

1 Introduction

In 1877, in an extremely technical discussion of landholding in Ireland, Joseph Fisher wrote: “I can find nothing in the Brehon laws to warrant this theory of social Darwinism, and believe further study will show that the Cain Saerrath and the Cain Aigillue relate solely to what we now call chattels, and did not in any way affect what we now call the freehold, the possession of the land” (Fisher 1877). “Cain Saerrath” refers to laws to do with honor and personal relationships and “Cain Aigillue” to laws to do with forfeits and fines. Fisher is arguing that the holding of large tracts of land by individuals is unwarranted in traditional law. It seems that he himself made up the term “social Darwinism.” Although there may not have been precedent, obviously he has Darwin’s theory in mind, especially the thoughts about the struggle for existence. What is not at all obvious is that he thinks of “social Darwinism” as an item, a single identifiable concept, as opposed to Darwinism in a social situation. What we can say is that, for all that he himself is using the language of “social Darwinism” in a negative sort of way, there is no justification for the claim (nor is it being made) that social Darwinism – meaning digging out the ethical implications of evolutionary theorizing and applying them to society – is always something negative (Leonard 2009).

As the term started to be used more and more often, so in tandem its bad reputation rose, to the extent that no one wanted to be thought a social Darwinian – that was a term used of opponents! And so to social Darwinism’s reputation today. Google it! “The concept of Social Darwinism attempted to justify and rationalize ideas of imperialism, hereditarianism and racism.” That’s before you get to big business. “The theory of Social Darwinism was used to support Free Enterprise and ‘laissez-faire’ capitalism combined with political conservatism during the Gilded Era.” And widows and children? Tough luck. “The belief that it was not the function of the Government to cure social problems.” It is a safe bet that in discussions like these the name of Adolf Hitler will come up, probably sooner rather than later. You would not be wrong. “The most infamous instance of Social Darwinism in action is in the genocidal policies of the Nazi German Government in the 1930s and 40s. It was openly embraced as promoting the notion that the strongest should naturally prevail, and was a key feature of Nazi propaganda films, some which illustrated it with scenes of beetles fighting each other.”¹

“Beetles fighting each other”?! When ideas have this kind of reputation and supposed inclinations, scholars sense red meat. To say that the topic of social Darwinism is a field well-ploughed is a bit like saying that parallel lines never

¹ www.historyhit.com/social-darwinism-in-nazi-germany/

meet. The literature is huge.² Why then yet more? Our justification for turning to this topic is that, rather than as historians and folk from other fields, who have dominated the discussion, we write as philosophers. We think there are issues of importance for people like us. Be warned, however, that because we are philosophers our underlying intent and hope is to ferret out truths about human beings. You may fear that this means our turning to history is part of what is known as a “Whiggish” agenda, where we are simply using the past to burnish the better, much-improved present. Far from it! We are evolutionists and we believe that, in order to understand the present, you need to understand the past. Exploring conceptual foundations, we start with Darwin himself and the implications of his theorizing for moral understanding. It is only then that we move to the subsequent history, but still with philosophical intent. Darwinian evolutionary theory is generally considered the jewel in the crown of biology, if not of modern science overall. How then could it have transmogrified and degenerated to such an awful form? From Charles Darwin, the quintessential Victorian gentleman, to Adolf Hitler, the quintessential twentieth-century tyrant? And within less than a century. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859. Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in 1925. A mere sixty-six years. What does this tell us about the nature of science? Copernicus did not lead to the gas chambers. Is there something peculiar about Darwin’s theory? Is it perhaps not really a scientific theory at all? And what are the implications for today?

These are the sorts of questions we raise. Questions that presuppose historical understanding but are not quite historical themselves. As is so often the case in these sorts of things, it turns out that the full story is very much more complex – and more interesting – than the popular account referred to just above. This is the real justification of this Element. Begin with Darwin’s theory.³

² The classic discussion is Richard Hofstadter, 1959. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Robert Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* is the revisionist account challenging every one of Hofstadter’s claims, including the one that there is such a concept as social Darwinism! Indispensable, although lengthy and turgid as only academics know how, is D. C. Bellomy, 1984. “Social Darwinism revisited,” *Perspectives in American History, New Series*, 1984. Also valuable are Greta Jones, 1980, *Social Darwinism and English Thought*, and Mike Hawkins, 1997, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945*. For those hesitant to plunge right into such turbulent seas, Gregory Radick, “Darwinism and Social Darwinism” (2018) offers an excellent wading pool for beginners.

