

How is BioLogos different from Darwinism or Social Darwinism?



Darwinism

When Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, he produced a major shift in scientists' understanding of biology. Darwin proposed a specific mechanism for the gradual change of species. That mechanism was called natural selection. The theory of evolution by natural selection was called Darwinism, although modern Darwinism also acknowledges the possibility of other types of evolutionary selection. To have the theory of evolution so strongly attached to Darwin's name may seem to imply the idea of a cult that slavishly follows the work of a single scientist. That is most certainly not the case. The modern theory of evolution has contributions from many independent scientists from the last 150 years and has become the absolute core of biology.

When Darwin proposed the mechanism of natural selection, he did not understand the details of how a species' naturally selected traits could be inherited by its offspring. Fortunately, Gregor Mendel's research in genetics was already underway. By breeding pea plants, Mendel discovered the precise method by which traits are inherited.¹ Although neither Mendel nor Darwin lived to see Mendelian genetics integrated with Darwinian natural selection, the synthesis of these two theories

— which more recently includes the discovery of the chemical nature of the gene and the development of the science of molecular biology — is called Neo-Darwinism, or The Modern Evolutionary Synthesis. The theory, however, is more often referred to simply as Darwinism.

Darwinism is a scientific theory that makes no direct statements about religion. It is possible that Darwinism might be incompatible with certain religions because some religions make specific statements about the natural history of the world. For example, Darwinism is incompatible with any religion that proposes a completely different physical history of life on Earth. It is true that Darwinism may have religious implications, although it does not involve any specific statements or beliefs about God.

Unfortunately, Darwinism is seen by some observers to carry atheistic connotations in part because Darwin's theory gave a natural explanation for the way in which highly complex systems appear to have been designed in their present form. Darwin's explanation of nature's apparent design was not an attack against belief in God. Rather he offered biological evolution what Laplace offered Newtonian physics. Neither of these cases presents an argument against the existence of God.

More recently advocates of Creationism, Intelligent Design and even New Atheism have made claims that the acceptance of Darwinism is synonymous with atheism. They argue that Darwinism is incompatible with a theistic worldview. BioLogos finds no basis for those claims, and the term Darwinism is used on this Web site only in reference to the scientific theory of evolution, not to an atheistic worldview.

BioLogos

Unlike Darwinism, BioLogos is not a strictly scientific theory. BioLogos is the belief that Darwinism is a correct science, and that it properly describes the method by which God chose to create the world. This theory directly challenges the claim that Darwinism is incompatible with belief in God.

Such a broad statement of beliefs can leave many questions unanswered. For example, is BioLogos compatible with any religion or only some? If Darwinism accounts for the complexity of life today, isn't BioLogos only compatible with an uninvolved creator? The BioLogos Web site addresses these questions, proving the theory is compatible with many belief systems, especially those that believe in an actively involved creator.

Social Darwinism

Although it shares a part of the name, Social Darwinism is an entirely different concept from

Darwinism. Social Darwinism is the view that results from applying evolutionary concepts to groups of individuals in a social context. It is the idea that Darwin's theory can be extended and applied to the social domain, as if competition by survival of the fittest is the proper mechanism for social development. When taken to an extreme, the end result is often discrimination against those members of society who are not in a position of power.

One example of Social Darwinism is the practice of eugenics, or the science of controlled reproduction for the purposes of changing the human race in accordance with some particular vision. The term was coined by Francis Galton, Darwin's prolific cousin, and comes from a Greek word meaning "well born." Galton promoted eugenics in his influential book *Hereditary Genius*, in which he outlined his vision for improving humanity. In another volume he described his program as the simple replacement of "Natural Selection by other processes that are more merciful and not less effective." Unfortunately, history proved eugenics to be anything but merciful.² In the early part of the 20th century the United States led the way in passing eugenic legislation.³ By 1917, more than 15 states had passed compulsory sterilization statutes for unfit members of society, and more than half of the United States had imposed restrictions on the marriage of those with mental defects.⁴ And the Supreme Court ruling of *Buck v. Bell* in 1927 sentenced Carrie Buck to sterilization on the grounds that she was "feebleminded" and an "imbecile". Later evidence revealed that she was neither.⁵

The sentiment of those who supported Social Darwinism is captured in the words of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

"It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind." ⁶

As Holmes' comment illustrates, Social Darwinists assume that if humans have evolved by a process of natural selection, it is appropriate to discriminate against less fit members of society.

