

Articles

SOCIAL DARWINISM AND NATURAL THEODICY

by David Oates

Abstract. Despite the harsh scientific basis of Social Darwinism, its followers strove to unify nature with humane feelings—for world views necessarily attempt such reconciliations. To answer the difficult “problem of evil” posed by natural selection and survival of the fittest, Social Darwinists such as Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Herbert Spencer resorted to three kinds of theodicy: sentimental denial of the problem, belief in progress, and belief in perfection. Spencer’s writings particularly display at different times both a rigid individualism and a softer organicism. Eventually, however, T. H. Huxley would abandon the attempt, acknowledging in effect that no complete world view was possible.

Keywords: individualism; organicism; problem of evil; progress; Social Darwinism; theodicy.

For several centuries now, each generation has faced the quintessential modern task of harmonizing its factual knowledge with its beliefs and values. Perhaps the most intense and famous struggle to achieve this harmony is that which occupied the latter half of the nineteenth century, and which focussed on Darwinian science as the new knowledge which had somehow to be made significant.

Progressive attempts to marry a system of values to the science of evolution were eventually dubbed “Social Darwinism.” Not only the body, but also mind and the social existence, needed to be fitted into the evolutionary frame. To do so was to create ethics. To do so was to ask about the role of God. And to do so was, finally and unavoidably, to

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ask the question that implicitly drives all apologists and world views: namely, Why is there evil and suffering? Where, if anywhere, is goodness?

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), co-discoverer of natural selection, was one who took this struggle to find the value of a brutal world mightily to heart. One of his most telling attempts to address the emotional and spiritual distress which his and Charles Darwin's view of nature had caused occurs in his book *The World of Life*. Written near the end of the long arc of Victorian debate that spans from 1859 to the beginning of the Great War, it sets the problem up with undeniable force and pathos.

A very large number of persons of many shades of opinion and various degrees of knowledge are disturbed by the contemplation of the vast destruction of life ever going on in the world. This disturbance has become greater, has become a mystery, almost a nightmare of horror, since organic evolution through the survival of the fittest has been accepted as a law of nature.

The idea, therefore, that the whole system of nature from the remotest eons of the past . . . has been founded upon destruction of life, on the daily and hourly slaughter of myriads of innocent and often beautiful living things, in order to support the lives of other creatures, which others are specially adapted to destroy them, and are endowed with all kinds of weapons in order that they may the more certainly capture and devour their victims—all this is so utterly abhorrent to us that we cannot reconcile it with an author of the universe who is at once all-wise, all-powerful, and all-good (Wallace 1911, 398).

Wallace is famous for having abandoned scientific logic in later life, turning to spiritualism and vitalism for answers. However, this passage in no way reflects ill on him either as a scientist or as a person, for as R. M. Young has shown so clearly, the debate over nature, evolution, and humankind was virtually always conducted in an environment charged with questions of ideology and value. Unlike the concepts dealt with by physics, biological concepts such as fitness, adaptation, and progress are tinged with questions of purpose and direction, and laden with ethical and theological import. From the beginning of the century to its end, ideology and science were bound together in the attempt to pry out the real truth of biological existence. They were all “part of an ongoing debate within natural theology which was at least as important to Darwin and Wallace as the question of the mechanism of evolution” (Young 1969, 111).

I would like to show that the problem of goodness was particularly acute for Darwinists. Not only was the nature they “discovered” relatively cruel. They also exacerbated the problem by their own rhetorical excesses, virtually and intentionally making the picture as horrible as possible. They dug themselves a remarkable moral and emotional hole—from which, as I shall further show, they typically emerged by

resorting to one of three kinds of answers—three forms of secular theodicy that vindicated the goodness of life on earth. Lastly, the attempts of these Darwinists to find the deeper meaning behind the hard facts of nature illustrate a more general truth: that even self-proclaimed “scientific” world views must include virtually religious components. For without such components, they cannot satisfy the human demand to make sense of it all. Without such components, in other words, they cannot be world views at all.¹

A NIGHTMARISH WORLD VIEW

A world view is a useful generalization. I define it as the way people who share similar assumptions go about solving similar existential and intellectual problems. It is on the most fundamental level a response to the universal human need for order, for some meaningful correlation among events, ideas, and feelings. When a number of people use the same logical apparatus, and are working to solve the same problem, the result is a reasonably coherent body of belief. Social Darwinism is definable in just this way. It takes the logic of evolution as its primary way of thinking; and it looks at the natural facts of struggle and selfishness and bloodshed—and the progress they seem to occasion—as the central problem to be solved. “Solved” means made significant, that is, harmonized on a large scale not only factually, but emotionally.