³ Because an Element is an extended essay rather than a full-length monograph, intentionally we have stayed on topic, avoiding discussion of related issues like eugenics. Also, we have confined the discussion to Britain, America, and Germany, leaving social Darwinism elsewhere, as in Asia and South America, unexplored. Parts of this Element draw on previous writings by the authors, most particularly the co-authored “After Darwin: morality in a secular world,” from *Secular Studies* (2019). Everything is used with permission.

2 Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Charles Robert Darwin was born in England on February 12, 1809, the same day as Abraham Lincoln across the Atlantic. He died, also in England, on April 19, 1882, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, next to the great physicist Isaac Newton (Browne 1995, 2002). His family was distinguished and rich. His paternal grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had been a physician, poet, and early evolutionist. His maternal grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, was the founder of the pottery works that still carries his name. Rather deliberately keeping the fortune within the family, Darwin married his first cousin Emma Wedgwood, also a grandchild of the first Josiah Wedgwood. Charles Darwin never had to work for a living. After education at Edinburgh and Cambridge, Darwin became a full-time scientist – first geologist and then biologist. No one ever doubted that he was a professional.

Following Cambridge, Darwin spent five years (1831–6) going around the globe on the British warship HMS *Beagle*. The navy was mapping the coastlines of countries that were, or had the potential to be, commercial markets. Darwin spent most of his time crisscrossing South America. He kept a diary, which he wrote up as a very popular travel book – *The Voyage of the Beagle*. On his return to England, Darwin soon became an evolutionist – primarily because of the distribution of the organisms on the Galapagos archipelago (in the Pacific, today belonging to Ecuador). Then, eighteen months later, Darwin discovered his mechanism of natural selection. He wrote up preliminary versions of his theory in 1842 and 1844, but kept them private, probably because he did not want to upset his powerful scientific mentors. He fell sick. The cause may have been lactose intolerance. Finally, in 1859, thanks to the arrival of an essay mirroring his ideas by the young naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. The work was influential and controversial. More on this in a minute. Darwin left most of the defense of his thinking to his younger colleagues and supporters, notably the morphologist and paleontologist, and notable essayist, Thomas Henry Huxley. What Darwin did do, spurred primarily by the apostasy of Wallace, who started arguing that human evolution was fueled by spirit forces, was write a follow-up book on our species, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871).

The *Origin* is written in a deceptively simple, “user-friendly” way. In fact, it is one long, very carefully constructed argument (Ruse 1979a). Darwin starts with the analogy between artificial selection – that process practiced by breeders – and natural selection – what he presumes happens in the real world. Farmers breed fatter pigs, stronger horses, better milk-producing cows.

Fanciers and sportsmen breed more songful canaries and tougher dogs. Given the tremendous changes they produce, why not something similar in nature? Then Darwin moves to the central case for natural selection. This is two-part. First there is the argument to the struggle for existence. Expounded first by the eighteenth-century clergyman/political scientist Thomas Robert Malthus, this is something that comes about because the potential for reproduction much outstrips the availability of food and space. “Every being, which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product.” The conclusion follows at once: “as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life” (Darwin 1859, 63–64). Then, drawing on the fact that, whenever you have a population of organisms, you find that there are differences between them and that, every now and then, something new seems to pop up into being – new variations – there is the argument to natural selection. If there are such variations, “can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection” (80–81).

