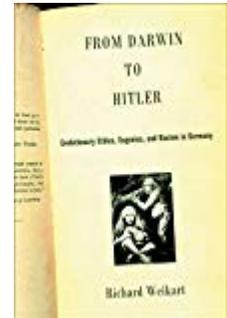


Richard Weikart. *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xi + 312 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-6502-8.



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The special tenth anniversary exhibition entitled "Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race" currently on view at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a powerful illustration of the Darwin to Hitler thesis explored in Richard Weikart's new book. On display are the texts, tools, and techniques used to promote and legitimate science, specifically eugenics, as the salvation to the threats that hampered the health of the nation. The exhibit depicts how widespread the mesh of eugenics and racism was by the late nineteenth century. It dramatically shows the effects on the real bodies of suffering victims who were forcibly sterilized or murdered because of the policies of racial hygiene enacted by the Nazis to regenerate the body politic. Richard Weikart's book has the merit of directly considering an implicit question within the scholarship upon which the exhibit was based: is there an ethical perspective within evolutionary theory that links Darwin to Hitler?

For intellectual historians, this question encapsulates other concerns: was Nazism imbued with a coherent moral vision or was it nihilistic

and opportunistic, animated only by the will to power? Does evolutionary theory have a systematic set of ethical values that underlie its scientific and materialistic viewpoint? What are the social implications of Darwin's ideas and how does social Darwinism differ in different national contexts? If Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* is one example of the effort to historicize the claim that there are immutable, universal ethical standards, can one conversely write a genealogy of moral relativism? How ought intellectual historians write the history of morality and in what ways is their approach different from philosophers? Richard Weikart's book on evolutionary ethics has the merit of foregrounding these issues. The last of them, which is both ethical and methodological, points to the shortcomings of a nonetheless important study.

In eleven chapters broken down into four parts, *From Darwin to Hitler* presents the basic tenets of Darwinian evolutionary theory as applied to ethics. Weikart focuses "primarily on [the] Darwinian influence on eugenics, euthanasia, racial theory, and militarism in Germany" (p. 9).

The basic premises that governed social Darwinist positions on these points were clear and coherent. They were encapsulated in the oeuvre of Ernst Haeckel, the most famous and influential social Darwinist in Germany from the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) until the early twentieth century. Haeckel—and many of the prominent scientists, physicians, psychiatrists, economists, geographers, anthropologists, and philosophers whose creed was akin to his—believed that everything, including human consciousness, society, and morality was a function of natural cause and effect. These natural laws could be known through scientific investigation and science was "the arbiter of all truth" (p. 13). Since individual subjectivity was a function of the laws of nature, Darwinism implied determinism. It undermined any mind-body dualism or the notion of a soul distinct from the physical body. Social Darwinism claimed that human behavior and moral character were the product of hereditary forces. The mechanism that drives heredity is natural selection (in particular group selection) and the struggle for existence. This struggle has resulted in a variety of moral standards within the human species and over time; Darwinism thus implies moral relativism (p. 25). These simple maxims provided a secular, unified, mechanistic, non-theological system that explained the link between the individual, the group, the nation, and mankind. It thus offered a consistent account of things as diverse as human nature, economics, international relations, and warfare.

If we believe Weikart, the impact of evolutionary theory on ethics was revolutionary. It overturned the moral codes of what he repeatedly calls "traditional" Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment ethics, legitimating eugenics, "inegalitarianism, scientific racism, and the devaluing of human life" (p. 10). The root of this revolution was Darwin's non-theistic explanation for the origin of ethics in *The Descent of Man* (1871): "He pointed out that other animals live in societies and cooperate, and the social instinct producing this coop-

erative behavior is heritable. In humans the social instincts have developed further than in most other species, and, harnessed together with expanded human cognitive abilities, produced what we call morality. The mechanism producing the increase in social instincts was, according to Darwin, natural selection through the struggle for existence. Those groups with more cooperative and self-sacrificing individuals would out-compete those groups with more selfish individuals" (p. 22). This naturalistic account replaced the old moral values with a single standard by which to judge all choices, exalting evolutionary progress itself "to the status of the highest moral good" (p. 10). The moral maxim of evolutionary ethics was, as Willibald Hentschel, a student of Haeckel's incisively put it on a postcard to Christian von Ehrenfels, a philosopher and proponent of eugenics, "That which preserves health is moral. Everything that makes one sick or ugly is sin" (p. 43).

