

The Final Evolution

I FOUND MYSELF WONDERING what the late Stephen Jay Gould would have made of this book. (The well-known Harvard professor and writer died in 2002.) His view of Darwin verged on idolatry, and yet, as Richard Weikart shows, Darwin's philosophy could be used to serve Hitler's purposes. Could be, and was.

Gould was already uneasy on this score. In an essay published in *Bully for Brontosaurus* (1991) he discussed a book called *Headquarters Nights* by Vernon Kellogg, a Stanford professor and a leading teacher of evolution. During the period of American neutrality in World War I, Kellogg was posted to the headquarters of the German general staff and was

shocked to find German military leaders, sometimes with the Kaiser present, supporting the war with an "evolutionary rationale." They did so with "a particularly

crude form of natural selection, defined as inexorable, bloody battle."

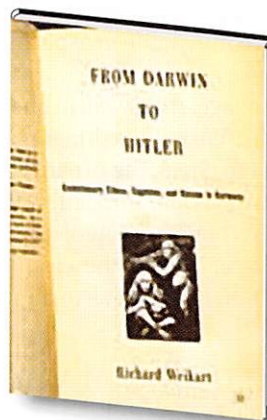
Vernon Kellogg had written:

The creed of the *Allmacht* ["all might" or omnipotence] of a natural selection based on violent and competitive struggle is the gospel of the German intellectuals; all else is illusion and anathema.... This struggle not only must go on, for that is the natural law, but it should go on so that this natural law may work out in its cruel, inevitable way the salvation of the human species.... That human group which is in the most advanced evolutionary stage should win in the struggle for existence.

"You like Darwin?" The German intellectuals were saying. "We'll give you Darwin."

In a subsequent essay, reprinted in *Dinosaur in a Haystack* (1995), Gould was even more dismayed that in the Wannsee Protocol, setting forth the "final solution of the Jewish question," Adolf Eichmann, who took the minutes at Wannsee, mentioned a Darwinian rationale for eliminating Jews of mixed race. This particular remnant would be the toughest,

Tom Bethell is a senior editor of *The American Spectator*.



Eichmann wrote, "as it is the product of natural selection."

This was painful for Gould, who was Jewish. I suspect he didn't want to look too deeply into the sources of Nazi ideas. The same goes for many other intellectuals, for whom Darwin is as heroic as Hitler was villainous. Darwinism has long been misused for the

purposes of social Darwinism, Gould wrote, but this was "the absolute ultimate in all conceivable misappropriation."

It is to his credit, then, that Weikart, a professor of modern European history at California State University in Stanislaus, has painstakingly undertaken the research that others may have skirted. Using primary sources that have never seen the light in English-language discussions, he tells us about both the well known and the obscure: Ernst Haeckel, the enthusiastic Darwinian whom Darwin himself cited in *The Origin of Species*; and (for example) the eugenicist and physician Wilhelm Schallmayer, whose pamphlet *The Threatening Physical Degeneration of Civilized Peoples* relied heavily on Darwinism.

Ernst Haeckel believed that the (alleged) animal ancestry of humans would "bring forth a complete revolution in the entire world view of humanity." His drawings of early stage embryos showing that humans could hardly be distinguished from other vertebrate embryos turned out to be faked, yet they persuaded Darwin to write that "we ought frankly to admit their community of descent." (The drawings live on in many modern textbooks.)

Schallmayer believed that the function of ethics "was to help social organisms triumph in the struggle for existence," Weikart writes, and that "the measuring rod for morality was the survival and reproduction of the greatest number." Natural selection—the survival of the fittest—was everything. Christianity was an obstacle to progress because it does not "have the tendency to improve selection," but rather "the opposite tendency."

Darwin himself was a eugenicist. He was careful with his language in *The Origin of Species*, but threw caution to the winds 12 years later, in *The Descent of*

Man. There he discussed perishing barbarians, the elimination of savages, and the inevitable prospering of civilized nations.

Darwin (in 1871): "With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated.... We civilized 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." Care, wrongly directed, swiftly leads to degeneration. "Excepting in the case of man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his weakest animals to breed."

From a scientific point of view, the problem with natural selection is not that it leads to any particular outcome but that it can be used to "explain" any outcome whatever. The concept of "fitness" is undefined, so that "the survival of the fittest" means nothing more than the survival of the survivors.

Hitler (in 1928): "While nature only allows the few most healthy and resistant out of a large number of living organisms to survive in the struggle for life, people restrict the number of births and then try to keep alive what has been born, without consideration of its real value and its inner merit. Humaneness is therefore only the slave of weakness and thereby in truth the most cruel destroyer of human existence."

If anything, Darwin sounds the more Hitlerian.

WEIKART POINTS OUT THAT, despite the decades of research, we have "scant evidence" about the "formative influences on [Hitler's] worldview." Viennese tracts and pamphlets were surely important. "The Viennese press was saturated with racist social Darwinism during Hitler's time there." Ernst Haeckel's influence is apparent in Hitler's 1933 claim that the "gulf between the lowest creature which can still be styled man and our highest races is greater than that between the

lowest type of man and the highest ape."

We are a long way from thinking like that today. In fact today's egalitarian view of mankind is closer in spirit to creationism—all are equal in the sight of God—than to evolutionism.

Weikart is right to stress that the Darwinian ideology did not lead unavoidably to Nazism. Many Darwinians, including numerous Jews, remained good Democrats, and all were appalled by the way the doctrine of evolution was so readily adopted by racists and used to justify murder on a massive scale.

Nonetheless, we should not be surprised to find dangerous doctrines being put to dangerous ends. In claiming to have furnished a materialistic explanation for the existence of life, Darwin made it possible to be an "intellectually fulfilled atheist," as Richard Dawkins said a few years ago.

Sometimes we are told that with God, all things are possible. We should also bear in mind that without God, all things are permissible.

From a scientific point of view, the problem with natural selection is not that it leads to any particular outcome but that it can be used to "explain" any outcome whatever. The concept of "fitness" is undefined, so that "the survival of the fittest" means nothing more than the survival of the survivors. This vacuity always was at the heart of Darwinism, and shows why the theory seems—but only seems—to explain anything that exists in nature. Winners can always claim a Darwinian rationale for their triumph. If a creature

existed, it was the fittest, at least until it became extinct. Darwin proposed no restrictions on ruthlessness, and the Nazis recognized none.

Defenders of Darwin have long tried to tell us that social Darwinism was an inappropriate extension of science to society. Not only is this untrue, as Darwin showed in his own application of natural selection to society, but the theory in its supposedly pure scientific form was itself an extrapolation from mid-Victorian competitive capitalism to the animal and vegetable kingdoms. The argument was made years ago by Bertrand Russell and more recently by Harvard's Richard Lewontin.

Weikart's book will not be popular, I would guess, but he has done valuable research and written an important treatise. Not only does it significantly add to the scholarship on Darwin's influence, but it illuminates the insanity that overcame much of the Western world in the century following publication of *The Origin of Species*. ❧