Do note that, for Darwin, change was not random. Certain features lead to success. Others do not. This means that the successful features have virtues not possessed by the unsuccessful. All in all, this means that features like the hand and the eye are “as if” designed for their ends – they are “adaptations.” “How have all those exquisite adaptations of one part of the organisation to another part, and to the conditions of life, and of one distinct organic being to another being, been perfected? We see these beautiful coadaptations most plainly in the woodpecker and missletoe; and only a little less plainly in the humblest parasite which clings to the hairs of a quadruped or feathers of a bird; in the structure of the beetle which dives through the water; in the plumed seed which is wafted by the gentlest breeze; in short, we see beautiful adaptations everywhere and in every part of the organic world” (60–61).

Guided by the analogy with artificial selection, where one has two classes of end – for utility, as with farm breeders, and for beauty and fighting spirit, as with fanciers and sportsmen – Darwin added a secondary mechanism of sexual

selection. Where natural selection is for adaptations that help organisms survive, sexual selection is for adaptations that help organisms find mates. And now, with selection introduced, Darwin added some complexifying factors, most particularly the division of labor (or “labour” as he writes it). Organisms specialize, as do workers in a factory. “So in the general economy of any land, the more widely and perfectly the animals and plants are diversified for different habits of life, so will a greater number of individuals be capable of their supporting themselves. A set of animals, with their organisation but little diversified, could hardly compete with a set more perfectly diversified in structure” (116). And so to the famous metaphor of a tree of life. “The affinities of all the beings of the same class have sometimes been represented by a great tree. I believe this simile largely speaks the truth.” Continuing: “As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications” (130).

The second half of the *Origin* applies this causal thinking to a wide range of problems across the whole of the life sciences. Invoking what the philosopher of science William Whewell (1840) called a “consilience of inductions,” Darwin explained and at the same time supported. As evolution through selection explains, for instance, why the birds of the Galapagos look like the birds of South America and why the birds of the Canaries look like the birds of Africa – descendants on the islands came from the respective continents, and when there evolved further – so these facts of biogeography confirm the reality and power of selection. The detective’s hypothesis explains the bloodstains, and, at the same time, the bloodstains confirm the truth of the hypothesis. Social behavior, paleontology, biogeography, morphology, systematics and embryology were taken out, dusted and returned cleaner. Less metaphorically, these various disciplines were illuminated by selection and, in turn, confirmed its power and worth.

And so finally to the most famous passage in the history of science.

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external

conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (489–490)

What about our own species, *Homo sapiens*? From the first, Darwin was stone-cold certain that we humans are part of the natural world, produced by the same processes as all other organisms. In his private notebooks of 1839, it is in the human context we find the first unambiguous mention of natural selection. Children, by chance, “produced with strong arms, outliving the weaker ones, may be applicable to the formation of instincts, independently of habits” (Darwin 1987, N 42). Not just humans but our brains and hence our minds! Darwin would have given those much-criticized human sociobiologists of the 1970s – of whom, more later – a good run for their money. However, Darwin knew that, as soon as he published, everyone would be all over the implications of the theory for humankind – as they were, talking at once of the “monkey theory” or likewise. He wanted to get the basic ideas out first. Humans could wait. Hence, so he would not be accused of cowardice, there was right at the end a brief trailer for the human question, but that was it. “In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation. Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history” (Darwin 1859, 488).

Possibly – probably – for Darwin that would have been his only and final word on the human problem. Wallace’s apostasy saw that this could not be, and so twelve years later we got the *Descent of Man*. It is very much written as a follow-up to the *Origin*, although there is much more use of secondary material and more open speculation about value issues. The standard picture is unchanged. Humans are primates and we evolved from the apes – not apes of a kind that exist today, but apes nevertheless. Going a bit against the tide – people were not keen on having “negro” ancestors – Darwin opted for Africa as our place of origin, not the more popular Asia. What was innovative was a very heavy reliance on sexual selection. Wallace had argued that things like intelligence and hairlessness could not have evolved by natural selection and must have had the aid of spirit forces. Rejecting the conclusion but accepting the

premises, Darwin argued that such characteristics were produced by sexual selection. The cleverer men got the prize women, and the less hairy males appealed to the better class of female. All this led to some very Victorian conclusions. He-men. “Man is more courageous, pugnacious, and energetic than woman, and has a more inventive genius. His brain is absolutely larger, but whether relatively to the larger size of his body, in comparison with that of woman, has not, I believe been fully ascertained.” She-girls. “In woman the face is rounder; the jaws and the base of the skull smaller; the outlines of her body rounder, in parts more prominent; and her pelvis is broader than in man; but this latter character may perhaps be considered rather as a primary than a secondary sexual character. She comes to maturity at an earlier age than man” (Darwin 1871, 2, 316–317). And so on and so forth at very great length.