In his painstakingly researched third chapter, Weikart examines the institutionalization of evolutionary ethics. His assiduous inquest into the archives, personal papers and even some personal interviews reveal a coterie of different ethical societies: the German Society for Ethical Culture; Academy of Physiological Morality and other efforts spearheaded and financed by Albert Samson; the Krupp Prize Competition announced in 1900 and completed in 1903; Haeckel's Monist League; the International Order for Ethics and Culture; Alfred Ploetz's Society for Race Hygiene; and renowned anti-Semite Theodor Fritsch's German Renewal Community. Each of these organizations promoted the separation of ethics from religion and advocated, in different degrees, an evolutionary approach to ethics. This resulted in the wide dissemination of an evolutionary approach to moral questions, especially in the medical, scientific, and academic milieu.

The second part of the book focuses on the application of evolutionary ethics to a number of concrete moral questions. Weikart's grand claim

is that "only in the late nineteenth and especially the early twentieth century did significant debate erupt over issues relating to the sanctity of human life, especially infanticide, euthanasia, abortion, and suicide" (pp. 75, 145). The argument of this section, summarized in its title, is that evolutionary ethics results in "Devaluing Human Life." A key tenet is that not all human life is equal. Those deemed unfit or *minderwertig* in German, often translated as inferior, "but literally meaning 'having less value'" could thus be targeted for elimination. In a 1909 speech to the Society for German Scientists and Physicians, the anthropologist and eugenicist Felix von Luschan made the dichotomy between the valuable and the inconsequential clear in his response to the question, "Who is inferior?" "The sick, the weak, the dumb, the stupid, the alcoholic, the bum, the criminal; all these are inferior," von Luschan maintained, "compared with the healthy, the strong, the intelligent, the clever, the sober, the pure" (p. 95). Generally, two overlapping categories were expendable: the disabled (especially the mentally ill) and those who were economically unproductive. Non-European "races," too, were consigned to moral oblivion as a result of the contribution of evolutionary theory to racial science.

What this ultimately permitted, Weikart contends in part 3, was "Eliminating the 'Inferior Ones.'" Since evolutionary ethics dovetailed with eugenics, it entailed controlling reproduction. A spectrum of positions emerged from the shared premise that sexual morality ought to be judged "by its effects on the hereditary health of future generations" (p. 144), including sanctioning infanticide, abortion, polygamy, and voluntary and involuntary euthanasia. Condoning these dictums throws into relief the difference between Jewish, Christian, and Enlightenment precepts and the doctrines that emerged from the new evolutionary credo. While "Christian churches explicitly forbade murder, infanticide, abortion, and even suicide," (p. 145), Darwinism undercut the sanctity of human life and reduced humans to mere an-

imals. "By stressing human inequality, and by viewing the death of many 'unfit' organisms as a necessary--and even progressive--natural phenomenon," Weikart argues, "Darwinism made the death of the 'inferior' seem inevitable and even beneficent" (p. 160).

Moreover, while it was most certainly not the case that social Darwinism created German militarism, it did provide a scientific justification for warmongering. However, while the dominant chord struck by Darwinists touted the virtue and necessity of war, it was interesting to learn that during the World War I epoch, social Darwinist arguments were marshaled to support both categorical pacifism and what Weikart calls "peace eugenics," which supported the peace movement by opposing wars between European nations "where the brightest and best mowed each other down without regard to their biological traits" (p. 181), since this would lead to the biological degeneration of Europeans.

