

## Book Review

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### **From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany by Richard Weikart.**

**Palgrave Macmillan, New York. ISBN 1-4039-6502-1**

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Survival of the fittest means that might—wisely used—is right. And we thus invoke and remorselessly fulfil the inexorable law of natural selection (or of demand and supply), when exterminating the inferior Australian and Maori races, and we appropriate their patrimony as coolly as Ahab did the vineyard of Naboth, though in diametrical opposition to all our favourite theories of right and justice—thus proved to be unnatural and false. The world is better for it; and would be incalculably better still, were we loyally to accept the lesson thus taught by nature, and consistently to apply the same principle to our conventional practice; by preserving the varieties most perfect in every way, instead of actually promoting the non-survival of the fittest by protecting the propagation of the imprudent, the diseased, the defective, and the criminal.<sup>1</sup>

Let the reader ponder this concise, unequivocal, rational—very rational—formulation of the practical implications of the evolutionary origin of species. Moral philosophers through millennia searched reason and divinity for salutary guidance and produced countless books recording their results. But here, in a few brush strokes, the long quest culminates in a stark raving scientific insight into humankind's true predicament. The fundamental ethical reality is that we are natural born killers. In this we differ only by degree from the remainder of animal nature, for we may direct our efforts wisely or foolishly. Foolish choices are sanctioned by the prevailing morality, which admonishes mercy to the vanquished and care to the weak and vulnerable. But the light of reason, released from the fetters of superstition, enjoins purposively directed genocide, euthanasia, sterilization, abortion, and positive eugenics.

That message is the core thought of the dozens of biologists and publicists brought together in Richard Weikart's artfully wrought study of the efflorescence of social Darwinism in Germany, 1860-1920. This literature is for the most part untranslated and known in the Anglophone culture—when it is known at all—through secondary writings such as this. To establish a connection between ourselves and that literature, I

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<sup>1</sup> Henry K. Rusden, Labour and capital. *Melbourne Review* 1:1(Jan 1876):67-83.

commenced with the quotation above. Its author is Henry K. Rusden, writing in the debut issue of the *Melbourne Review* (1876), which he and friends established to promote the secular outlook. Rusden was a public servant<sup>2</sup>, an office bearer of the Victorian Royal Society, and co-founder of the Eclectic Association, a forerunner of Victoria's Humanist Society, which staunchly supports birth control, abortion, euthanasia, and no-limits reproductive technology. (The Society opposes genocide on humanitarian and human rights grounds).

The radical message of social Darwinism was wrapped in an envelope best described as 'the scientific world view'. By mid-Nineteenth Century it was a robust, widely diffused, and variegated outlook whose exponents championed all-sided progress. It was integral to professional standard of the growing cadres of scientific and technological elites. It was explicit in free trade economics, but socialists of many hues also claimed it as their watchword. It had penetrated literature, theatre, and the arts. From its inception in 17<sup>th</sup> Century rationalist philosophy and science, whose great metaphor was the World Machine, the scientific worldview posed some acute questions. If nature is ordered by strict laws admitting no exceptions, what is to be made of miracles? If the world is a machine, must not we humans be machines also? If so, does not the soul vanish, taking free will and the moral capacity with it? 'Yes' answers to these questions resulted in militant anti-religious materialism by the onset of the French Revolution. By mid-Nineteenth Century, this version of the scientific worldview enjoyed cultural penetration of great depth, although its declared exponents were a minority and not one of Europe's leading scientists or statesmen endorsed it.

Recalling this context helps explain the sudden change of climate precipitated by the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Although the book contained few express statements about scientific principles or method, many of its initial readers interpreted it to be a full-fledged vindication of scientific materialism. Although Darwin would publish not a word about the application of his theory to humankind until 1871, the tabloid press instantly labelled Darwin as endorsing the sensational notion of our species' pithecoïd origin. Although Darwin's book presented no empirical proof of the evolution of even one species, his partisans vehemently proclaimed that he had proved the evolution of all species. Although the book's reasoning is embedded in technical detail across numerous fields—details whose accuracy is essential to the success of the argument—that forbidding challenge did not prevent numerous readers, including those with no knowledge whatever of natural history, from experiencing Darwin's message as a Grand Revelation.

To instance one example: Richard Goldschmidt, a leading geneticist, wrote that at age sixteen

...it seemed that all problems of heaven and earth were solved simply and convincingly; there was an answer to every question which troubled the young

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of Rusden and his friends, see Ralph Biddington, *Eclectic Association: Victoria's First Rationalists, 1866-1895*, *Australian Rationalist*, 51(2):35-44, 2004.

mind. Evolution was the key to everything and could replace all the beliefs and creeds which one was discarding. There were no creation, no God, no heaven and hell, only evolution and the wonderful law of recapitulation which demonstrated the fact of evolution to the most stubborn believer in creation.<sup>3</sup>

This Eureka transformed many persons, male and female, young and old, scientist and non-scientist. Be it noted that life-changing responses to books is commonplace and is unrelated to cognitive merit. This observation helps to understand what was involved in 'the Darwinian Revolution'. Antecedent cultural change had prepared a wide public for a scientific catechism of thoroughgoing materialism. Darwin's *Origin* was perceived to fulfil this expectation. This in turn involved a psychological Gestalt switch that shunted aside what was previously self-evident and made room for what was previously unthinkable. Social Darwinism, with its base-line conviction that life is devoid of sanctity, that is, merely animal, occupied this space in the bat of an eye. For example, Clemence Royer was among the initial admirers. In 1862 she published her French translation of *Origin*, together with a long introduction in which she linked free market economics—for her the social engine of Progress—with natural selection—the natural counter-part—to produce the first clear statement of Social Darwinism. She wrote:

What is the result of this exclusive and unintelligent protection accorded to the weak, the infirm, the incurable, the wicked, to all those who are ill-favored by nature? It is that ills which have afflicted them tend to be perpetuated and multiplied indefinitely; the evil is increased instead of diminishing, and tends to grow at the expense of good.<sup>4</sup>

Those who have probed the ethics of life's sanctity, or the challenges of Creationism vs. Evolution, will be aware that they are dealing with two positions that seem unbridgeable by argument. My remarks are intended to assist understanding why this is so. Those who deny the sanctity of life, on the basis of what I style 'stark raving rationalism', have undergone a conversion experience that shuts off any return to pre-conversion sensitivity to sanctity arguments, even arguments of a prudential kind. By electing to emphasize this point, I have foregone comment on Weikart's rich historical evidence about the initial deniers of life's sanctity. Let me leave it by strongly recommending this study to any ethics student who wishes to understand the actual performance of denial in its initial historical manifestation. You will find that it presents a very different set of historical facts than those usually adduced by Darwin advocates.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, p11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p89