” Darwin then conclusively put these ideas together to establish the concept of natural selection, stating that “owing to this struggle for life, any variation, however slight...if useful, is preserved” (Darwin and Wilson 489), leading to an increased chance of survival and therefore increased reproductive success. Darwin did, however,

allude to the fact that perhaps humans have been removed from this “great battle of life” (Darwin and Wilson 498), saying that “we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply” (Darwin and Wilson 500). Darwin implied here that we need not worry about the “war of nature,” with particular emphasis on nature, and that the “happy survive,” with clear implications that he was simply consoling his human audience that as long as a person was happy they would “survive and multiply” (Darwin and Wilson 500). Although Darwin implies that perhaps humans are now removed from this struggle for existence, he later embellishes on the development of man and the role of the struggle for existence in man’s development in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*.

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin continues (or rather starts) his analysis on the origin of our species, with a clear-cut conclusion as to the future of the human race and what needs to be done in order to progress as a species. He comes to the conclusion that:

Man, like every other animal, has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through a struggle for existence consequent on rapid multiplication; and if he is to advance still higher he must remain subject to a severe struggle. (Darwin and Wilson 1247).

Darwin asserts that in order to avoid “[sinking] into indolence,” with “the more highly-gifted men” not “[being] more successful in the battle of life than the less-gifted” (Darwin and Wilson 1247), it is necessary to continue the struggle. However, Darwin insists that the human struggle for existence must be different, “hence our natural rate of increase, though leading to many and obvious evils, must not be greatly diminished by any means,” and asserts that “there should be open competition for all men,” as to not prevent those who are most able from “succeeding best

and rearing the largest number of offspring” (Darwin and Wilson 1247). Darwin recognized that “important as the struggle for existence has been and even still is, yet as far as the highest part of man’s nature is concerned there are other agencies more important” (Darwin and Wilson 1247). Darwin describes these other, more important, agencies while discussing natural selection and its affect on “Civilised Nations” (Darwin and Wilson 873). Darwin begins by describing the “savages” that he has encountered, and how the “weak in body or mind are soon eliminated,” so that “those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health” (Darwin and Wilson 873). He asserts that “we civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment” (Darwin and Wilson 873). Darwin then appeals to the widespread understanding of domestic breeding to say that such aid in the struggle for existence will no doubt be “highly injurious to the race of man” in the eyes of anyone “who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals” (Darwin and Wilson 873). While it may appear that Darwin indeed did believe the aid to which society gives the less-fit is injurious, he later justifies such actions as a “result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused” (Darwin and Wilson 873). Darwin believed that we could not “check our sympathy, if so urged by hard reason, without the deterioration of the noblest part of our nature” (Darwin and Wilson 873), clearly identifying the human capacity for compassion and sympathy as transcendent of the struggle for existence. If we were to abandon this instinct, which Darwin believed was surely evolutionarily achieved, we would be abandoning that which had preserved our species and allowed us to reach the dominant position in our environment.

Although Darwin was adamant that our capacity to sympathize was key to our continued success and progress as a species, he also was sure that natural checks would keep the balance of “less-fit” people and “more-fit” people at a level at which the integrity of the species would not be degraded. He acknowledges this after discussing the instinct of sympathy, and he describes the “weaker and inferior members of society not marrying so freely as the sound,” and even believes that “this check might be indefinitely increased, though this is more to be hoped for than expected, by the weak in body or mind refraining from marriage” (Darwin and Wilson 873). He even quotes W.R. Greg, who describes the dilemma between the Irish and the Scottish, saying that:

The careless, squalid, unambitious Irishman multiplies like rabbits: the frugal, foreseeing, self-respecting, ambitious Scot, stern in his morality, spiritual in his faith, sagacious and disciplined in his intelligence, passes his best years in struggle and in celibacy, marries late, leaves few behind him...In the eternal ‘struggle for existence,’ it would be the inferior and *less* favoured race that had prevailed – and prevailed by virtue not of its good qualities but of its faults. (Darwin and Wilson 876).

Darwin then explains another check to “this downward tendency,” saying that “the intemperate suffer from a high mortality rate, and the extremely profligate leave few offspring” (Darwin and Wilson 876). As is seen by these references to population checks, Darwin was certainly not a tolerant man. He was racist toward other races (namely the “savages” of which he speaks in *The Voyage of the Beagle*), and he felt superior to members of his own “race,” namely those who were of lower social class. However, as intolerant and racist as he may have been, he still believed in the power of the human “instinct of sympathy,” and believed that nothing should be done to halt the *natural* selection process that had developed the human race to what it was. This

is certainly in contrast to the racist and murderous tendencies of the National Socialist Party, who harnessed the sound logic of Darwin's theory of evolution to justify their crimes against the human race.

