

Controversies over the influences on and effects of Darwinian theory

Robert J. Richards: Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed question in the history of evolutionary theory. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 280pp, \$27.50 PB

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Robert J. Richards is one of the world's leading experts on the history of Darwinism, and this set of essays amplifies many points he has made in his earlier scholarship. In the first four essays, Richards examines Darwin's alleged belief in moral purpose and teleology. Then he compares Spencer's and Darwin's views on evolution. Two brief essays focus on Haeckel, and one explores August Schleicher's theory of the evolution of language. Finally, in his title essay, Richards examines the influence (or lack thereof) of Darwinism on Hitler and Nazism.

One of the most prominent arguments in these essays—and in many of Richards's earlier publications—is that German Romanticism, especially as mediated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, influenced Darwin's evolutionary theory, especially with respect to his perspective on teleology and morality.

Most historians and scientists laud Darwin for eliminating teleology from nature. The standard story, articulated by scholars such as Michael Ghiselin, Peter Bowler, Neal Gillespie, and Ernst Mayr, is that Darwin's natural selection demolished the argument from design, eliminating purpose from nature. Some historians, such as David Kohn, have noticed the ambiguities in Darwin's relationship to natural theology and teleology. On the one hand, Darwin wrote in his Notebook B, "It is absurd to talk of one animal being higher than another." On the other hand, in *Origin of Species*, Darwin referred multiple times to some organisms being higher than others. In *Origin*, Darwin was also trying to eliminate the interference of a deity in producing biological organisms, while still maintaining that a deity created the lawful processes of nature, including evolutionary processes.

Richards does not see any ambiguity at all. He argues that Darwin was a true believer in teleological evolution. He insists that Darwin was a progressivist, who saw nature and evolution imbued with moral purpose. He states, "Yet not only did

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Darwin construe natural selection as producing moral creatures; he conceived of natural selection itself as a moral and intelligent agent.” (38) Richards even goes so far as to describe Darwin’s model of natural selection as the “model of an intelligent designer.” (87)

Indeed, Richards latches onto every statement of Darwin’s that implies teleology (and there are many). Every time Darwin personified nature by writing about nature selecting and nature scrutinizing variations, Richards takes him literally. However, Richards ignores or downplays Darwin’s many anti-teleological statements. In his *Autobiography*, for instance, Darwin wrote, “There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows. Everything in nature is the result of fixed laws.” (Darwin 1958, 87)

In the longest essay of this volume, Richards answers the question, “Was Hitler a Darwinian?” with a resounding: No. According to Richards, Hitler rejected the transmutation of species, including humans, altogether. Further, Richards claims that Nazi biologists opposed Darwinism, too.

In order to arrive at these specious conclusions, Richards engages in a number of problematic moves. First, he misrepresents the position of other scholars. Richards frequently takes issue with my position in *Hitler’s Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress*, but unfortunately, in many cases I do not recognize the “Richard Weikart” that Richards is criticizing. For instance, Richards castigates me for erroneously arguing that Darwin is a materialist, but this is a position I have never taken.

An even more egregious misrepresentation of my position is crucial to Richards’s argument. He claims that I invoke a “lonely remark” by Hitler to prove that Hitler was an evolutionist (223). However, if one looks at the passage in *Hitler’s Ethic* where I discuss that “lonely remark,” one finds that I follow up that “lonely remark” with five pages packed with evidence that Hitler believed in human evolution.

Second, Richards attacks straw men. For instance, he states, “The proposition that Darwinian ideas motivated Hitler’s anti-Jewish racism moves quickly to the edge of profound absurdity without the need of any scholarly pressure” (196). Indeed, Richards devotes a lot of attention in his essay to demolishing the idea that Darwinism produced Nazi anti-Semitism. But who ever said that it did? Certainly not I. Also not Daniel Gasman, who charged Haeckel with influencing Hitler’s anti-Semitism, but did not consider Haeckel a true Darwinian. To be sure, Richards does a great job explaining why Darwinism did not contribute to Nazi anti-Semitism. However, he then makes the unwarranted claim that since Darwinism did not contribute to Nazi anti-Semitism, Darwinism did not influence Nazi racism at all.

