

BOOK REVIEW

Robert J. Richards. *Was Hitler a Darwinian: Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. 269 pp. \$23.29 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-0-226-05893-1.

The book takes its title from the last chapter, although the book's subtitle, *Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory*, probably provides a more accurate indication of its overall contents. Apart from the title chapter, the other essays in the book have been published elsewhere, but have been revised and reworked for the current book. Richards is best known for his opposition to the dominant view that Darwin's theory of evolution represents the triumph of mechanistic science in biology. In a 1987 book, Richards argued that for Darwin and other early writers on evolution, conduct, and the development of mind were central to their concerns. In later works, Richards (1992, 2002) argued that the amalgam of early nineteenth-century German philosophy and biology known as Romantic biology or *Naturphilosophie*, constituted a major influence on Darwin's thought. Both themes are well represented in the current work.

In the current book, Richards criticizes those who dismiss the importance of design in Darwin's writings and who also interpret him as having banished teleology from nature. Although Darwin wrote in terms of natural law, for Darwin as for other Victorian scientists, natural law was ordained by God. Richards points out that Darwin was a theist until the late 1860s, long after the 1859 publication of the first edition of the *Origin* (Darwin, 1859). As late as 1870, Darwin could write to Joseph Hooker: "I cannot look at the universe as the result of blind chance" (in Opsovat, 1980, p.194). Richards also further discusses the importance of the evolution of mind and morality in Darwin's thinking. Darwin, who never totally abandoned the concept of "use inheritance," theorized that the development of language led to the ability to use more complex ideas which, in turn, stimulated brain development and eventually became hereditary. Elsewhere in the book Richards writes a more detailed analysis of the connections between theories of linguistic development and Darwin's theory of human evolution. Darwin also employed the idea of group (community) selection, as well as social and cultural influences, to account for the development of an abstract and extended sense of morality. Even in his later, more mechanistic descriptions of natural selection, Darwin maintained that evolution was generally beneficent and tended toward the production of greater complexity (e.g., Darwin, 1868, pp. 7–8).

Richards, who published a book on Ernst Haeckel in 2008, devotes two chapters to him here. Haeckel was an important popularizer of Darwinian thought, but critics have attacked his widely disseminated illustrations of developing embryos, characterizing them as misleading or even fraudulent. Richards defends Haeckel, a talented amateur artist, arguing that Haeckel's illustrations reveal relationships more clearly than would photographs. Critics have marginalized Haeckel as an evolutionary thinker, but Richards argues that Haeckel's views were quite close to Darwin's. Haeckel's emphasis on morphology owes much to the Romantic tradition, particularly Goethe's ideas of prototypical forms and structures (archetypes). Richards' discussion of the importance of Haeckel's illustrations also provides an implicit defense of the value of the aesthetic in the Romantic approach to nature.

The last essay in the book, *Was Hitler a Darwinian?*, is an effective critique of the efforts by religious conservatives to discredit Darwinism (a term used synonymously with

evolutionary biology generally) by tying it to Nazi racial and eugenics policies. As Richards notes, this strategy is never employed to discredit genetics, despite that discipline's acknowledged influence on the Nazis. Richards' primary antagonist in his critique is Richard Weikart (2004, 2009), a historian strongly linked to the "Intelligent Design" movement. Richards criticizes the idea that Darwinism was an important influence on Nazism on a number of grounds, including the lack of any real evidence for such a link, as well as the active opposition to Darwinism among the major Nazi figures. Richards notes that Weikart ignores important sources of Nazi racial beliefs, including the heritage of religious and cultural anti-Semitism in Germany.

Richards also takes issue with Weikart's claim that Darwinian "materialism" influenced the inhumane policies of the Nazis. Leaving aside the question of Darwin's materialism, Richards points out that the Nazis were not materialists. In fact, some of the same Romantic thinkers who influenced Darwin also influenced the Nazis, although Richards does not make much of this connection. Richards might also have mentioned that the Nazis made "mechanical science" a particular target of criticism, and often characterized it as "Jewish science."

One point of agreement between Richards and Weikart is that both dismiss the accusation, made initially in 1971 by Daniel Gasman, that it was Haeckel rather than Darwin who influenced Nazi eugenics and anti-Semitism. Richards' defense of Haeckel fits with his contention that Haeckel was not a rogue biologist, but part of the Darwinian mainstream, thus denying any link between evolutionary theory and Nazism. On the other hand, Weikart's unwillingness to blame Haeckel specifically permits him to include the entire Darwinian enterprise in his indictment.

There are several other essays in the book, including one on the relationship between Darwin's and Spencer's ideas, and another on the problems that species divergence posed for Darwin's theorizing. Richards is an important historian of evolutionary biology, one whose thinking is always challenging and provocative. You can argue with Richards, but you better have all your ducks in a row. This book provides a good introduction both to his work and to some of the current debates about the nature and history of Darwinian Theory.

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