Gertrude Himmelfarb notes, fairly enough, that “in the spectrum of opinion that went under the name of social Darwinism almost every variety of belief was included” (Himmelfarb 1959, 407). Yet overuse of a name does not mean there can be no useful definition of it. John C. Greene limits the name to the set of beliefs of Herbert Spencer, Darwin, T. H. Huxley, and Wallace in the late 1850s and 1860s (Greene 1981, 130). I shall adapt this definition to include their writings at other times, since these continued to influence the widespread public habit of applying natural principles to social questions. The widely-read Spencer, in particular, justifies this expansion—for some of his most Social Darwinist pronouncements occurred in the 1870s and 1880s, notably in the series “The Man Versus the State” (Spencer [1884] 1910).

The identity problem of Social Darwinism has for some time been bracketed by the opposed views of Richard Hofstadter and Robert C. Bannister. Hofstadter, of course, painted the classic picture of the juggernaut Social Darwinism, carrying capitalism on its back and grinding down the poor before it (1944). Bannister, in turn, has doubted the very existence of this monster—showing in a convincing discussion that, although many in the late nineteenth century were

afraid of it, few ever really saw it. He portrays the conservative Social Darwinist as mostly a fabrication of its opponents (1970).

Yet there is an interesting and unintended side effect created by the impressive march of anti-Social Darwinists across Bannister's pages. One inevitably asks: Where is all this energy of opposition coming from? If Social Darwinism did not exist, then what motivated these writers—Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and many others—to oppose it? Further, Bannister acknowledges the existence of at least two bona fide Social Darwinists, namely Spencer and the American academic William Graham Sumner (1840-1910). That these two were widely read, and often quoted, is undeniable.

The conclusion that seems warranted, therefore, is the obvious one: the middle way. Accepting that some exaggeration may occur in Hofstadter (possibly for the socio-political reasons Bannister mentions) still leaves one with a very real and very potent way of looking at the world through the Darwinian glasses made by Spencer and others, including Darwin and Wallace themselves. It is a way of putting the world together that repays examination, for I am convinced that its attempt to salvage human values from apparently hostile facts, contains instructive information for the various scientific eras which have succeeded it—including our own.

There is an irony in the rather bleak complaint quoted from Wallace at the beginning of this essay. It is that he was among those most responsible for the popular conception of a bloody and hideous nature. Early in his career Wallace, like Darwin and Huxley, was apparently aware of a need to impress upon his readers just how universal was the struggle for existence. The obstacle to communicating this was not only general ignorance about nature but a public habit of thinking about nature that had been conditioned by generations of Paleyism and religious sentiment. Nature, in England, wears a calm and kind face; and the famous 1802 *Natural Theology* of William Paley had interpreted nature as a set of proofs of the benevolence and providence of God. Whatever occurred in nature was well-planned and appropriate, and showed both the mastery and the loving-kindness of the Creator. Of course such a view was well-matched with the belief in special, divine creation of each species. Together they shaped the "nature" of popular belief: God's good and harmonious workmanship.

To overturn this view was a gigantic task, which the first generation of Darwinists undertook with great vigor. To read any quantity of Darwinist literature is to be impressed with its vivid depictions of nature's gore. These depictions are clearly a rhetorical tool, wielded repeatedly and for a purpose. Indeed, certain oft-repeated examples begin to stand out, becoming virtual parables of Darwinism that are

used not merely factually but representatively: they are intended to present the inner truth of nature. The most repeated of all, once used by Erasmus Darwin and showing up in his grandson's *Origin of Species* no less than three times, may have been the ichneumon wasp—that famous carnivore which lays its eggs in the stunned bodies of its prey, so that the hatch may dine at leisure on its still-living flesh.