In order to understand the full extent of the Nazi misinterpretation of Darwin's work, it is first necessary to understand Darwinism's early origins in Germany. After the defeat of the liberal movement in the 1848 revolutions in Germany an antiestablishment tone became an integral part of popular science, as people looked for scientific justification for political rebellion (Kelly 17). The publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 was a veritable dream-come true for the Populizers and publishers of scientific journals, as Darwinism had "enormous philosophical, religious, political, and even emotional implications beyond the narrow realm of biology" (Kelly 4). Darwin's work was both informative and accessible, using a personal and informal tone of scientific discovery that included the reader in its revelations (Kelly 5). The theory of evolution by natural selection gave hope to disgruntled segments of the population, as they thought the struggle for existence would surely end in their favor, and Darwinism became an increasingly widespread ideological weapon for the lower classes (Kelly 5). Darwin's theory, however, was anything but airtight (as he himself acknowledges in chapters such as "Difficulties on Theory"), and left gaps for tremendous misinterpretations (Kelly 43). These gaps allowed for the great "Populizers" of the time to adapt Darwinism to their own ideals and beliefs, and perhaps the greatest Populizers and manipulator of Darwinism at the time was Ernst Haeckel (Kelly 5, 8). Haeckel adopted a far more brutal version of the struggle for existence, saying that:

The theory of evolution teaches us in human life, exactly as in animal and plant life, at each place and time only a small privileged minority can continue to exist and flourish;

the great mass must starve and more or less prematurely perish in misery...we may deeply mourn this tragic fact, but we can not deny or alter it. (qtd. in Holmes 17).

The manipulation of Darwin was taken even further beyond the Populizers into the literal translation of such terms as “natural selection” and the “struggle for existence” from English to German (Kelly 29). The term for natural selection that was finally settled on was *natürliche Zuchtwahl*, which meant “natural breeding choice (or selection)” (Kelly 30). This led to the misinterpretation that nature chooses with purpose as man does for breeding, which implies that certain forms are superior to others. The term *Kampf* was used for “struggle,” which implies a harsh physical battle as opposed to the struggle against the environment or for natural resources (Kelly 30). When the term was introduced into the mainstream German culture, it probably translated to “Life is War” (Kelly 31). Darwinism also appealed particularly to the youth of Germany, as it was a new way of thinking that did not restrict them with religion and creeds as their parents did (Weikart 11). Although Darwinism was a new outlet for such ideas as the renewed struggle for existence and the selective process of race, these ideas were hardly new in terms of the exposure to the public. Darwinian ethnologist Oscar Peschel explained before the publication of *The Descent of Man* that racial extermination was unfortunate but necessary, using the phrase “nature triumphs ethics” (Weikart 8). Also the Naturalism movement, which advocated many of the same ideas as Darwinian based eugenics, was on the rise before even the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, with German Populizers such as Vogt, Büchner, and Moleschott publishing articles on the subject in the early 1850s (Weikart 14). As a foundation had been established in Germany both by Naturalists and Darwin in the nineteenth century, the stage was set for the eugenics movement to gain real popularity in the twentieth century.

In order to fully understand how the concept of Nazi eugenics opposed both the views of Darwin and those of other eugenicists, it is necessary to understand the original purpose of the eugenics movement. When Sir Francis Galton officially established eugenics as a scientific movement, he described it as “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally” (qtd. in Freeden 645). The early stages of the movement operated under a very elementary knowledge of heredity, thinking that “unfit traits such as feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, criminality, insanity, alcoholism, pauperism and many others run in families and are inherited in exactly the same way as color in Guinea pigs” (qtd. in Gray 84). Sidney Webb, founder of the *New Statesman*, a leftist British publication, interpreted eugenics as a situation in which “we cannot afford to leave...bad environment alone...the ‘survival of the fittest’ in an environment unfavourable to progress may...mean the survival of the lowest parasite” (qtd. in Freeden 647). Thus from an apparently well-intentioned movement comes the subjective nature of fitness, as fitness is dependent on the observer, survival of the fittest means only “survival of the survivors” (Bethell 68). If fitness is truly dependent on the observer, one eugenicist argued, then the poor may be seen as the eugenically superior as the competition among the lower classes is surely more vigorous than that of the upper classes, weeding out the weakest (Freeden 654). It is precisely this subjective characteristic of eugenics that made the Nazi eugenics movement morally justifiable (in their minds), as they were simply accelerating the selection process of the superior organisms (Germans) over the morally, physically, and mentally inferior organisms (the Jews). However, before the implementation of Nazi eugenics, most eugenicists believed that the measures that needed to be taken for successful eugenics would require the support of the government, as well as the moral responsibility needed could be shifted to a government body (Hen 116). Little did

