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5. Social Darwinism Reconsidered

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5. Social Darwinism Reconsidered

Abstract

Although the contemporary reaction to the implications of evolution was generally one of long-term optimism, an antithetical reaction did exist. Seen in stark terms, evolutionary theories were depressing to those who, on religious or humanitarian grounds, found the reduction of life to an irrational and brutal struggle for existence disturbing and provocative. There was, however, an important body of thought which accepted Darwin's findings without embracing the social or ethical implications of Social Darwinism. Many who studied Darwin came to the conclusion that it was possible to concede that man is an animal, but an animal capable of moral and ethical behavior, and therefore responsible to do more than involve himself in the struggle within his environment. They believed that there was evidence that man could and must impose his morality upon his environment unless he wished to lose his humanity. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Charles Darwin, Evolution, Social Darwinism, Survival of the Fittest, Thomas Huxley

Disciplines

Ecology and Evolutionary Biology | Evolution | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine

Comments

This is a part of [Section XV: Biology and the Rise of the Social Sciences](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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5. Social Darwinism Reconsidered

Although the contemporary reaction to the implications of evolution was generally one of long-term optimism, an anti-theoretical reaction did exist. Seen in stark terms, evolutionary theories were depressing to those who, on religious or humanitarian grounds, found the reduction of life to an irrational and brutal struggle for existence disturbing and provocative. There was, however, an important body of thought which accepted Darwin's findings without embracing the social or ethical implications of Social Darwinism. Many who studied Darwin came to the conclusion that it was possible to concede that man is an animal, but an animal capable of moral and ethical behavior, and therefore responsible to do more than involve himself in the struggle within his environment. They believed that there was evidence that man could and must impose his morality upon his environment unless he wished to lose his humanity.

There was, in other words, a persistent concern with ethics on the part of those who supported Darwin without accepting Spencer. One of this group who spoke with special authority was Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), the brilliant English biologist. Huxley was so enthusiastic and articulate a defender of the shy and retiring Darwin that he became known as "Darwin's bulldog." A fiery and pugnacious orator and writer, Huxley was undaunted by the position and prestige of his opponents. Nor did he ever attempt to win favor by making more palatable his own grim view of the universe. He once wrote:

As in the past, so, I fear, through a very long future, the multitude will continue to turn to those who are ready to feed it with the viands its soul lusteth after; who will offer mental peace where there is no peace, and lap it in the luxury of pleasant delusions.... Belief in majorities is not rooted in my breast, and if all the world were against me the fact might warn me to revise and criticise my opinions, but would not in itself supply a ghost of a reason for forsaking them. For myself I say deliberately, it is better to have a millstone tied around the neck and be thrown into the sea than to share the enterprises of those to whom the world has turned, and will turn, because they minister to its weaknesses and cover up the awful realities which it shudders to look at.

In 1892 Huxley was requested to deliver the second in a series of annual Romanes lectures at Oxford. He was delighted by this opportunity and spent many months in its preparation. The elderly Huxley was well aware that his lecture would find a wide audience and, despite his own ill health and the restrictions imposed by the conditions of the lecture (there could be no mention of politics or religion), he welcomed the chance to make known some of his views concerning what he

When he came to applying Darwinism to social & ethical problems, Huxley is divided upon his opinions.

believed to be the mistaken though widely held idea that the doctrine of evolution furnished a basis for ethics.

In this lecture, entitled "Evolution and Ethics" (1893), Huxley expresses his belief in man as an ethical being, but there is a deep strain of pessimism in his words. The essay remains an excellent exposition of some of the problems facing those who are concerned with the formidable hardships and suffering that are part of man's struggle against the hostile nature both interior and exterior to himself.

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