

RICHARDS, Robert J. *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 264pp.—This remarkably erudite book by the distinguished University of Chicago historian, Robert J. Richards, could have been more suitably entitled, “Disputed Questions Concerning Darwin and the Genesis of His Theory.” The chapter that gives the book its title is added to eight other chapters that explore recent interpretations of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and the reception of Darwin by his contemporaries, notably Alfred Russell Wallace, Thomas H. Huxley, and Herbert Spencer. It was Wallace who suggested that Darwin replace the phrase “natural selection” with Spencer’s “survival of the fittest,” but Darwin demurred. “Variability,” “struggle for existence,” and “adaptation” form core features of Darwin’s conception of natural selection. Roberts finds that the principle of natural selection is not as simple as it might first seem, but complex, only gradually taking shape in Darwin’s mind, thus providing an illustration of the historian’s claim that “theories are historical entities that develop over time.”

Richards makes clear that Darwin’s original principle of natural selection, as he formulated it, and the auxiliary ideas associated with it, ill-conform to our present knowledge of evolution. Richards maintains that Darwin’s original principle had features that an older and less sanguine Darwin would likely have rejected. It is often assumed that Darwin constructed an indifferent, materially neutral nature, one no

longer passing as a surrogate for God, thus leaving nature teleologically vacuous. The result is that in subsequent academic discourse nature gradually became drained of intelligence and moral value. Given that Darwin did not regard the natural process of evolution as morally neutral, “Darwin’s theory,” writes Richards, “is not responsible for the malign social theory often associated with his work, namely, the social eugenics that played through America, Britain, and especially Germany in the late nineteenth century.”

In passing, Richards engages scholars such as Richard Dawkins, Michael Ghiselin, and Michael Ruse who represent “Darwinian man” as self-aggrandizing, always selfish in behavior. “I will attempt to show,” writes Richards, “that Darwin did not regard the natural process of evolution as morally neutral; [rather] he wielded his device of natural selection in *On The Origin of Species* . . . to fix nature with an animal that can make moral choices.” Richards insists that “Darwin, although a harbinger of the modern age, was yet a nineteenth-century thinker—a biologist who had not abandoned teleological ideas but conceived nature as having the goal of producing human beings.”

Two chapters of this volume are devoted to Ernst Haeckel, Darwin’s foremost champion, not only in Germany but throughout the world. Haeckel’s *Natural History of Creation* (twelve editions: 1868–1920) became the chief source of the world’s knowledge of Darwinism. Haeckel is credited with introducing into biology many concepts that remain viable today, including the idea that the nucleus of the cell contains hereditary material, as well as the concepts of phylogeny, ontogeny, ecology, and the stem cell. It was he who introduced the idea of the missing link between man and lower animals. Another work, his, *Die Welträtsel*, (in English translation, *The Riddle of the Universe*) published in 1899 sold over 400,000 copies prior to the First World War.

Another chapter of Richards’s book is devoted to the linguist, August Schleicher, whose theory of linguistic development complemented Darwin’s own explanation of the refinement of human intelligence. Darwin studied Schleicher’s *Darwinsche Theorie*, which he then used in his own account of human evolution in *The Descent of Man*.

To the question, “Was Hitler a Darwinian?”, Richards’s answer is decidedly, “no.” Hitler positively rejected any notion of the descent of human beings from lower animals. Man from the very beginning, he believed, was what he is today. Although Hitler’s racial ideology is often associated with social Darwinism, “most scholars of Hitler’s reign” Richards finds, “don’t argue for a strong link between Darwin’s biology and Hitler’s racism, but they often deploy the vague concept of social Darwinism when characterizing Hitler’s racial ideology.” Some maintain that Haeckel was largely responsible for the bond between the academic sector and the emergence of racism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Quite apart from the final essay that gives this book its title, the eight essays which constitute the bulk of the volume are worthy of serious

study in themselves, both for the information they provide and the guiding judgment of Professor Richards.—Jude P. Dougherty, *The Catholic University of America*