In the hands of aggressive Darwinians, the point of such examples was to shock Paleyites out of their complacent optimism about nature, so that their doctrine of special creation and their teleological explanations of adaptation could be replaced by evolution and inductive explanation. Fierce and bloody competition must replace divine orderliness. The situation demanded strong statement, and got it. Consider this awesome passage from Wallace's *Darwinism* (1889). In it, a gory three-page extravaganza on the passenger pigeon climaxes with this description of its breeding-grounds:

The ground was strewed with broken limbs of trees, eggs, and young squab pigeons, which had been precipitated from above, and on which herds of hogs were fattening. Hawks, buzzards, and eagles were sailing about in great numbers, and seizing the squabs from the nests at pleasure; while, from 20 feet upwards to the top of the trees, the view through the woods presented a perpetual tumult of crowding and fluttering multitudes of pigeons, their wings roaring like thunder, mingled with the frequent crash of falling timber. . . . It was dangerous to walk under these flying and fluttering millions, from the frequent fall of large branches, broken down by the weight of the multitudes above, and which in their descent often destroyed numbers of the birds themselves (Wallace 1889, 31-32).

"A nightmare of horror" indeed, this hell of mischance, fertility, predation, and scattered embryos. With descriptions like these abounding from Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, and others, small wonder the educated layperson felt a bit concerned and queasy over exactly what kind of world this was. That was the intent of the exercise.

Darwin himself later admitted some of the excesses of his picture of nature. "If I have erred . . ." he says some twelve years after the *Origin*, "or exaggerated. . . . I have at least, as I hope, done good service in aiding to overthrow the dogma of separate creations" (Darwin [1871] 1874, 1:153). The emphasis on competition, strife, and brutality clearly did its job of bludgeoning a reluctant public into a new awareness. However rhetorically effective, it also left out important parts of the natural economy. Revisionists soon began to limit and qualify Darwinistic selection to include, for example, the adaptive value of cooperation and the importance of coadaptation.² Yet the image was already fixed in the public mind: Nature was a jungle, stalked by ruthless predators, and it was "every man for himself."

SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF GOODNESS

It was this picture, therefore, which created the greatest difficulty for those who tried to found their understanding of human life on Darwin's view of nature. It is not human nature simply to rule out of existence such qualities as kindness, love, unselfishness, and beauty. Yet the strict Darwinist held that altruistic qualities, aesthetic perceptions—perhaps even consciousness itself—were but trivial appearances playing over an ugly and brutal deeper reality. Social Darwinists found that their world had been defined in terms of horrible necessities: it was nothing other than a process of brutal strife that brought forth life, humanity, and civilization. Or in Darwin's words: "Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows" (Darwin [1859] 1964, 490). Whoever accepted evolution as the basic biological reality had also to accept a sort of universal evil, or at least universal selfish struggle and conscienceless pain.

Therefore, for followers of Darwin the familiar theological "problem of evil" was turned inside out: evil could henceforth be assumed, and the existential paradox which demanded explanation became, in fact, *the problem of goodness*. How could the human values of love, beauty, and the like be affirmed in such a world as this? It was this question—this curious inversion of the traditional apologist's dilemma—that Social Darwinists had to answer.

The readiest method of dealing with difficult or contradictory material is simply to deny it. Denial "solves" a problem by making it disappear—admittedly a very primitive form of theodicy. While it gives no lasting answer, it at least testifies to the weight of the dilemma which presses even good minds to such expedients.

Darwin himself occasionally took this approach, solving the problem by simply minimizing the suffering he witnessed in nature. It should be noted that at many other points he was capable of being fully horrified by nature's waste and cruelty. However, at the end of the crucial third chapter of the *Origin* (which introduces the "Struggle for Existence"), he allows himself to muse, as John C. Greene states it, "on the brighter side of the dark struggle for existence" (Greene 1981, 136): "When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply" (Darwin [1859] 1964, 79). The aim here is consolation. Darwin, like others, found the spectacle of nature difficult to bear, and sought some way to justify the harshness of the law of the jungle. Yet such unfounded glossing-over as this could hardly do the job.

