



**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.



**Reviewed by** Sander Gliboff (Department of History and Philosophy of Science, Indiana University)

**Published on** H-German (September, 2004)

## Darwin on Trial Again

The American creationist movement has been waging war against Darwin and modern science for decades, but their strategy is evolving. Instead of pitting only the Bible against the biology, they are cultivating their credentials in a variety of academic disciplines and attacking from many new directions. On the history front, Richard Weikart's book appropriates the Holocaust and indeed the entire course of Western civilization for the creationist side, as it traces a decline in Western morals from the *Origin of Species* to the origin of National Socialism. It is being sold at a big discount by the Discovery Institute, one of several organs of the religious right that is touting it as an argument against teaching evolution. It may also prove instrumental in making a case against reforming marriage and legalizing abortion or assisted suicide, because it includes comparable proposals among the links between Darwin and Hitler.

According to Weikart, all of these evils have stemmed from Darwinian "naturalism." Naturalism is the principle that marks the modern boundary between science and theology or metaphysics. It limits scientific investigation to the natural realm and disallows supernatural agencies

and divine intervention in scientific explanations. For example, it might very well please the Creator to make an object fall with a force that is inversely proportional to the square of its distance from the center of the earth, but under naturalism, physicists leave that Creator out of the equations that describe and explain gravitation. Similarly, biologists do not invoke the Creator in their work, either.

Among modern creationists, Phillip Johnson first made an issue of biologists' naturalism in *Darwin on Trial* (1991), where he raised legalistic and philosophical objections to the way it banishes God from the sciences. Here Weikart builds upon Johnson's work with historical and ethical objections. In particular, he objects to the fact that Darwin included humanity as part of Nature and treated the human mind and the moral sense as subjects for biological research. Rather than investigate Man's immortal soul or the divine foundations of ethics, Darwin's naturalistic approach took ethics to be a human creation, a product of the brain and of cultural and biological evolution. That, says Weikart, undermined traditional Christian values and constituted the first link

in a chain of ideas leading to National Socialism and the Holocaust.

The book is very well crafted to maintain a scholarly stance and avoid any blatant evangelizing or explicit political advocacy. It never cites Johnson or other creationists and it does not identify the author as a fellow of the Discovery Institute. Skillfully, it deploys the bugbear of naturalism to draw attention away from anti-Semitism, with its inconvenient Christian connections, as well as from any other intellectual, political, social, cultural, economic, diplomatic, military, or technological components of Nazism or factors in Hitler's success. The result, by scholarly standards, is an overly narrow and selective history, which makes only cursory use of the extensive secondary literature on the origins of National Socialism and the history of Darwinism.[1]

In the first part of the book, titled "Laying new foundations for ethics," Weikart anchors the Darwinian end of his chain of ideas. He has Darwin and early Darwinians developing evolutionary systems of ethics. These systems varied among themselves or allowed for historical change in ethical norms, hence were relativistic in comparison to Christianity, which was absolute. Part two, "Devaluing human life," ascribes to Darwinians the view that individual human lives are not sacred, not equal, and may be sacrificed selectively for the sake of evolutionary progress or other perceived good. Here the chain branches and links up with eugenics on the one hand and with scientific theories of racial inequality on the other. Part three, "Eliminating the 'inferior ones,'" connects the theories to practical proposals. On the eugenics branch: promoting population fitness through marriage reform, birth control, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. On the side of scientific racism: promoting international and inter-racial struggle, imperialism, and militarism. Part four, "Impacts," completes the chain to Hitler, who, Weikart argues, was influenced by both the practical proposals and the theories of ethics, which he needed for winning converts to his cause. Hitler and his followers are depicted not as amoral, but as having embraced the wrong sort of morality, the naturalistic sort, instead of the one that was engraved in stone. And that, so to speak, is the moral of Weikart's story: there is no workable form of morality that is not God-given and absolute. All else leads to Hitler.

