

Response to Daniel Gasman's Objections to my Article "Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology"--*Biological Theory* 2 (2007): 97-103.

Gasman's essay at: [www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/staff/webpages/site.cfm?LinkID=259&eventID=34](http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/staff/webpages/site.cfm?LinkID=259&eventID=34)

After reading Daniel Gasman's response to my article "Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology," I see no reason to alter my general conclusions, namely, that there is no evidence that Haeckel was a virulent anti-Semite and that his views were embraced by the National Socialists. I rather believe there is quite a bit of evidence that Haeckel, a free-thinker and materialist, was generally favorably disposed to what he thought of as the Jewish *race* and specifically to Jewish scientists and thinkers of his acquaintance. I also believe the evidence is patent that Haeckelian biology was rejected by Nazi Party officials. I would, however, like to make a few observations about Gasman's response to my article. I will ignore the rampant scurrility of his characterizations of my argument.

1. I did not direct my reassessment of Haeckel's alleged anti-Semitism to undermine Gasman's scholarship, as he seems to believe. I wished, rather, to suggest a corrective of a wide-spread view. Gasman certainly gave the presumption of Haeckel's rabid anti-Semitism currency thirty-five years ago, but in my essay I was especially concerned with individuals like Stephen Jay Gould, who picked up Gasman's notion and persisted in his attacks against Haeckel throughout his career. I also wished to counter the even more unwarranted proposals of Richard Weikart, who has extended the charge of complicity with the Nazis to Darwin. These are matters that I more extensively treat in my forthcoming book on Haeckel.

2. As I pointed out in my essay, some few writers, like Heinz Brücher, did initially attempt to recruit to the Nazi side the shade of Ernst Haeckel, as well as that of many other famous intellectuals of the past. But, as I also indicated, that effort was quickly staunches by Nazi Party officials writing in a Party organ (not just some random Nazis, as Gasman suggests). They regarded Haeckelian monism antithetic to the volkisch

biology they promoted. I did not mention in my article (since I didn't have the evidence at the time) that the suppression of Haeckel's ideas also extended to all of his books. The warnings of the Nazi Party were enforced by an official edict of the Saxon ministry for bookstores and libraries condemning material inappropriate for "National-Socialist formation and education in the Third Reich." Among the works to be expunged were those by "traitors," such as Albert Einstein, those by "liberal democrats," such as Heinrich Mann, those by sexologists, such as Magnus Hirschfeld, books by "all Jewish authors no matter what their sphere," and books by individuals advocating "the superficial scientific enlightenment of a primitive Darwinism and monism," such as "Ernst Haeckel" (Richtlinien für die Bestandsprüfung in den Volksbüchereien Sachsens," *Die Bücherei* 2 (1935): 279-80). While Gasman may find Haeckel's monism supportive of the Nazis, the Nazi officials I named did not.

3. In regard to Hermann Bahr's interview with Haeckel, Gasman forgets about Haeckel's specific praise of those Jews who had always been a vital part of German culture. Nor does he deal with Haeckel's graphic placement of the Jewish race among the most culturally and intellectually progressive. These beliefs about the virtues of the Jews seem hardly compatible with a virulent racial anti-Semitism. We also have the testimony of both Haeckel's friends (e.g., Frida von Uslar-Gleichen) and enemies (e.g., Ludwig Plate) as to his liberal, tolerant attitudes about Jews. It's hard to believe that if Haeckel had the reputation of being an anti-Semite, Magnus Hirschfeld, the great Jewish sexologist, would have lectured on him as "a German spiritual hero." Even Brücher thought he had to dispose of "the fairy tale of Haeckel's alleged philo-Semitism (*Judenfreundschaft*)." (Heinz Brücher, *Ernst Haeckels Bluts- und Geistes-Erbe*, p. 118) Apparently the belief that Haeckel was friendly toward Jews was wide spread. This kind of evidence seems to count for nothing against an *idée fixe*. But a curious logic does seem to be at play here.