Mowing down the racially inferior degenerates outside the European order was, however, almost universally authorized. It was social Darwinist arguments that provided the counterpoint to the liberal "civilizing mission" by maintaining that the "lower races" were doomed to their inferiority. Europeans, and the new German colonizers in particular, could thus legitimate the most uncivilized barbarity. Weikart illustrates this in his brief exposition of the Herero genocide in German Southwest Africa (1904-6), where General Trotha "explicitly justified racial annihilation using Darwinian concepts" (p. 205). Having thus laid the stage for the final scene, Weikart concludes the book with a discussion of "Hitler's Ethic," arguing that he was the ultimate embodiment of "an evolutionary ethic that made Darwinian fitness and health the only criteria for moral standards. The Darwinian struggle for existence, especially the struggle between different races, became the sole arbiter for morality" (p. 210).

But was Hitler's ethics defined only by evolutionary principles? And does this mean that racism and anti-Semitism were subsumed within an evolutionary credo by the Weimar period? Or was it the case, as I would suggest, that evolutionary discourse and scientific racism were grafted onto the multiple branches of anti-Semitism and volkish ideology in which Nazism was rooted? Indeed, Weikart is at pains to show that most social Darwinists and eugenicists directed their fear and concern about racial degeneration not at Jews, but at non-Europeans: American Indians, Australian aborigines, Africans, and East Asians. As he says, "some social Darwinists even opposed anti-Semitism, and some German and Austrian Jews ([Ludwig] Gumplowicz, for example) justified racial struggle and racial extermination, just as other German thinkers did" (p. 204). Weikart also indicates that while Haeckel and a number of other social Darwinists held anti-Semitic views (an issue only sporadically addressed throughout the book), they differed from the redemptive anti-Semitism of Hitler (p. 217). In fact, the extent to which there was a cross-fertilization of Darwinism and anti-Semitism is never adequately addressed.

Certainly one of the merits of the book is that Weikart presents lots of countervailing evidence to support his own more nuanced version of the Haeckel-to-Hitler thesis. He aptly summarizes its simplified form (and cites its key exponents, who he takes to task): "Darwinism undermined traditional morality and the value of human life. Then, evolutionary progress became the new moral imperative. This aided the advance of eugenics, which was overtly founded on Darwinian principles. Some eugenicists began advocating euthanasia and infanticide for the disabled. On a parallel track, some prominent Darwinists argued that human racial competition and war is part of the Darwinian struggle for existence. Hitler imbibed these social Darwinist ideas, blended in virulent anti-Semitism, and--there you have it: Holocaust" (p. 3). While he includes many caveats and dis-

claimers, this is ultimately the general thrust of the book. But Weikart also itemizes the variants of Darwinism and eugenics ideology as they were applied to ethical, political, and social thought and is aware of the many roots of Nazi ideology, thus clearly refusing any monocausal explanations of Nazism. There were many twisted roads that converged at Auschwitz: Darwinism, Wagnerism, Nietzscheanism, volkish ideology, fascism, nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism. The question for the intellectual historian is to weigh the elements and cultural and contextual specifics that led individuals and movements to the crossroad. This is the Achilles heel of Weikart's account.

This is a work of intellectual history methodologically two generations old, written in the vein of Arthur Lovejoy. Weikart follows what Lovejoy called the "unit ideas" of social Darwinism in Germany, tracing their variations in a number of individual thinkers and their works. The result is often repetitive, since the core premises of these men are pretty clear. It is also repetitious in the structure of the presentation. Most chapters open with Darwin's position on the point at hand, then discusses Haeckel's incorporation into Germany, and continues with the elaboration or modification by what becomes a slightly changing cast of characters after the first chapter (Bartholomäus von Csernői, Alexander Tille, academic philosophers Georg von Gizycki and Friedrich Jodl, eugenicists Friedrich Hellwald, Wilhelm Schallmayer, and Ludwig Buchner, psychiatrists like Hans Kurella and Emil Kraepelin, and anthropologists like Felix von Luschan). On several occasions Weikart expresses the same point in different chapters using exactly the same verbiage. He even uses the same quotation by Theodor Fritsch (translated slightly differently!) to illustrate the same point in two different chapters (see pp. 55, 69).