3 Darwin on Morality

Now we start to move to our focus of interest. By the 1870s, among intellectuals (in Britain and America), God-belief was in a bad way. More and more people, including Darwin himself, inclined to some form of what Thomas Henry Huxley had called “agnosticism.” Does God exist? I don’t know and I am not terribly worried. Start with science. While on the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin moved from theism, in his case belief in the God of Christianity, to deism, belief in an Unmoved Mover. He moved from a God who is prepared to intervene in His creation to a God who worked through unbroken law. Darwin simply could not reconcile miracles with the beliefs of common sense, including the lawlike nature of the world. Many were starting to think this way, although in respects more important than science was the so-called German “higher criticism,” treating the books of the Bible as humanly written rather than directly from on high. Moses, for instance, did not write the first five books of the canon. As soon as one started to think this way, the literal authenticity of all the Bible, including the Gospels, started to crumble, and with it went the God of the Christians.

The very claims of Christianity came under very critical scrutiny. It was here that Darwin parted ways with religious belief. “I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished.” Adding: “And this is a damnable doctrine” (Darwin 1958, 87). One adds to this that, sociologically, Christianity was seemingly out of date. It worked as a uniting ideology in the village with the squire and the yokels, but, in the urban world of factories, it seemed outdated and unneeded. That good Christian

Charles Dickens spotted this. In *Hard Times*, with acid tongue in cheek, he wrote of the churches of Coketown, the industrial city in which his story occurs, that: “The perplexing mystery of the place was, Who belonged to the eighteen denominations? Because, whoever did, the labouring people did not.” Walk the streets on a Sunday, “and note how few of them the barbarous jangling of bells that was driving the sick and nervous mad, called away from their own quarter, from their own close rooms, from the corners of their own streets, where they lounged listlessly, gazing at all the church and chapel going, as at a thing with which they had no manner of concern” (Dickens [1854] 1948, 23).

A century before the *Descent*, the Scottish philosopher David Hume had dismissed religious belief as a delusion. “We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice and good will to everything that hurts or pleases us” (Hume 1757). As a young man, Darwin had read Hume’s *History of Religion* from which this line is taken. He took the same tack: “my dog, a full-grown and very sensible animal, was lying on the lawn during a hot and still day; but at a little distance a slight breeze occasionally moved an open parasol, which would have been wholly disregarded by the dog, had any one stood near it. As it was, every time that the parasol slightly moved, the dog growled fiercely and barked. He must, I think, have reasoned to himself in a rapid and unconscious manner, that movement without any apparent cause indicated the presence of some strange living agent, and no stranger had a right to be on his territory” (Darwin 1871, 1, 67). Adding: “The belief in spiritual agencies would easily pass into the belief in the existence of one or more gods.”

We come to morality. Let’s start with the fact that the last thing wanted by the agnostics was a rejection of right and wrong. George Eliot, the novelist, who as a young woman translated into English the classic of higher criticism, David Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*, was obsessive on this topic. Anyone who read her novels, *Daniel Deronda* for instance, with the triumph of the noble title character and the tragedy of the selfish Gwendoline, knew that. After her death, a friend wrote: “I remember how, at Cambridge, I walked with her once in the Fellows’ Garden of Trinity, on an evening of rainy May; and she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men—the words God, Immortality, Duty—pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third.” (Myers 1881, 47)

Darwin and his followers fit right in here. Darwin and his family lived in the village of Downe, in Kent, where his closest friend was the local Anglican clergyman, John Brodie Innes. Between them they ran the “Coal and Country