Wallace, as we have already seen, felt this pressure as keenly as any of his contemporaries. Already, in his *Darwinism*, he had offered a spiritualist way out to those who would “be relieved from the crushing mental burthen” of believing “that we, in common with the rest of nature, are but products of the blind eternal forces of the universe” (Wallace 1889, 476-77). In that book Wallace proposed that natural selection operated only on the human body, not on the mind or spirit.

However, this expedient did not solve the whole problem. Nature still presented a gory spectacle; and people of faith still had to wonder at the divine power that would use such means. Hence, Wallace comes to repeat the position Darwin flirted with above: denial of pain and suffering as a means of vindicating the goodness of nature. In his 1911 chapter “Is Nature Cruel?” he offers again the answer that nature is not cruel because most animals simply do not suffer. Wallace cautions that one must not read one’s own sensations into the animal world: that “anything approaching to what we term ‘pain’ was unknown” to most animals. They “probably suffer nothing at all when being devoured.” He goes further to assert (very strangely) that “birds, mice, squirrels, and the like, do not get limbs broken by falls, as we do,” and that, in sum, “whatever pain exists is not long-continued” (Wallace 1911, 404-405).

There is little evidence that these unconvincing solutions to the problem of evil had much influence. They could not, for their premises are almost exclusively, almost embarrassingly, emotional. The Pangloss approach to the dilemma of natural evil and human moral expectations could not offer much solace, for it ignored the factual data that created the problem in the first place and abandoned the habit of taking empirical facts seriously. An effective Darwinian theodicy would have to *use* Darwinian nature in its full reality, not deny it.

A second approach to the problem of evil has already been implied in some of the quoted passages: the importance of progress as a justification of the struggle for survival. If suffering could not be minimized, it could at least be seen as the means to a desirable end, the progressive improvement of civilization and species.

“Progress” was typically a rather unexamined article of faith to the Victorians. It seemed obvious that civilization was progressing rapidly. It was easily assumed that European culture was the higher form toward which “primitive” cultures were growing. And certainly *Homo sapiens* was a higher form than apelike ancestors. With the evidence of technological progress all around them, Victorians and their contemporaries took solace in the notion that both nature and human civilization were treading a path that led ever upward.

Echoing Darwin, Wallace observed that “this daily and hourly struggle, this incessant warfare, is nevertheless the very means by which

much of the beauty and harmony of nature is produced" (Wallace 1889, 14). Many others, including such writers as Walter Bagehot (1826-77) and Thomas H. Huxley (1825-95), managed to see the evolutionary good in the worst human and natural suffering: war, poverty, even rapacious colonial conquest. Bagehot explicitly based his "law of history" on the idea of evolution through struggle and survival of the fittest: "What was put forward for mere animal history may, with a change of form, but an identical essence, be applied to human history." Yet this leads to no glum assessment of the human situation; instead, such struggle guarantees civilization itself and the advancement of humankind. When nations struggle, "the constant winning of these favoured competitors is the particular mode by which the best qualities wanted in elementary civilization are propagated and preserved. . . . The energy of civilization grows by the coalescence of strengths and by the competition of strengths" (Bagehot [1869] 1970, 506-509).³ The naturalist and traveller Thomas Belt, for another example, actually praises intertribal warfare in precolonial Central America because it "weeded out the weak and indolent" (Belt 1874, 171).

But the figure who did more than any other to promote the rationale of progress was surely Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). He linked progress and suffering together in a vast edifice of allegedly scientific certainty. From the start, however, his avowed purpose was not merely to present a scientific understanding of life. It was to find the meaning, the goodness, hidden in the rough facts of nature: to make a scientific theodicy.

Spencer is well known for having almost discovered natural selection. In later life, in fact, he seemed rather galled at having missed it—for he had laid out all its principal points in writings from 1852 to 1857. In his 1852 "Theory of Population," he derives from Thomas Malthus the notion that excess population drives human progress by eliminating the unfit and rewarding the fit. This was followed by the 1857 "Progress: Its Law and Cause," which included the observation that changing environmental conditions would not only cause divergence and adaptive variation in a species, "but also [cause] a tendency to the occasional production of a somewhat higher organism" (Spencer [1857] 1858, 43). Taken together, these insights bear close resemblance to the theory which Wallace and Darwin would present a scant year later.