Methodologically, the book is the kind of history of ideas that connects thinkers and texts by means of conceptual or linguistic resemblances. There are indeed some thought-provoking connections to be made

here, for as is well known, National Socialism incorporated ideas about biology, race, struggle, and survival. Less well known may be the particular scientists and social thinkers in Weikart's study, whose writings conveyed Darwinian ideas to the twentieth-century German audience. They developed various naturalistic systems of ethics and various proposals for racial advancement, some of which were reprehensible by any reasonable standard, and some of which bore resemblances to later Nazi ideas.

The method becomes problematic, however, when one tries to argue from these kinds of resemblances to causal relationships. Is the scientific *causing* the political? *Influencing* it? *Converging* with it? Being *appropriated* and misrepresented by it? Maybe the influences go the other way, and science is responding to political trends and pressures. Maybe science and politics are both responding to something else in the historical context. A good historian of science will have an eye out for various patterns of give and take among biologists, physicians, social philosophers, politicians, even theologians, interested segments of the public, and eventually Hitler. With Weikart, it is a foregone conclusion that the connections are causes and influences, always emanating from Darwin.

Weikart goes so far as to assert that "in philosophical terms, Darwinism was a necessary, but not a sufficient, cause for Nazi ideology" (p. 9). As the book portrays it, Darwinism's causal role lay in undermining Christian ethics, which would otherwise have held as the last bastion against Nazism, no matter how many other causes were working in Hitler's favor. I suppose this is also the rationalization for leaving all those other causes out of the book. There is of course no way to investigate what would have happened without Darwinism, or even to imagine the modern world without any challenges to pre-modern Christian doctrines. Perhaps Nazism could have been avoided, as Weikart asserts. Perhaps it would only have had to appropriate less biological rhetoric and more of some other sort.

Weikart tries to argue that no ideology as coherent and destructive as Nazism could ever have developed as long as ethics stood on unquestioned Christian foundations, which upheld the sanctity of every individual life. He seems at times to picture a halcyon pre-Darwinian past, when the absolute theoretical foundations of ethics made a real difference in practice. However, as Weikart does acknowledge, there were many ethical lapses before Darwin, too. One might reasonably doubt whether

Western civilization was significantly more corrupt after its intellectuals took the naturalistic turn, but Weikart does not. He argues—incredibly, for someone who likes his morals absolute—that things like racism and slavery were less bad before Darwin, because Europeans still had Christian values and were moved to send missionaries to Africa as well as slave traders (pp. 103, 185).

It is dismaying to see such opinions being passed off as results of scholarly research. The book's few merits only deepen the dismay because they suggest that Weikart knows better. His book is rich in primary material, thoroughly documented, and clearly and concisely written. It features an intriguing and diverse cast of characters, including biologists like Ernst Haeckel, philosophers like Christian Ehrenfels, the eugenicists Alfred Ploetz and Wilhelm Schallmayer, the psychologist August Forel, and the feminist Helene Stoecker. Unfortunately, Weikart only repeats their most outrageous stances on ethics and human evolution and omits their criticisms of the still-Christian (despite Darwin) societies in which they lived. In short, he does not strive for a contextual understanding of the selected writers any more than for an explanation of Hitler. They are only charac-

ters in a contrived, cautionary tale against religious apostasy, Darwinism, and free inquiry into the foundations of ethics.

#### Note

[1]. Relevant works on the roles of science, medicine, and eugenics in the history of National Socialism include, e.g.: Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Robert N. Proctor, *Racial Hygiene. Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). On important discontinuities between Weimar eugenics and Nazi extermination: Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex. The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For an overview of the history of Darwinism, including discussion of religion and morals, see Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For a more detailed historical treatment of Darwinian ethics: Robert J. Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

View the author(s) response to this review:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-german&month=0409&week=d&msg=zhXbCx93nfETuT1sNM0nWw&u>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Sander Gliboff. Review of Weikart, Richard, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9837>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).