Club,” designed to help the working class to save for difficult times, and to make sure that no one went without proper housing, fuel and care. “Wonderful charitable people the Darwins were,” said the village carpenter. “Used to give away penny tickets on bread for the baker. I’ve given away thousands and thousands. And very good to the poor for blankets and coal and money till they got run on” (Browne 2002, 452). Spurred by a similar philosophy, Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin’s “bulldog,” he who invented the word agnostic,” ran for and was elected to the first London School Board in 1871. “He opted for selective Bible-reading, ‘without any comment,’ to instill moral principles.” A progressive Victorian but a Victorian nevertheless, Huxley insisted that the reading “be selective: the Old Testament was as much vice as virtue. Who would want the lasciviousness of Lot’s daughters or Joseph’s seduction taught?” (Desmond 1997, 403). In a late essay, Huxley went so far as to argue that morality is opposed to evolution and that we must strive against our innate animal drives (Huxley 1893).

This was hardly going to be Darwin’s position. He had not labored his way through the *Origin* and half of the *Descent* to have to throw up his hands and say that his mechanism was opposed to the most important aspect of humankind. Against Huxley, the first thing that Darwin had to argue was that natural selection could lead to some kind of harmonious social situation. He had to argue that it is false that, from a biological perspective, the struggle just leads to outright hostility and competition and warfare, and that anything social must be imposed from without, almost by force as it were. Darwin had faced this problem in the *Origin* when dealing with the social insects. His solution there to the problem was to suggest that it comes about because of relatedness. Organisms show help to others if they are related. Although Darwin did not have the language of genetics, he would have agreed with today’s thinkers who argue that, inasmuch as relatives reproduce, one is oneself reproducing by proxy, because you share units of heredity (genes) with relatives (Hamilton 1964a, b). Kin selection!

In the *Descent*, Darwin extended this discussion somewhat. He suggested that sociality could come through interaction of non-relatives, through what today is known as “reciprocal altruism” – you scratch my back and I will scratch yours (Trivers 1971). “In the first place, as the reasoning powers and foresight of the members became improved, each man would soon learn that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return. From this low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions certainly strengthens the feeling of sympathy which gives the first impulse to benevolent actions. Habits, moreover, followed during many generations probably tend to be inherited” (Darwin 1871, 1, 163–4). Then

Darwin added: “But there is another and much more powerful stimulus to the development of the social virtues, namely, the praise and the blame of our fellow-men. The love of approbation and the dread of infamy, as well as the bestowal of praise or blame, are primarily due, as we have seen in the third chapter, to the instinct of sympathy; and this instinct no doubt was originally acquired, like all the other social instincts, through natural selection” (1, 164). He elaborated: “To do good unto others – to do unto others as ye would they should do unto you, – is the foundation-stone of morality. It is, therefore, hardly possible to exaggerate the importance during rude times of the love of praise and the dread of blame” (1, 165).

Darwin elaborated. “It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an advancement in the standard of morality and an increase in the number of well-endowed men will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another” (1, 166). There is no ambiguity about what this means: “There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.” Hence, the consequence. “At all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase.” Let us emphasize that Darwin was not now breaking from the thinking of the *Origin*. Following the comparative jurist Henry Maine (1861), he regarded tribes as inter-related families (or thinking they are), and he took the family to be one individual, a kind of super-organism.⁴ With respect to morality, humans are like the ants. We are parts of a whole rather than individuals doing their own thing (Richards and Ruse 2016). Note however that although we may have a super-organism, the parts are furthering their own ends and only incidentally that of the whole. I am better off being part of a tribe.

Moral philosophers make a distinction between substantive or normative ethics, what should I do, and metaethics, why should I do what I should do? Take Christianity. It has all sorts of normative dictates, not always consistent with each other. But central is the Love Commandment – love your neighbor as yourself. Why should you love your neighbor as yourself? Most Christians subscribe to some version of the Divine Command Theory. Because God wants

⁴ Without comment, showing his agreement, Darwin inserted as a footnote: “After a time the members or tribes which are absorbed into another tribe assume, as Mr. Maine remarks (*Ancient Law*, 1861, 131), that they are the co-descendants of the same ancestors.”