

Evolution and Ethics, Revisited

Gertrude Himmelfarb

They persuade the world of what is false by urging upon it what is true.” That is John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1852) referring to the sciences of his day, which threatened to dominate and even overwhelm theological education in the university. A science’s teaching might be true in its proper place but fallacious “if it be constituted the sole exponent of all things in heaven and earth, and that, for the simple reason that it is encroaching on territory not its own, and undertaking problems which it has no instruments to solve.”

While Newman’s notion of science was far broader than ours, including even painting and music, his description of the overreach of science is still apt. We now have a term—“scientism”—for that fallacy, exemplified, as has been demonstrated in these pages, by Richard Dawkins’s pronouncement that genes “created us, body and mind,” and Edward O. Wilson’s claim that biology is the “basis of all social behavior.” If scientism has become so prevalent, it is partly because of the emergence of new sciences, each encroaching, as Newman said, on “territory not its own” (invading, we would now say, the turf of others), and each professing to comprehend (in both senses of that word) the whole. Intended as an epithet, the term has been adopted as an honorific by some of its practitioners. A chapter in the book *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized* (2007) by three philosophers is entitled “In Defense of Scientism.”

Newman’s book appeared seven years before Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, which provoked the classic case of scientism—the mutation of Darwinism into social Darwinism. There had been earlier theories of evolution, such as Lamarck’s. And there had been earlier doctrines, most notably Malthus’s, that applied to society the concept of a “struggle for existence.” Indeed, Darwin had been inspired by Malthus, while opposing Lamarck. But it was the *Origin* that gave credibility to the theory of evolution and, inadvertently, encouraged others to extend it to society, making the “survival of the fittest” the natural and proper basis for human behavior and social relations.

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The emergence of social Darwinism recalls the adage of another eminent Victorian. “Ideas,” wrote Lord Acton, “have a radiation and development, an ancestry and posterity of their own, in which men play the part of godfathers and godmothers more than that of legitimate parents.” Darwin, the unwitting godfather of social Darwinism, disowned even that degree of parentage. He dismissed as ludicrous the charge of one reviewer that he had endorsed “might is right” thereby justifying the idea “that Napoleon is right & every cheating Tradesman is also right.” Challenged on another occasion to declare his views on religion, he replied that while the subject of God was “beyond the scope of man’s intellect,” his moral obligation was clear: “man can do his duty.” Averse to controversy in general (even over the *Origin* itself), Darwin played no public part in the dispute over social Darwinism. That battle was left to Darwin’s “bulldog,” as T. H. Huxley proudly described himself—“my general agent,” Darwin called him. Huxley’s arguments against social Darwinism are all the more telling because they come not, as might have been expected, from a cleric or theologian, but from an eminent scientist and ardent Darwinist.

Man as a Moral Being

Sixteen years younger than Darwin, with little formal schooling, self-taught and self-willed, Thomas Henry Huxley (like Darwin) served his apprenticeship as a naturalist by doing research on a royal naval ship (although his official appointment was as assistant surgeon). By the time he returned from that four-year trip, he was a recognized authority on marine biology. In 1851, at the age of twenty-six, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, received the Royal Medal the following year, and two years later was appointed Professor of Natural History at the Royal School of Mines. It was around that time, while Darwin was laboring on early drafts of the *Origin*, that Huxley met him and became one of the party of three, and by far the youngest of the three—Charles Lyell and Joseph Hooker were the others—who were Darwin’s principal confidants and advisers. “If I can convert Huxley,” Darwin wrote the year of the publication of the *Origin*, “I shall be content.” Huxley needed conversion because he had been wary of other theories of evolution and even of Darwin’s in its earlier stages. But he was completely won over after reading the book. “My reflection,” Huxley recalled, “when I first made myself master of the central idea of the ‘Origin’ was, ‘How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!’” Preparing Darwin for the “abuse and misrepresentation” the book would receive, Huxley reassured him: “I am sharpening up my claws and beak in readiness.”

