

Myth 19

That Darwin and Haeckel were Complicit in Nazi Biology

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[Haeckel's] evolutionary racism; his call to the German people for racial purity and unflinching devotion to a "just" state; his belief that harsh, inexorable laws of evolution ruled human civilization and nature alike, conferring upon favored races the right to dominate others; the irrational mysticism that had always stood in strange communion with his grave words about objective science—all contributed to the rise of Nazism.

Stephen Jay Gould, Ontogeny and Phylogeny (1977)¹

No matter how crooked the road was from Darwin to Hitler, clearly Darwinism and eugenics smoothed the path for Nazi ideology, especially for the Nazi stress on expansion, war, racial struggle, and racial extermination.

Richard Weikart, From Darwin to Hitler (2004)²

In 1971, Daniel Gasman saw published his Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in Ernst Haeckel and the German Monist League, the dissertation he had produced at the University of Chicago two years before. That book argued that Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), the great champion of Darwinism in Germany, had special responsibility for contributing to Nazi extermination biology. Gasman stacked up the evidence: that Haeckel's Darwinian monism (which held that no metaphysical distinction separated man from animals) was racist; that he was a virulent anti-Semite; and that leading Nazis had adopted his monistic conceptions and racial

views. Quite uncritically, scores of historians have accepted Gasman's claim, the most prominent of whom, at least among historians of biology, has been Stephen Jay Gould.

In his book Ontogeny and Phylogeny (1977), Gould investigated the consequences of Haeckel's "biogenetic law," the principle that the embryo of an advanced creature recapitulates the same morphological stages that the phylum went through in its evolutionary descent. According to Haeckel's law, a human embryo, for instance, begins life as something like a one-celled creature, then advances through the forms of an invertebrate, a fish, an ape, and finally a particular human being. Gould argued that the principle of recapitulation sustained an unwarranted progressivist interpretation of evolutionary theory and had racist implications. He urged that Charles Darwin (1809–1882) had refrained from adopting the principle, though acknowledged that many biologists had subsequently accepted it as part of the Darwinian heritage. The law, in Gould's estimation, was not Haeckel's most enduring legacy, however. Rather, "as Gasman argues, Haeckel's greatest influence was, ultimately, in another tragic direction—national socialism."³

Gasman's thesis has been used by religious fundamentalists as a crude lever by which to pry Darwinian theory away from public approbation. Put "Haeckel" and "Nazis" into any web search engine, and you will get thousands of hits, mostly from creationist and intelligent design websites that set alight Haeckel's Darwinism in an electronic auto-de-fé.

Most historians, save for Richard Weikart (quoted above), have refused to indict Darwin for complicity in the crimes of the Nazis. Gasman, Gould, and many other scholars have striven to distinguish Darwin's conceptions from those of Haeckel. In the nineteenth century, one individual of singular authority did not, however, detect any differences between the doctrines of the two biologists—namely the English master himself. Early in their acquaintance, Darwin

wrote Haeckel to say that "I am delighted that so distinguished a naturalist should confirm & expound my views; and I can clearly see that you are one of the few who clearly understands Natural Selection."⁴ Their initial correspondence led to an enduring friendship, with Haeckel visiting Darwin several times at his home in the village of Downe. In the Descent of Man, Darwin affirmed their common understanding of evolutionary theory: "Almost all the conclusions at which I have arrived I find confirmed by this naturalist [Haeckel], whose knowledge on many points is much fuller than mine."⁵ Though their emphases certainly differed, Haeckel and Darwin essentially agreed on the technical issues of evolutionary theory.⁶

If the indictment of complicity with the Nazis stands against Haeckel, should it then be extended to include Darwin and evolutionary theory more generally? Did Haeckel simply pack Darwin's evolutionary materialism and racism into his sidecar and deliver their toxic message to Berchtesgaden as Weikart has recently maintained?⁷ Let me answer these questions by considering their subsidiary parts: Was Darwinian theory progressivist, holding some species to be "higher" than others? Was it racist, depicting some groups of human beings to be more advanced than others? Was it specifically anti-Semitic, casting Jews into a degraded class of human beings? Did Darwinian theory rupture the humanitarian tradition in ethics, thus facilitating a depraved Nazi morality based on selfish expediency? And, finally, did the Nazis explicitly embrace Haeckel's Darwinism?

Nineteenth-century Europe witnessed tremendous scientific, technological, and commercial advances, which seemed to confirm religious assumptions about signs of divine favor. The discovery of increasingly more complex fossils in ascending layers of geological formations indicated that progressive developments had been the general story of life on earth. Darwin believed his theory could explain these presumed facts of biological and social progress,

since “as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.”⁸ He not only thought the progressive development of individual species could be read in the fossil record but, like his disciple Haeckel, he believed that progressive advance could also be detected in the developing embryo, which was left as a dynamic “picture” of the ascending morphological stages traversed in evolutionary history.⁹ Darwin, too, employed the biogenetic law.