Third, he misreads key documents, sometimes making them say the exact opposite that their authors intended. Those who are not conversant with the primary source documents Richards uses (as many historians will not be) really need to look at these, because Richards mishandles some of them. For instance, in his zeal to prove that Nazi biologists rejected Darwinism, Richards mentions a 1940 essay in *Der Biologe*, where, according to Richards, Konrad Lorenz, “good Darwinian that he was, complained that there were many ‘in the schools of National-Socialistic

greater Germany who in fact still reject evolutionary thought and descent theory [Entwicklungsgedanken und Abstammungslehre] as such.' Lorenz's complaint strongly implies that Darwinism had no official mandate in the educational system" (236). However, if one reads Lorenz's essay, Lorenz is making the exact opposite point. Richards illegitimately interpolates the word "many" in front of the first quotation. Lorenz did not say "many," and it is clear from the context (including the article that Lorenz was responding to) that there were few—not many—biology teachers in Germany opposing evolution. Worse yet, Lorenz explicitly stated in his essay that the Nazis had an official biology curriculum that required the teaching of evolution, and he encouraged compliance with these official standards. Also, Richards ignores the obvious point that Lorenz was promoting evolutionary theory in this article published in a journal edited by the SS (and many other articles in that journal taught evolution). This misreading of documents is not an isolated instance, but Richards also systematically misrepresents Hitler's writings to make him seem non-Darwinian.

Fourthly, Richards fails to examine some of the most important lines of evidence. In order to ascertain if German biologists in the Third Reich believed in Darwinism, he examined a small number of articles in one scientific journal. He pounces on the anti-Darwinian statements of five scholars, but he fails to mention that despite their problems with Darwinian theory, all of them believed in human evolution (an inconvenient fact that demolishes Richards's argument). Worse, he failed to look at the many pro-Darwinian articles and books published by German scientists in Nazi Germany, including many articles published in official Nazi journals. He also ignored the fact that leading evolutionary anthropologists at German universities were members of the SS and lectured to Nazi Party organizations. Walter Gross, the head of the Nazi Party's Office for Racial Policy, published a scholarly article in 1943 where he made clear his commitment to Darwinian selection in human evolution. Richards also failed to look at the Nazi's school curriculum, which prominently featured evolution, including human evolution. My article, "The Role of Darwinism in Nazi Racial Thought," which appeared almost simultaneous with Richards's book, explains many of these lines of evidence (Weikart 2013). Indeed, Richards knew about this evidence, because in 2010 I sent him an earlier version of that essay, but he largely ignored my evidence.

Finally, Richards makes factual errors because he simply does not seem to understand the history of Nazi Germany. Some of these, such as his false claim that Hitler viewed Jews and Aryans as pure, unmixed races, do not affect his interpretation (though it casts doubt on his knowledge of Nazism). However, his desperate argument that the word "Entwicklung" was not being used by Germans in the early twentieth century to refer to biological evolution is unsustainable. Not only did many translators of *Mein Kampf* and Hitler's *Second Book* translate "Entwicklung" as "evolution," but the official Nazi biology curriculum repeatedly used the term "Entwicklung" to refer to evolution. It also mandated the teaching of "Darwinismus." I have examined many biology textbooks used in Nazi Germany, and they regularly used the term "Entwicklung" to refer to biological evolution, and in the upper grades they all teach Darwinian evolution, including the evolution of humans and human races.

It is unfortunate that this final essay is the title essay, because it is by far the worst essay in the collection. The essays on the nineteenth century, which is Richards's real area of expertise, are much better. They are indeed provocative, and in my view sometimes one-sided. However, one can tell that Richards is conversant with the primary sources. In the final essay, Richards seems to be thrashing around like a fish out of water.

References

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