As there had been earlier theories of evolution, so there were earlier versions of social Darwinism, most notably the laissez-fairism propounded by Herbert Spencer. It took a while for Huxley to address that issue, perhaps because Spencer was a friend (and remained one, in spite of their differences). But when he did, he brought to its refutation the same vigor he brought to the defense of the *Origin*. Provoked by recent demands to deny the state any role in education, Huxley, in his 1871 lecture “Administrative Nihilism,” supported the state in that capacity as in others, arguing that men are not isolated individuals but parts of a “social organization,” requiring all the help and support that society could and should give them so that each one may attain “all the happiness which he can enjoy without diminishing the happiness of his fellow-men.” He expanded upon that theme in his 1888 essay “The Struggle for Existence in Human Society,” distinguishing between nature and society, man as an animal and man as a human—which is to say, moral—being:

From the point of view of the moralist the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiator’s show. The creatures are fairly well treated, and set to fight—whereby the strongest, the swiftest, and the cunningest live to fight another day....

Society differs from nature in having a definite moral object; whence it comes about that the course shaped by the ethical man—the member of society or citizen—necessarily runs counter to that which the non-ethical man—the primitive savage, or man as mere member of the animal kingdom—tends to adopt. The latter fights out the struggle for existence to the bitter end, like any other animal; the former devotes his best energies to the object of setting limits to the struggle.

Five years later, Huxley produced the classic case against social Darwinism—and scientism in general. His lecture, “Evolution and Ethics,” delivered at Oxford in 1893, was the second in the series of the prestigious Romanes Lectures, the first having been given the year before by the prime minister, William Gladstone. The choice of Gladstone as the initial lecturer was surprising in view of the conditions laid down by the sponsor, George Romanes, that the lecturer, as Huxley explained, “abstain from treating of either Religion or Politics”—the two subjects about which Gladstone was most passionate. A skilled rhetorician, Gladstone managed to address his theme, “Medieval Universities,” while skirting as best he could any overt mention of religion, even though it was central to his argument. Huxley, too, had to perform an “egg-dance,”

as he said, reassuring Romanes that there would be no allusion to politics in his lecture and that his only reference to religion was to Buddhism, and this only to the “speculative and ethical side” of it. In fact, politics does appear, if only implicitly. Spencer’s name is not mentioned, but he is clearly implicated in Huxley’s decrying of the “fanatical individualism of our time,” adding in a footnote that “it is this form of political philosophy to which I conceive the epithet of ‘reasoned savagery’ to be strictly applicable.”

Published as an essay the following year, the forty-one-page lecture is prefaced by forty-five pages of “Prolegomena” and supplemented by thirty pages of footnotes, exhibiting a remarkable range and depth of knowledge of philosophy in particular—this not from a philosopher but a scientist (and an autodidact at that). Indeed, philosophy, rather than politics, bears the burden of the argument over social Darwinism. The epigraph from Seneca, in Latin, may be translated: “For I am wont to cross over even into the enemy’s camp,—not as a deserter, but as an explorer.” This precisely defines Huxley’s role. The scientist is venturing into the enemy camp, that of the philosopher and moralist, not as a deserter from science, but as an explorer—and discovering not an enemy, but a welcome ally.

Beyond ‘Survival of the Fittest’

The essay opens, less formidably, with a “delightful child’s story”: “Jack and the Bean-stalk,” the familiar story of “a bean-plant, which grows and grows until it reaches the high heavens and there spreads out into a vast canopy of foliage.” The hero, climbing the stalk, finds that the world of the foliage above is made up of the same parts as the world below, “yet strangely new,” for as the stalk grows and expands, it “undergoes a series of metamorphoses,” and then, having reached ever new heights, it begins to wither and crumble. This tale of “cyclical evolution” illustrates the “cosmic process” (a term that is almost a refrain in the essay) that governs mankind as well as the animal kingdom—but with a difference: the pain and suffering inherent in that process affects all living creatures, but man more intensely, and civilized man, the member of an “organized polity,” more than the savage.

Man, the animal, in fact, has worked his way to the headship of the sentient world, and has become the superb animal which he is, in virtue of his success in the struggle for existence....

But, in proportion as men have passed from anarchy to social organization, and in proportion as civilization has grown in worth, these

deeply ingrained serviceable qualities have become defects. After the manner of successful persons, civilized man would gladly kick down the ladder by which he has climbed. He would be only too pleased to see 'the ape and tiger die.'