The way of thinking that led to eugenics, however, is contrary to the standards of morality that BioLogos upholds, making the two beliefs incompatible. Rather than a consequence of biological evolution, these extreme applications of Social Darwinism are an unfortunate result of the human species exercising its freedom in harmful ways.

While Darwin himself did not advocate Social Darwinism, he is often mistakenly quoted in its favor:

"With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the

maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. [...] Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. [...] Hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed." ⁷

As many authors have pointed out, this quote from *The Descent of Man* by Darwin has been deceptively taken out of context.⁸ Another quotation reveals that even though Darwin assumed an evolutionary account for charity and philanthropy, he disavowed Social Darwinism.

The above quotation continues as follows:

"The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, if so urged by hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature. The surgeon may harden himself whilst performing an operation, for he knows that he is acting for the good of his patient; but if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with a certain and great present evil." ⁹

Regardless of Darwin's personal beliefs, it is often argued that an acceptance of his science comes hand in hand with a Social Darwinist philosophy. A popular example of this idea is the claim that Darwin's ideas heavily influenced Adolf Hitler. However, as Jeffrey Schloss points out,¹⁰ from the simple fact that no Darwinists since the time of Hitler have been led to the same ideas, it is clear that Darwinism does not inevitably lead to Hitler's philosophy. What's more, human history contains a long and sad chronicle of racial exterminations and race-based interpretations, most of which existed before Darwin's theory was published. Schloss also explains that Hitler's misapplication of Darwin's ideas is mirrored in his abuse of Christianity, which Hitler claimed was part of the inspiration for his actions toward Jews.¹¹ Needless to say, anyone capable of such deception — or perhaps self deception — as applying Christ's principles of loving one's neighbor toward such evil actions should not be considered a serious case study for the philosophical implications of Darwinism.

Conclusion

There are clear distinctions between Darwinism, BioLogos and Social Darwinism. Darwinism is the scientific theory of evolution by natural selection, subsequently synthesized with Mendelian

genetics and modern molecular biology. BioLogos accepts the correctness of this evolutionary model based on a massive database of supporting evidence, but views God as the author of this process. Thus evolution is the answer to “How?” but God is still the answer to “Why?”. Social Darwinism is a misguided set of beliefs, derived by applying evolutionary concepts to the social realm. BioLogos does not in any way support Social Darwinism.

Consulted Experts:

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Denis Alexander](#) in drafting this response.

Notes

1. Museum of Paleontology University of California, "Discrete Genes Are Inherited: Gregor Mendel," Understanding Evolution, [http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/ 0_0/history_13](http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/0_0/history_13) (accessed 12/20/08).
2. E. J. Larson, "Biology and the Emergence of the Anglo-American Eugenics Movement," in *Biology and Ideology: From Descartes to Dawkins*, eds. D.R. Alexander & R.L. Numbers (Chicago: Chicago University Press, In Press).
Galton, Francis. *Memories of My Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, p. 323, 1909).
3. Harry Hamilton Laughlin, *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* (Chicago: Psychopathic Laboratory of the Municipal Court of Chicago, 1922).
4. Laughlin, *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*.
5. Steven Jay Gould, "Chapter 20: Carrie Buck's Daughter," in *The Flamingo's Smile* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1985).
6. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Eugenics," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/195069/eugenics> (accessed December 28, 2008).
7. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, (London: J. Murray, 1871), 168. Also available online at John van Wyhe ed., *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/> (accessed 12/20/08). A similarly misleading quote is used in Nathan Frankowski, "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed," (USA: Rampant Films, 2008).
8. See, for example, Jeff Schloss, "The Expelled Controversy: Overcoming or Raising Walls of Division?," American Scientific Affiliation, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/resources/Schloss200805.html>.
9. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, (London: J. Murray,

1871), 168-9. Also available online at John van Wyhe ed., *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/> (accessed 12/20/08).

10. See, for example, Jeff Schloss, "The Expelled Controversy: Overcoming or Raising Walls of Division?," American Scientific Affiliation, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/resources/Schloss200805.html>.
11. Schloss, "The Expelled Controversy."

Further Reading

Articles

- Kevles, Daniel. "[In the Name of Darwin](#)," *PBS.org*.
 - Museum of Paleontology University of California. "[Misconceptions about Evolution and Social Darwinism](#)."
 - Museum of Paleontology University of California. "[What is Evolution and How Does it Work?](#)"
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