The beginning of this train of near-discovery, however, lay in precisely that border region of mixed biology and ideology so typical of the whole nineteenth-century debate about nature. For the theory of population, Spencer tells us, was born out of a desire to *answer* Mal-

thus—out of Spencer's declared need to find the good hidden within the evident evil of Malthusian population growth and its inevitable privations. There must be some benevolent purpose behind this dismal condition, Spencer declares: some "inherent tendency of things towards good," some "invisible," "patient self-rectification" (Spencer 1852, 250).

He found it in the universal "law of progress," which could affirm goodness even in the face of the most brutal facts. Spencer in fact offers two proofs of inevitable progress, corresponding to the two, rather ill-mated assumptions from which he worked (Barker [1915] 1947).⁴ The Spencer that is best remembered assumes a radical individualism, as in *Social Statics*. An individual human being, the "social atom," must be allowed to function as freely as possible. The sole purpose of government is to keep other persons from infringing upon one's right of expression and fulfillment—or failure. The payoff is that the law of progress could then work freely, according to the now-familiar principles of natural selection. "Pervading all nature we may see at work a stern discipline, which is a little cruel that it may be very kind. That state of universal warfare maintained through the lower creation, to the great perplexity of many worthy people, is at bottom the most merciful provision which the circumstances admit of."

Not only does the natural world progress by this means, but it also brings forth humanity, civilization and (ultimately) what Spencer calls the "ideal man." However, the price of such progress is high: it relies on "a discipline which is pitiless in the working out of good: a felicity-pursuing law which never swerves for the avoidance of partial and temporary suffering. The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many 'in shallows and in miseries,' are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence" (Spencer 1851, 322). Though harshness and suffering are real, they are justified by the resulting advance of species and civilization.

As Spencer promoted his vision of progress, authorities as various as Huxley and Friedrich Nietzsche joined him in celebrating what might from another viewpoint be seen as tragic: the inevitable feasting of being upon being, the destruction of the weak by the strong. It all formed part of a necessary pattern of good-from-evil which, by the turn of the century, had become a commonplace of educated and middle-class belief. It vindicated the order of nature by proclaiming that, in the words of Andrew Carnegie, "All is well since all grow better" (Carnegie 1920, 339).

PERFECTION AND THE ORGANISMIC ANALOGY

Such optimistic evolutionism, for which Spencer is so well remembered, was as common an idea in its day as a vague sort of environmentalism is in our own. It was most often found in the form of that unreflective faith in the future to which so many clung, as the accelerating pace of the nineteenth century swept away the familiar and traditional. It was, in the words of one of Anton Chekhov's dullest and most bourgeois characters, a faith in "the unceasing advance of life upon earth, of unceasing movement towards perfection" (Chekhov [1899] 1978, 84).

As these words suggest, belief in inevitable progress led toward a third form of apologetic: belief in eventual perfection. It did not matter that biologists forthrightly admitted that "retrogression" was as possible an outcome of natural selection as "progress" toward higher forms was. The idea had outgrown its makers. If the progress of species and of civilization could justify the cruel means that gained them, then how much more so could the glittering possibility of some kind of (usually unspecified) "perfection"?

Here what might be called the "other" Herbert Spencer provides one of the best examples. The book which followed *Social Statics* pursued this goal of perfection almost to the point of ignoring the processes of suffering on which such emphasis had formerly been laid. Spencer's *First Principles* (1860-62) focuses on a state of virtually paradisaical perfection which he foresees as the logical end of evolution. The atom-individual is supplanted in this vision—or perhaps transcended—by a new reality: the organically unified society. In *First Principles*, the means are mentioned less, the end more. The struggles and pains along the way are hardly noticed—Darwin's natural selection gets only a footnote—because Spencer regards the advancing cooperation and coordination of nature as the ultimate truth of the physical process. Evolving nature is seen as a progressive involution, an ever-intensifying harmony.