What this approach cannot explain is why Darwin, "a typical English liberal" supported laissez-faire economics and opposed slavery! Nor

why Darwin "like most of his contemporaries considered non-European races inferior to European, but he never embraced Aryan racism or rabid anti-Semitism, central features of Hitler's political philosophy" (p. 3). Nor why Herbert Spencer's views on war differed from most of his German contemporaries. Nor why French social Darwinist Georges Vacher de Lapouge and French racial theorist Arthur Comte de Gobineau's biological racism had greater resonance in Germany than in France. To explain the very different conclusions reached from shared axioms, Weikart would have to delve into what the generation of intellectual historians after Lovejoy (Peter Gay, H. Stuart Hughes, Carl Schorske, George Mosse, etc.) explored as the social dimensions of thought and the specificity of different national histories and cultural traditions.

But Weikart is categorical that while he recognizes "the influence of political, social, economic, and other factors in the development of ideologies in general and Nazism in particular" he claims that "these topics are outside the scope of this study" (p. 5). The result is a weak account of many important contextual forces that shaped Weikart's story, including his pale version of the moral crisis of the fin-de-siecle, which is never really located in its epoch (p. 59). There is no flesh on the bones, no heart and soul to the characters we are introduced to that explains their divergent itineraries. After all, there were social Darwinists who opposed infanticide, abortion, euthanasia, and militarism on evolutionary grounds.

Weikart also fails to follow the rich nuances of the discourse/practices and institutions that have preoccupied the contemporary generation of intellectual historians, who have paid attention to the continuities and ruptures within systems of thought. So his presentation of racism, for example, reiterates a rationale that does not stand up to the critical scrutiny of intellectual history. He consistently claims that Christian and Enlightenment principles (especially the former) "militated

against some of the worst excesses of racism. Christian theology taught the universal brotherhood of all races, who descended from common ancestors" (p. 103). When indicating what theological tradition he is referring to, Weikart's repeatedly has recourse to the term "traditional," which is a reductive notion that intellectual historians should always inveigh against. He uses the common nomenclature of "Judeo-Christian" when no such tradition exists--there have been more than one Christian tradition, all with a supercessionist theology and wholly different Jewish traditions. Does the theological tradition to which Weikart refers include the Spanish inquisition, with its juridical designation of "limpieza de sangre," which was the basis for the persecution of Jewish converts and constitutes an important kernel in modern conceptions of racial discourse? Is Martin Luther's *On the Jews and their Lies*, which signaled the theme of *Verjudung* or "Jewification" as a major threat to Luther's quest for a purity of faith and spirit and called for Germans to take practical measures to guard against "Judaizing," including burning all Jewish houses of worship and forcing Jews into labor camps, an aberration of Christian theology? What of the Hamatic myth, which reads racism into and out of the Bible? Not to mention Voltaire's anti-Semitism, the first development of systems of racial classification in the eighteenth century by Buffon and Linne, and the development of the first racial sciences, phrenology and physiognomy, by Johann Lavater and Franz Gall, all of which were firmly entrenched within central strands of the Enlightenment. Similar criticisms could easily be developed for Weikart's claims that Christian ethics were a necessary limit to evil, including imperialism or genocide. The more interesting question, it seems to me, is how Christianity could endorse racism, imperialism, anti-Semitism and genocide or at the very least, why "Christianity failed in practice to stop the extermination of many tribes and peoples" (p. 185) given its prima facie principles.

These criticisms aside, Weikart has written a significant study because it raises key ethical questions in broad terms that have contemporary relevance. His historicization of the moral framework of evolutionary theory poses key issues for those in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, not to mention bioethicists, who have recycled many of the suppositions that Weikart has traced. Along the way, we are offered a number of interesting side currents, including a discussion of Nietzsche's embrace and resistance of evolutionary theory (pp. 46-49), as well as interesting tidbits of what Weikart covered in his book, *Socialist Darwinism* (pp. 90-94). Ultimately, however, Weikart's desire to write a complex version of the twisted roads taken on the journey from Darwin to Hitler would require a methodology that can better integrate the roads not taken, as well as an appreciation that some of those byways had traffic moving in opposing directions.

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