Gasman says that my discussion of Bahr's interview with Haeckel leaves out any mention of the anti-Semitic parts. But then he complains that I give those parts the wrong kind of interpretation. It looks as though I omitted the crucial parts precisely in

the sense that I didn't. That Haeckel believed immigrants and foreigners should adopt the cultural characteristics of the country in which they wished to live—that I specifically described in my article. Gasman prefers to interpret this as virulent anti-Semitism when directed against the group Haeckel mentions, Russian Jews who would not assimilate. Gasman, I believe, allows restriction of immigration to slide rather easily into portents of extermination. As I indicated in my essay, I understood that these statements of Haeckel might be regarded as an expression of anti-Semitism, but that they certainly were not racial or indicative of the kind of hatred endemic to the Nazis.

In my article, I described Brücher's efforts to make Haeckel's ideas compatible with National Socialism, but I was wrong to suggest that he did not formally characterize Haeckel as an anti-Semite. I missed the two paragraphs in which he did just that. Interestingly, he refers to the same few sentences in the article by Hermann Bahr that Gasman trots out regarding restriction on immigration.

4. A curious logic similar to the sort just mentioned attends Gasman's discussion of the journal *Archiv für Rassen-und Gesellschaftsbiologie*. Gasman writes that it was a journal that "Haeckel helped found, and which eventually became an organ of the Nazis; [it] featured at its outset, articles by scientists and anthropologists who were not always in agreement with the radical assumptions of German racism" (p. 16). Alfred Ploetz and Fritz Lenz were the actual founders of the journal in 1904. Ploetz's initial attitude about anti-Semitism was identical with Haeckel's: "The high spiritual ability of the Jews and their leading role in the developmental process of humanity must, in light of the names of Jesus, Spinoza, and Marx, without further ado be recognized with joy." The Jews and Arabs were, during the medieval period, the cultivators and preservers of science and medicine. He thought "all of this anti-Semitism is a drop in the water whose ripple will be slowly submerged in the flood of natural scientific knowledge and humane democracy" ("Die Tüchtigkeit unsrer Rasse und der Schutz der Schwachen," 1895, pp 141-2). As Gasman indicates, in the 1930s the journal became allied with the aims of the Nazis. But here, one must mark the logic. Haeckel is indicted because a journal he helped found became allied with the Nazis a decade and a half after his death; but he is

given no credit for the support rendered journal colleagues who expressed philo-Semitic attitudes while he was alive, which means—well, I’m not sure what it means, except that Haeckel is to be condemned on both sides of this equation.

5. Gasman correctly points out that I do not mention Haeckel’s *Welträthsel* in my article (though I do discuss it extensively in my forthcoming book). I didn’t refer to it since Haeckel hardly mentions Judaism in the volume—the discussion of the Jewish religion extends to about a page and a half at the outside. Anyone familiar with the book knows that hundreds of pages are devoted to the deficiencies of Christianity, particularly Catholicism. Haeckel even suggests that shortly after the founding of Christianity, it turned from Jewish monotheism to polytheism, with its doctrine of the Trinity and many saints. The instance that Gasman takes as emblematic of Haeckel’s anti-Semitism in the book leaves one rather breathless. It comes in a chapter on “Science and Christianity,” in which the superstitions of the latter are pitted against the rationality of the former. Haeckel attempts to confute the dogma of the Virgin Birth and the cult of the Madonna by suggesting that Christ was born neither of the Jewish Joseph nor certainly of a God in the form of a bird, but rather of a Roman centurion of Greek heritage who had seduced Mary. The Son of God and founder of Christianity, Haeckel concludes, was really a bastard. I think Gasman may have missed the point of Haeckel’s little story.

6. Finally, I’ll simply indicate a further bit of disingenuousness. Gasman accuses me of maintaining the jejune historiographic assumption that because “Haeckel died in 1919, [he] therefore could not have influenced the coming of Nazism.” Gasman has perused my website and presumably has read an article posted there that was my Ryerson Lecture at the University of Chicago in 2005 and recently published in the *Cambridge Companion to the Philosophy of Biology* as “The Moral Grammar of Narratives in History of Biology—the Case of Haeckel and Nazi Biology.” The title and suspicions of defamation would surely have impelled him to read it. In that article I spend a considerable amount of time exploring a principle that I call “historical responsibility,” precisely the principle that accords responsibility to actors for behaviors

that arise after they have passed from the scene. I try to specify the conditions under which such judgments are warranted. I thus hardly ignore the principle in question, but do believe it needs to be considered with care.

In the preamble to his posting of his article, Gasman provides a severely distorted description of his interactions with the editor and board of the journal *Biological Theory*. I will, however, let the editor respond to those egregious mischaracterizations.