One reason for this surprising departure from the individualism and struggle of *Social Statics* is the more ambitious design of *First Principles*: it seeks a universal explanation for the change perceived in all phenomena, from the astronomic to the microscopic. The human social realm is merely one small part of the cosmic picture here. To reach this lofty level of abstraction, Spencer relies on an almost exclusively deductive method. While specific examples of change and adaptation are given in abundance, the logical spine of the book is simple and spare: from the known laws of motion and energy—the laws of thermodynamics—it can be deduced that all matter must move from relatively homogeneous states to relatively heterogeneous states. This

“law” can be seen as the material universe evolves from the simple to the complex, continually adapting until (most importantly) it must eventually stabilize its innumerable parts in a “constant state” of universal equilibrium. The process of adaptation begins with rather coarse gestures of correction and reaction; but as it proceeds, its changes become increasingly subtle, correlating part with part until contrary pressures are so finely “equilibrated” as to pass out of existence.

This eventual “equilibration of forces” presents a very obvious appeal. This equilibration is the perfection Spencer sees promised by the law of evolution. And (not insignificantly) this is the eventual goal of human society. The Malthusian law of population would advance the race of humans until, “as it gradually finishes its work, [it] must gradually bring itself to an end” (Spencer 1852, 268). Evolution for Spencer moved toward the virtual utopia of “completeness.” Needless to say, in this state the cruel process which brought it about would be abandoned, at last and forever.

This is a different Spencer from the dour Malthusianist dispensing fatal medicine far and wide. There is an almost visionary gleam in this book, a relentlessness (for once) in hope. In fact, as Mark Francis points out, Spencer was one of many mid-century writers who dreamt of a society that developed by its own inner laws. Many glimpsed the bright anarchist’s dream that external coercion would be unnecessary in an organically unified society. In such a society, the identity of the whole would be inherent in the identity of the part, and conflicts of interest would be settled, as they are in an organic body, for the good of all (Francis 1978, 327).

In *First Principles*, then, Spencer—freed from narrow concern with poor laws, sanitary legislation, and the like—takes a high view which enables him to see the biological world as a whole composed of interlocked and coadapted parts. The individualistic bias drops away, and in some surprising passages, Spencer actually anticipates some of the holistic and ecological insights of the twentieth century.

The process of universal evolution, from this perspective, is seen as an “ever-increasing coordination of parts” (Spencer [1860-62] 1903, 300). Specialization and coadaptation march hand in hand, until the distinct and bristly self-interest typical of Darwinist nature blurs into the mutual well-being typical of the ecosystem. To exemplify this fact, Spencer draws upon just those examples from nature which would later become the very touchstone of ecology: symbioses—or as he describes them, creatures who are “practically combined into one organism.” Similarly, whole associations of plant and animal are discovered to be profoundly interconnected: “The Flora and Fauna in each habitat, constitute an aggregate so far integrated that many of its

species die out if placed amid the plants and animals of another habitat. And this integration, too, increases as organic evolution advances" (Spencer [1860-62] 1903, 288-89). This is a far different vision from that of *Social Statics*, with its self-sufficient ideal human beings.

Like nature, human society also moves irresistibly toward a phase beyond the present cruelties, in which all adaptation and weeding-out have finally been accomplished. This eventual self-adjustment of society will be like the "moving equilibrium . . . maintained among the functions of an individual organism." Again the imagery is striking. This is the organismic analogy, the view of society as a single organism in which individuals are as wholly integrated as cells in the body. In this final state change must virtually cease; the finally-adapted society is a "constant state" (Spencer [1860-62] 1903, 468). The fundamental Victorian ideas of individualism and progress are here surprisingly transcended by a vision of wholeness and calm.

Such a vision, had it stood by itself, might have given Spencer a radically different influence and reputation than what he actually attained. This functionally holistic view of a nature whose individuals "are integrated into a group of organs that live for and by one another" might, it seems, have stimulated a counter-movement to the prevailing ethos of the times (Spencer [1860-62] 1903, 300). But such was not the case. Spencer's utopia was forgotten, except as an ungainly appendix to his individualistic evolutionism. Eventual perfection could be referred to for apologetic purposes, but the insight into cooperative adaptation that accompanied it was wholly ignored. Spencer never truly integrates the individualistic basis of his sociology with the functional holism of *First Principles*.⁵

Thus what seems like a breakthrough into an ecological style of regarding nature is reduced to a quasi-religious vision—a dream of something far removed from present natural laws and conditions of life. In the present, the Social Darwinist (following the Spencer of *Social Statics*) saw none of it. All was competition and progress. Lacking a firm factual basis in either natural systems or theory of steady states, the idea of "finely equilibrated" stability could not be tied to real nature. It remained, therefore, a perfection reserved for the end of time, not a present reality.