these highly hypothetical eugenists know what the full implementation of eugenics would mean for the human race, and for the very decency of human morality.

As Adolf Hitler rose to power in the early twentieth century, the notion of widespread application of eugenics slowly became a reality. Hitler's popularity rose from his promise to bring health, prosperity, and power to the German people, and his Nazis were the poster-children for the clean-cut order that represented the new morals Hitler wanted to implement (Weikart 209). Hitler opted for both artificial and "natural" selection, with eugenics within the German community to purify the blood of the "Master Race," and destruction of outsiders (through a World War) to oppose competition and free up land for the superior German race (Weikart 212). Hitler believed it evil to fight against the evolutionary good of progress, and thought that to stop the struggle for existence would be to degenerate the human race (Weikart 211). In a 1928 speech Hitler outlined his quasi-Darwinian justification for both his war and eugenic policies, saying that:

The idea of struggle is as old as life itself for life is only preserved because other living things perish through struggle...struggle is the father of all things...It is not by principles of humanity that man lives or is able to preserve himself...but solely by means of the most brutal struggle. (Fritz 166).

He believed that Germany's fate would be that of Russia's (who had recently undergone the Bolshevik revolution), and was afraid that communism (which tried to justify the equality of people) would reach Germany and exterminate the Germans, as other inferior peoples would be allowed to rule and subjugate them (Fritz 169). One of the main reasons Hitler specifically targeted the Jews (aside from him thinking them inferior physically, mentally, and morally) was that he was afraid that a Jewish-Marxist coalition would attempt to take over Germany (Weikart

213, Fritz 171). It was also necessary (in his contorted evolutionary view) to exterminate all Jews (hence a Darwinian extinction through natural selection), as to completely remove an inferior group of people that the Germans would inevitably be forced to compete with, as well as acquire new land for the Aryan race to occupy as it developed into a more perfect society (Fritz 173-174). While the majority of moral people view Hitler's extreme measures as inhumane in every sense of the word, Hitler himself recognized that perhaps some of his tactics were inhumane, but pressed on realizing that "humaneness is therefore only the slave of weakness and thereby in truth the most cruel destroyer of human existence" (qtd. in Weikart 215). He even tried to justify his policy of infanticide on the grounds that it is "a thousand times more humane than the wretched insanity of our day which preserves the most pathological subject" (qtd. in Gasman 164). Using Darwinism to account for infanticide, euthanasia, and genocide is not a very tenable argument, as it is completely dependent on what is meant by improvement of the species, which in Hitler's case was the extermination of inferior peoples, regardless of their biological ability to survive (Weikart 215). What was also proof of Hitler's extreme quasi-evolutionary devotion was his belief that not only were Germans a different race, but a different species, compelling him to say that "Plainly I belong to another species...I would prefer not to see anyone suffer, not to do harm to any one...But when I realize that the species is in danger; then in my case sentiment gives way to the coldest reason" (qtd. in Barta 134). Regardless of the motives behind Hitler's actions, the outcome of his eugenics program speaks for itself. It is believed that between 300 and 400 thousand people were subjected to compulsory sterilization from his 1934 sterilization law, 100 thousand psychiatric patients were shot or gassed (a process deemed "euthanasia of inferiors") along with another 120 thousand psychiatric patients that were starved to death under the classification of "lives of little value." In addition around 6 million Jews and Gypsies were

executed by firing squad, gassed, or worked to death in death camps (Hen 117). Such unspeakable acts of horror were certainly not justified by any set of morals to be found through Darwin's theory, and these actions will probably never be rivaled in terms of callousness and complete disregard for the sanctity of human life. While the result of Hitler's eugenics policies is truly horrific, its affect on the eugenics movement as a whole was also significant.