As savagery gave way to civilization, civilization itself became problematic. "The stimulation of the senses, the pampering of the emotions," and the cultivation of the intellectual and imaginative faculties led to a weakening of old customs and traditions, including primitive ideas of justice. Only with the further advance of civilization was justice refined, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary misdeeds, doling out punishment in accord with motive, and making justice an instrument of "righteousness" rather than mere revenge. It was at this stage that civilized man was superseded by "ethical man," who, rejecting the "ape and tiger promptings" of nature, branded them as sins and punished them as crimes. It was then that philosophers sought to reconcile the implacable facts of evolution, of nature itself, with "the ethical ideal of the just and the good."

At this point, Huxley comes close to defying Romanes's injunction about religion. He does steer clear of Christianity, to be sure; Jesus, the New Testament, and the Church Fathers are conspicuously absent from his account. But the Book of Job and the Buddhist sutras are amply cited to illustrate "the unfathomable injustice of the nature of things"—"that the wicked flourishes like a green bay tree, while the righteous begs his bread; that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children." While Job took refuge in "silence and submission," Buddhists sought to vindicate the cosmic process with the "doctrine of transmigration," and Indian philosophers invoked the concept of "karma" for the same purpose. The Greek philosophers took different approaches to the problem. Several of the pre-Socratic philosophers, especially Heraclitus, were "pronounced evolutionists," their aphorisms and metaphors anticipating some of the modern doctrine. Socrates and the Athenians, on the other hand, engaged in "a kind of inverse agnosticism," putting physics "beyond the reach of the human intellect" and enjoining philosophers to devote themselves to the study of ethics, "the one worthy object of investigation." The Stoics, professing to be disciples of Heraclitus, altered his teachings by endowing the "material world-soul" with the attributes of an "ideal Divinity," thus giving it an ethical quality. But the stoical dictum, "Live according to nature," made the cosmic process an ideal for human conduct, thus resolving the ethical issue no more than the doctrines of karma or transmigration.

The philosophers of antiquity occupy the largest part of Huxley's essay, as if to establish the universality and inexorability of the problem. But the account comes to its climax in the modern doctrine of the "ethics of evolution," which might better be called, Huxley suggests, the "evolution of ethics." Unfortunately evolution gives rise to and perpetuates immoral sentiments together with the moral. "Cosmic evolution may teach us how the good and the evil tendencies of man may have come about; but, in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before." The fallacy in the ethics of evolution is the equation of the "struggle for existence" with the "survival of the fittest," and the assumption that "the fittest" is identical with "the best." But that struggle may favor the worst rather than the best. It is the function of laws and moral precepts to curb the cosmic process, encouraging self-restraint rather than self-assertion, and reminding the individual that he owes to the community, if not existence itself, at least a life better than that of the savage.

Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest, in respect of the whole of the conditions which obtain, but of those who are ethically the best....

Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it. It may seem an audacious proposal thus to pit the microcosm against the macrocosm and to set man to subdue nature to his higher ends; but I venture to think that the great intellectual difference between the ancient times with which we have been occupied and our day, lies in the solid foundation we have acquired for the hope that such an enterprise may meet with a certain measure of success....

Fragile reed as he may be, man, as Pascal says, is a thinking reed: there lies within him a fund of energy, operating intelligently and so far akin to that which pervades the universe, that it is competent to influence and modify the cosmic process.

The Scientist *cum* Poet

The epigraph introducing the essay has the scientist preparing to "cross over" into the enemy camp, that of the moralist. The essay concludes with Huxley, now the scientist-moralist, crossing over into the still more alien camp of the poet—of Tennyson, in his poem "Ulysses," exhorting

man "...strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Interpolating Tennyson, Huxley reminds us that "we are grown men, and must play the man, cherishing the good that falls in our way, and bearing the evil, in and around us, with stout hearts on diminishing it." The final words of the essay are Tennyson's:

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down,
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
...but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note may yet be done.

This may be too radical a leap for the scientist of our own day—to invoke not only morality but poetry as a corrective to scientism. But he may be reassured by the modest claims made by the poet, and by Huxley himself. If evolution, or any other scientific theory, or nature itself, is not the ultimate arbiter of humanity, not the solution to all of our problems, there may be no single arbiter, no grand theory assuring that morality will triumph. This has not the triumphal appeal of scientism, but it is a salutary, realistic, even scientific appraisal of the human condition.