Spencer's vision probably responds to the selfsame allure of the complete, the stable, and the harmonious which has recently given ecology such popular and widespread power. For Spencer, however, with his thoroughgoing program of competitive necessity and evolution, equilibrium was a merely theoretical possibility. Its logic more truly resembles the familiar theological rationale that an eventual paradise justifies the difficulties and pains of the present. Its purpose is

apologetic, not descriptive. It is an attempt to bring future moral meaning out of the present chaos of the struggle to survive: a theodicy based on a future utopia.

HUXLEY ABANDONS THE QUEST

Thus the foremost Darwinists of the Victorian age can be detected at work constructing explanations and *apologia* that have little to do with science but everything to do with the search for meaning and harmony. The pressure of Darwinism forced at least three lines of theodicy or world-justification: sentimentality, progress-worship, and utopianism.

Yet a fourth response, dealing with the problem in quite a different fashion, came from the other prominent Darwinist so far unmentioned—Thomas H. Huxley. Although during his career he contributed energetically to the advance of Darwinism, he came at last to perceive an impossible cleavage between the Darwinian view of nature “red in tooth and claw” and human values. Finding it impossible to reconcile the two, he abandoned the quest for a comprehensive evolutionary world view.

The announcement of this abandonment came in Huxley’s 1888 article “The Struggle for Existence: A Programme.” Oddly enough, this piece was widely read as a further Darwinist attack on traditional values. In fact, it is an attempt to find the balance between the two warring positions. The article sets about redressing both the despairing pessimism often felt by beleaguered traditionalists and the rather shrill optimism which had arisen from the wholesale application of the law of the jungle to the affairs of humanity. (The inversion of emotional states here is noteworthy: the Paleyite, formerly serene in his ideas of a happy natural world, now experiences the fear of encroaching disproof and disbelief [Himmelfarb 1959, 369; Houghton 1957, 54-77 and *passim*]; and the Darwinist, promoting his bloodthirsty idea of nature, takes unconscious refuge in a utopian rationale.)⁶

However, Huxley’s intention to find the *via media* in this emotionally charged issue often was not grasped. The popular misreading of this article probably stems from its typically Darwinistic depiction of red-clawed nature. “From the point of view of the moralist the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiator’s show,” Huxley asserts in an often-quoted passage (Huxley 1888, 163). In good evolutionist form he then goes on to parade the familiar, grisly facts of life.

Yet Huxley’s conclusion differs significantly from the too-familiar philosophies which attempted to make a moralistic interpretation of Darwin’s idea of nature. According to Huxley, neither optimism nor pessimism accurately reflects the state of affairs in nature, where “the goodness of the right hand, which helps the deer, and the wickedness

of the left hand which eggs on the wolf, will neutralize each other." Nature is "neither moral nor immoral, but non-moral" (Huxley 1888, 162). Against the law of survival—the strictly natural "Hobbesian war of each against all"—the law of civilization presents a *purely human* alternative: "The first men who substituted the state of mutual peace for that of mutual war . . . created society. But, in establishing peace, they obviously put a limit upon the struggle for existence. . . . And of all the successive shapes which society has taken, that most nearly approaches perfection in which the war of individual against individual is most strictly limited" (Huxley 1888, 165). Huxley is far from denying the truth of Darwin's view of nature and the survival of the fittest. Instead, he here observes that science, in Jules-Henri Poincaré's phrase, speaks only "in the indicative" and never "in the imperative." It speaks of "is," never of "ought." From the principles or discoveries of science, one "will never obtain a proposition which says: do this, or do not do that; that is to say a proposition which confirms or contradicts ethics" (Gillispie 1973, 154-55).