Hitler's eugenics policies, having been fully realized due to the government control of Germany, showed the eugenics community exactly what full-scale implementation of eugenics was capable of. According to controversial German historian Ernst Nolte, "everything which the Nazis later did, with the sole exception of the technical process of gassing, had already been described comprehensively in the early Twenties" (qtd. in Fritz 161). Such racist beliefs were widespread, even in America, with Madison Grant, president of the New York Zoological Society, stating in 1916 that:

Mistaken regard for what are believed to be divine laws and a sentimental belief in the sanctity of human life tend to prevent both the elimination of defective infants and the sterilization of such adults as are themselves of no value to the community. The laws of nature require the obliteration of the unfit, and human life is valuable only when it is of use to the community or race. (qtd. in Weikart 10).

It was commonly held that Nazi eugenics (and the manner in which the Holocaust was presented to the world) "tainted" the face of eugenics, but the modern consensus is that the ideas were similar to those of leading eugenisists in England and America, with the exception that the Nazis had the means to make them a reality (Hen 116-117). Leading eugenist Julian Huxley, however, makes clear that a more moral view of eugenics involves the inclusion of sympathy (which Darwin highlighted the importance of), leading him to state that "no eugenist in his senses ever

has or would ever suggest that one particular type or standard should be picked out as desirable...it takes all kinds to make a world” (qtd. in Freeden 648-649). Clearly Hitler was not in his senses, and was not correctly justifying his actions with Darwinism, or even the moral consensus of fellow eugenisists.

The question as to whether Darwin’s theory of evolution by means of natural selection, and its component of the “struggle for existence,” was significant in shaping Hitler’s worldview and subsequent use in Nazi eugenics is a simple one. Darwin’s theory was very significant in forming Hitler’s worldview, and without it he may not have developed the ideas that lead to one of the worst periods in human history. However, Darwin himself cannot be held personally responsible, or as Nick Kemp, leading scholar of the British eugenics movement, states it: “while we should be wary of depicting Darwin as the man responsible for ushering in a secular age we should similarly be cautious of underestimating that importance of evolutionary thought in relation to questioning the sanctity of human life” (Weikart 10). While undoubtedly Darwin’s theory does lower the status of man to that of an animal that simply evolved and, by dumb luck, reached the dominant position on the planet, it does not question the sanctity of human life. As Darwin himself emphasizes in *The Descent of Man*, we could not “check our sympathy, if so urged by hard reason, without the deterioration of the noblest part of our nature” (Darwin and Wilson 873). While he clearly claims that there are differences, both physical and mental, between various groups of people, it is the human capacity for sympathy that allows for the development of morality in our society. In *The Descent of Man*, he acknowledged that other animals cooperate and live in societies based on altruism (Weikart 22). He believed that this social instinct coupled with the evolutionarily attained cognitive abilities make for human morality, and that it was not harsh battling among groups that developed morality, but that in the

past groups with more cooperation and self-sacrificing individuals would survive over those with selfish individuals (Weikart 22). Thus Darwin emphasized cooperation, sympathy, and a general concern for others as the key to progress for the species; a far cry from the extermination policies of the Nazis. Darwin knew that learning and development of morality would far outweigh the struggle for existence, and any worldview that viewed the “most brutal struggle” as the key to progress was doomed to fail (Kingsland 183, Fritz 166). Hitler was under the misguided assumption that any struggle for existence improves the species, viewing the inevitable result of any such struggle as progress for the species. But what Hitler (as well as many other Darwinists and eugenicists of the time) did not realize is that evolution does not imply inevitable progress, but inevitable change. As for progress, it is necessary for people to combine their capacity for sympathy as well as their well-developed sense of morals to better the world and society in which they live. Lastly from a biodiversity stand-point eugenics, and especially extermination due to biological inequality, doesn't hold-up, as put by American botanist William H. Brewer:

Biological inequality means not only the possibility of biological advance. It means also a fundamental requirement of a human society which values and conserves real individuality in its members. Just as a body is better and more efficient for not being composed either of all brain cells, or all bone cells, or all muscle cells, so it is with the community. Democracy above all needs diversity and freedom to express diversity in every possible way. (qtd. in Freedman 669).

While evolution may have determined our genetic make-up, sculpting the human species into many different varieties, it cannot prevent us from acting for the good of the whole, emphasizing the inherent need for sympathy, compassion, and cooperation in the world.

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