

PRIMARY SOURCES

The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man Charles Darwin

The nineteenth century was a period of great scientific ideas and discoveries. Perhaps the most important and certainly the most controversial was Darwin's theory of evolution. Charles Darwin (1809-1882), a British naturalist, gathered data while on voyages in the southern Pacific. He used those data to develop his theory of evolution by natural selection. This theory of evolution, particularly as applied to human beings, challenged Biblical accounts of creation. He argued that all life, including human life, evolved from lower forms. Evolution was slow and extended over a much longer period than had been assumed. Natural selection, or survival of the fittest, determined how species evolved.

Darwin first formulated his findings and theory in an 1844 essay. However, it was only after 1859, when he published The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, that his ideas became well known and widely controversial. The first of two selections below is from that book. The second is from The Descent of Man, which he published in 1871.

Consider: *Why his ideas might be so welcome by some, so disturbing to others; the possible psychological impact of his ideas; how those favoring Biblical accounts might respond.*

[C]an we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest. . . .

Natural selection acts solely through the preservation of variations in some way advantageous, which consequently endure. Owing to the high geometrical rate of increase of all organic beings, each area is already fully stocked with inhabitants; and it follows from this, that as the favoured forms increase in number, so, generally,

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will the less favoured decrease and become rare. Rarity, as geology tells us, is the precursor to extinction.

The main conclusion here arrived at, and now held by many naturalists who are well competent to form a sound judgment, is that man is descended from some less highly organized form. The grounds upon which this conclusion rests will never be shaken, for the close similarity between man and the lower animals in embryonic development, as well as in innumerable points of structure and constitution, both of high and of the most trifling importance,—the rudiments which he retains, and the abnormal reversions to which he is occasionally liable,—are facts which cannot be disputed. They have long been known, but until recently they told us nothing with respect to the origin of man. Now when viewed by the light of our knowledge of the whole organic world, their meaning is unmistakable. The great principle of evolution stands up clear and firm, when these groups of facts are considered in connection with others, such as the mutual affinities of the members of the same group, their geographical distribution in past and present times, and their geological succession. It is incredible that all these facts should speak falsely. He who is not content to look, like a savage, at the phenomena of nature as disconnected, cannot any longer believe that man is the work of a separate act of creation. . . .

We have seen that man incessantly presents individual differences in all parts of his body and in his mental faculties. These differences or variations seem to be induced by the same general causes, and to obey the same laws as with the lower animals. In both cases similar laws of inheritance prevail. Man tends to increase at a greater rate than his means of subsistence; consequently he is occasionally subjected to a severe struggle for existence, and natural selection will have effected whatever lies within its scope. A succession of strongly-marked variations of a similar nature is by no means requisite; slight fluctuating differences in the individual suffice for the work of natural selection. . . .

[M]an with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.

SOURCE: Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 6th ed. (London: John Murray, 1872), pp. 63, 85. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1883), pp. 606-607, 619.

Social Statics: Liberalism and Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer

The works of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) epitomize the assertive liberal philosophy favored by successful mid-nineteenth-century industrialists. This was a period in which capitalism was relatively unrestrained and social legislation was only in its infancy. It was also the beginning of thinking from a biological and evolutionary perspective, as best evidenced by the publication of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859. Spencer reflected all this in his massive writings: He rose from a railroad engineer to become editor of the London Economist—which espoused the views of industrial capitalism—and an independent author. Always a supporter of laissez-faire, he was best known for his advocacy of social evolution and acceptance of Darwinian ideas applied to society (Social Darwinism). Modern scholars consider him a founder of sociology. The following is an excerpt from Social Statics, first published in 1851.

Consider: *Why Spencer's views would be so appealing to the industrial middle class; on what grounds certain groups might oppose these views; the social policies that would flow from these ideas; ways these views reflect Darwin's ideas.*

Pervading all Nature we may see at work a stern discipline which is a little cruel; that it may be very kind. . . . It seems hard that an unskillfulness which with all his efforts he cannot overcome, should entail hunger upon the artisan. It seems hard that a labourer incapacitated by sickness from competing with his stronger fellows, should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately but in connexion with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of beneficence—the same beneficence which brings to early graves the children of diseased parents, and singles out the intemperate and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic.

There are many very amiable people who have not the nerve to look this matter fairly in the face. Disabled as they are by their sympathies with present suffering, from duly regarding ultimate consequences, they pursue a course which is injudicious, and in the end even cruel. We do not consider it true kindness in a mother to gratify her child with sweetmeats that are likely to make it ill. We should think it a very foolish sort of benevolence which led a surgeon to let his patient's disease progress to a fatal issue, rather than inflict pain by an operation. Similarly, we must call those spurious philanthropists who, to prevent present misery, would entail greater misery on future generations. That rigorous necessity which, when allowed to operate, becomes so sharp a spur to the lazy and so strong a bridle to the random, these paupers' friends would repeal, because of the wailings it here

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and there produces. Blind to the fact that under the natural order of things society is constantly exerting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members, these unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which not only stops the purifying process, but even increases the vitiation—absolutely encourages the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unfailing provision, and discourages the multiplication of the competent and provident by heightening the difficulty of maintaining a family. And thus, in their eagerness to prevent the salutary sufferings that surround us, these sigh-wise and groan-foolish people bequeath to posterity a continually increasing curse.