Huxley took the step to sever morality from science because the connections which had been created between them were imprisoning chains rather than ascending steps. If strictly construed, they led nowhere, or nowhere anyone wanted to go—into the closed world of a strictly materialist philosophy. Huxley was on solid logical ground: a rational science can describe only the phenomenal world. However, belief systems, ways of regarding the universe, are not founded upon epistemological distinctions. They are the product of usually unexamined, deeply *felt* apprehensions of "how things are." When Huxley reasserted the radical separation between science and moral values, it was an admission of defeat from an aging warrior who, having slain the theological enemy, discovered he had little to offer as a replacement. It was an admission that Social Darwinism could not offer an acceptable view of life as a whole.

SCIENCE AND A SENSE OF THE WHOLE

The point, however, is hardly to poke fun at all the varieties of Social Darwinists; for their habit of misdirecting scientific concepts to apply to cultural values, and vice versa, is a crucial human activity, a transforming of detached and isolated concepts into cohesive wholes that reflect the complexity and manysidedness of the human experience. The history of ideas itself characteristically plots the far-from-straight paths of these transformations and associations—illogical perhaps, but of the first importance. The constant trafficking of ideas and images between science and culture is, in truth, a crucial interaction, guaranteeing the vitality of both.

These four responses to Darwinistic biology—the optimistic belittling of the actual amount of suffering, the rationale of progress, the utopian belief in eventual perfection, and the eventual abandonment of biology-based ethics—share a common motivation. It is the desire to find in the universe some validation of the basic human qualities of love, tenderness, mercy, kindness, hope, and the like. Social Darwinism, in its most uncluttered form, could not do so. It invited people to applaud the “gladiatorial” show of nature, slaying the weak and rewarding the strong. But many found ways to alter this picture, or augment it, in order to make the Social Darwinist world view more complete, in order to find a better home there for moral and spiritual elements.

The career of Social Darwinism and associated materialisms demonstrates that even a “scientific” world view must answer the needs of the human mind for a sense of order and meaning. It is not enough to offer the intellect a vision of how the whole is put together. It must also offer the emotions a sense of belonging, the imagination a sense of delight, the heart a sense of goodness. These are much of what distinguish a world view from mere theory or speculation. And the skill with which these affective elements are integrated with the intellectual and empirical is certainly one of the crucial measures of a world view’s power—in Darwin’s day, in Huxley’s and in our own.

NOTES

1. Recent events call for a disclaimer. I use the term *religious* to refer to concerns with a transcendent order and the human response to it. Yet every world view, including Social Darwinism, will have religious elements without being “a religion.” Still less does this religious component pertain to Darwinistic science *per se*: the biological science remains of course distinct from the world view which was erected upon it, even when those building the world view were Darwin and Wallace themselves.

2. Peter Kropotkin ([1902] 1916, 3-5), for example, whose revisionist Darwinism began appearing in 1890, cites a well-developed continental tradition of the 1870s and 1880s.

3. Note that “coalescence” here is not cooperation but subjugation and copying by the victor.

4. Ernest Barker’s classic *Political Thought in England 1848 to 1914* ([1915] 1947) points out this basic contradiction in Spencer, which is still widely accepted. A critic of this view, Mark Francis (1978), depicts Spencer as a “developing” writer whose ideas changed, rather than contradicted themselves. But this approach makes no sense of Spencer’s return to extreme *laissez-faire* sentiments in the 1880s: Francis labels them, rather unconvincingly, as merely “degenerated” forms of Spencer’s thought. What Francis depicts, from *Social Statics to First Principles* to “The Man Versus the State,” is not development but oscillation.

5. But see Robert L. Carneiro (1973) for an argument that Spencer’s ideas were based on a consistent principle of social and biological equilibrium. For discussions of Spencer’s organicism, see Ellen Paul (1983) and Betty Abel (1982).

6. It is possible to interpret Darwin’s contemporary Karl Marx in a parallel fashion. Theodicy-like, the Marxist system answers objections about the problem of evil—the terrible, explicitly Darwinian evil of the present moment, the sanctioned brutality of the class struggle—by an all-justifying End in which contradictions are not just resolved but

dissolved. The human need for a satisfactory moral cosmos pressures even the most materialistic of systems into shapes that offer solace, make good come from evil, and give meaning to life. See, for example, Mircea Eliade (1960, 206-207); M. H. Abrams also identifies the Marxian myth of history as a form of "secular theodicy" (1971, 314-16).

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