This progressivist view of animal species was consistent with the belief that the various human groups could also be arranged in a hierarchy from lower to higher. The effort to classify and evaluate the human races, however, had begun long before Darwin and Haeckel wrote. In the mideighteenth century, Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778) and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840) first began systematically to classify human races and evaluate their attributes. In the early nineteenth century, Georges Cuvier (1769–1832), the most eminent biologist of the period, divided the human species into three varieties: the Caucasian race, the most beautiful and progressive; the Mongolian race, the civilizations of which had stagnated; and the Ethiopian race, whose members displayed a “reduced skull” and facial features of a monkey. This last group remained “barbarian.”¹⁰ That the different groups of human beings could be arranged in a hierarchy from lowest to highest was, thus, a commonplace in biology, as well as in the public mind. Our own American Constitution recognized this kind of hierarchy when it affirmed the property rights of slave holders and stipulated that resident Africans should be counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of deciding congressional representation.

Darwin, for his part, simply sought to explain the presumed facts of racial differences. He allowed that the human groups could be regarded either as varieties of one human species or as separate species. The decision for him was entirely arbitrary, since no real boundary could be

drawn between species and varieties or races.¹¹ He thought it conformed better with standard usage to refer to human races, while Haeckel preferred to consider different groups as distinct species. Though Darwin recognized higher and lower races, he certainly did not believe this justified less than humane regard for those lower in the scale. Indeed, his abolitionist beliefs were strongly confirmed when visiting the slave countries of South America on the Beagle in the early 1830s; later, he longed for the defeat of the slave-holding Southern states during the American Civil War.¹² Haeckel, on his travels to Ceylon and Indonesia, often formed closer and more intimate relations with natives, even members of the untouchable classes, than with the European colonials. When incautious scholars or blinkered fundamentalists accuse Darwin or Haeckel of racism, they simply reveal to an astonished world that these thinkers lived in the nineteenth century.

Gasman in a recent volume has reiterated the claim, now widely accepted, that Haeckel's virulent anti-Semitism virtually began the work of the Nazis: "For Haeckel, the Jews were the original source of the decadence and morbidity of the modern world and he sought their immediate exclusion from contemporary life and society."¹³ This charge, which attempts to link Haeckel's convictions with the Nazis' particular brand of racism, suffers from the inconvenience of having absolutely no foundation. The reality was quite the contrary, as is revealed by a conversation Haeckel had in the mid-1890s on the subject of anti-Semitism. He had been approached by the Austrian novelist and journalist Hermann Bahr, who was canvassing leading European intellectuals on the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Haeckel mentioned that he had several students who were quite anti-Semitic but that he himself had many good friends among Jews, "admirable and excellent men," and that these acquaintances had rendered him without this prejudice. He recognized nationalism as the root problem for those societies that had not

achieved the ideal of cosmopolitanism; and he did allow that such societies might refuse entry to those who would not conform to local customs—for instance, Russian Orthodox Jews, not because they were Jews but because they would not assimilate. He then offered an encomium to the educated (gebildeten) Jews who had always been vital to German social and intellectual life: “I hold these refined and noble Jews to be important elements in German culture. One should not forget that they have always stood bravely for enlightenment and freedom against the forces of reaction, inexhaustible opponents, as often as needed, against the obscurantists.”¹⁴ One such enlightened individual was his friend, Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935), the physician and sexologist, who regarded Haeckel a “German spiritual hero.”¹⁵ During the Nazi period Hirschfeld had to flee for his life in the glare of his burning institute. At the turn of the century, as the black slick of anti-Semitism began to spread, Haeckel stood out for his expression of Judenfreundschaft (friendliness toward Jews).¹⁶

Perhaps the ethical proposals of a materialistic and utilitarian Darwinism have “broken with the humanitarian tradition”—in the words of one indictment—and, consequently, have sanctioned a selfish, might-makes-right kind of morality that was congenial to the Nazis.¹⁷ Darwin, in the Descent of Man, did develop an explicit ethical theory based on natural selection; but he believed that his proposal overturned utilitarian selfishness and that natural selection, operating on proto-human groups, would have instilled an authentic altruism among their members.¹⁸ Haeckel endorsed Darwin’s ethical conception of altruism, which he thought a better foundation for traditional Christian morality.¹⁹ Moreover, during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, Haeckel described a despicable phenomenon he called “military selection,” in which the bravest and brightest were slaughtered on the fields of battle while the weak and cowardly were left to man the bedrooms and thereby perpetuate their low moral character. He

cultivated the hope that “in the long run, the man with the most perfect understanding, not the man with the best revolver, would triumph . . . [and that] he would bequeath to his offspring the properties of brain that had promoted his victory.”²⁰

Despite Haeckel’s being a philo-Semite and expressing an antimilitary disposition, did the Nazis yet try to recruit him—or at least his reputation, since he died a decade and a half before the Nazis came to power—and therewith embrace his Darwinism? During the 1930s, the Nazi apparatus attempted to align the new political dispensation with the views of eminent German intellectuals of earlier centuries. For instance, Alfred Rosenberg, chief party propagandist, declared Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), doyen of German scientists a century before, to be a supporter of the ideals of the National Socialists, even though Humboldt was a cosmopolitan friend of Jews and a homosexual.²¹ Haeckel, too, was enlisted in the Nazi cause by a few ambitious academics, such as Heinz Brücher, who contended that Haeckel’s evolutionary monism easily meshed with Hitler’s racial attitudes.²² But almost immediately, in the mid-1930s, the official guardians of party doctrine quashed any suggestion of consilience between Haeckel’s Darwinism and the kind of biology advanced by their members. Günther Hecht, who represented the National Socialist Party’s Department of Race-Politics (Rassenpolitischen Amt der NSDAP), issued a monitum:

The common position of materialistic monism is philosophically rejected completely by the völkisch-biological view of National Socialism. . . . The party and its representatives must not only reject a part of the Haeckelian conception—other parts of it have occasionally been advanced—but, more generally, every internal party dispute that involves the particulars of research and the teachings of Haeckel must cease.²³

Kurt Hildebrandt, a political philosopher at Kiel writing in the same party organ, likewise dismissed as simply an “illusion” Haeckel’s presumption that “philosophy reached its pinnacle in the mechanistic solution to the world puzzles through Darwin’s descent theory.”²⁴ These warnings 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; literature by “all Jewish authors no matter what their sphere”; and materials by individuals advocating “the superficial scientific enlightenment of a primitive Darwinism and monism,” such as Ernst Haeckel.²⁵

Nazi biology formulated theories of racial degeneracy and executed a horrendous eugenic prophylaxis. But these racial notions and criminal acts were rarely connected with specific evolutionary conceptions of the transmutation of species and the animal origin of all human beings, even if the shibboleth “struggle for existence” left vaporous trails through some of the biological literature of the Third Reich. The perceived materialism of Darwinian biology and Haeckelian monism deterred those who cultivated the mystical ideal of a transcendence of will. Pseudo-scientific justifications for racism would be ubiquitous in the early twentieth century, and Hitler’s own mad anti-Semitism hardly needed support from evolutionary theorists of the previous century. Weikart and Christian conservatives have attempted to trace a path from Darwin to Hitler by way of Haeckel, but their efforts must stumble against the many barriers I have noted in this chapter. While attempting to hack through an impenetrable thicket of facts, they failed to notice the great highways leading to the Third Reich that passed through the wreckages of the First World War—the economic havoc, the political turmoil, and the pervasive anti-Semitic miasma created by Christian apologists. Complex historical phenomena such as the

advent of the Nazi regime require complex causes to give them account—a historiographic axiom unheeded by those perpetuating the myth of Darwinian complicity in the crimes of the Nazis.

Notes

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, Ontogeny and Phylogeny (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 77.

² Richard Weikart, From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 6.

³ Gould, Ontogeny and Phylogeny, 77.

⁴ Charles Darwin to Ernst Haeckel, 9 March 1864, The Correspondence of Charles Darwin, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., 15 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–), 12:63.

⁵ Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:4.

⁶ I have argued this at greater length in my The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chap. 5.

⁷ Weikart, From Darwin to Hitler.

⁸ Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species (London: John Murray, 1859), 489.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁰ Georges Cuvier, Le Règne animal, 2d ed., 5 vols. (Paris: Deterville Libraire, 1829–1830), 1:80.

¹¹ Darwin, Descent of Man, 1:235.

¹² See Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 19 April 1865, in Correspondence of Charles Darwin, 13:126.

¹³ Daniel Gasman, Haeckel's Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 26.

¹⁴Hermann Bahr, Der Antisemitismus (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1894), 69.

¹⁵ Hirschfeld to Haeckel, 17 December 1914, in the Correspondence of Ernst Haeckel, Ernst-Haeckel-Haus, Jena.

¹⁶I discuss Haeckel's alleged anti-Semitism at greater length in my Tragic Sense of Life.

¹⁷Jürgen Sandmann, Der Bruch mit der humanitären Tradition: Die Biologisierung der Ethik bei Ernst Haeckel und anderen Darwinisten seiner Zeit (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer, 1990).

¹⁸Darwin, Descent of Man, 1:161–7.

¹⁹Ernst Haeckel, Der Monismus als Band zwischen Religion und Wissenschaft (Bonn: Emil Strauss, 1892), 29.

²⁰Ernst Haeckel, Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte, 2d ed. (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1870), 156.

²¹Nicolaas Rupke, Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 81–104.

²²See, for instance, Heinz Brücher, Ernst Haeckels Bluts- und Geistes-Erbe: Eine kulturbiologische Monographie (Munich: Lehmanns Verlag, 1936).

²³Günther Hecht, “Biologie und Nationalsozialismus,” Zeitschrift für die Gesamte Naturwissenschaft 3 (1937–1938): 280–90, at 285. This journal bore the subtitle: “Organ of the Reich's Section Natural Science of the Reich's Students Administration.”

²⁴Kurt Hildebrandt, “Die Bedeutung der Abstammungslehre für die Weltanschauung,” Zeitschrift für die Gesamte Naturwissenschaft 3 (1937–1938): 15–34, at 17.

²⁵“Richtlinien für die Bestandsprüfung in den Volksbüchereien Sachsens,” Die Bücherei 2 (1935): 279–80.