

## BOOK REVIEW

of

Richard Weikart,

*From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*,  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

In the documentary movie *Expelled* by Ben Stein, the latter part of the film suggests that Darwinian evolutionary ideas contributed to the atrocities of Nazi Germany. At one point Stein interviewed Richard Weikart, the author of the book under review, for his assessment of Hitler. No doubt Stein became familiar with Weikart at least in part because of this book. My first reaction to the film was that it is one thing to charge that scientists and others who oppose Darwinian evolution are being suppressed in our society and in some cases *expelled* from their professional posts, it is quite another to charge that Darwinian evolution is in some way to blame for Nazi Germany, and that perhaps Stein was inappropriately using his film for drawing even more attention to the Holocaust. After reading this book by Weikart, I think it safe to say that the charge is just and very well substantiated. This is a very scholarly book, very well researched and documented, and yet very readable, especially for those of us who like history. The conclusion is that while one cannot say that Darwinian evolutionary theory necessarily leads to policies of racial extermination and other atrocities of high order, one can say with certainty that it did, in fact, contribute to the actual development of those policies in history, in Nazi Germany. In fact, in this book Weikart develops this conclusion with utmost care, and demonstrates that the ideas leading up to Nazism were being developed in Germany almost from the onset of the publication of *Origin of Species* up to the establishment of the Nazi party continuing through World War II.

The book is divided into four parts and a total of eleven chapters. Part 1, *Laying New Foundations for Ethics* contains the first three chapters: 1. *The Origin of Ethics and the Rise of Moral Relativism*, 2. *Evolutionary Progress as the Highest Good*, and 3. *Organizing Evolutionary Ethics*. Part 2, *Devaluing Human Life* contains the following three chapters: 4. *The Value of Life and the Value of Death*, 5. *The Specter of Inferiority: Devaluing the Disabled and the "Unproductive"*, and 6. *The Science of Racial Inequality*. Part 3, *Eliminating the "Inferior Ones"* contains chapters 7 through 10: 7. *Controlling Reproduction: Overturning Traditional Sexual Morality*, 8. *Killing the "Unfit"*, 9. *War and Peace*, and 10. *Racial Struggle and Extermination*. Part 4, *Impacts* contains just one chapter: 11. *Hitler's Ethic*. This is followed by a *Conclusion*.

This book is an outstanding example of the importance of ideas: ideas have consequences. Many, seemingly especially in Germany, immediately saw implications of Darwin's theory far beyond biology. As Weikart notes: "Haeckel, Büchner, and many young men and women influenced by them saw Darwinism as more than merely a biological theory. For them it was a central ingredient of a new worldview that was locked in combat with traditional Christian religion and indeed any dualistic religion or philosophy." Eugenics (dealing with the improvement of races and breeds, especially the human race) was early on embraced in a number of countries, including the USA but especially Germany, and was directly an application of evolution. "Not only did many leading Darwinists embrace eugenics, but also most eugenicists – certainly all the early leaders – considered eugenics a straightforward application of Darwinian principles to ethics and society." Some of this could be confused with high moral principles. "The constant stress on physical health in Darwinian and eugenics circles contributed to various movements promoting healthy lifestyles which often took on the character of a moral crusade." Early eugenics leaders compared humans with animals, and noted how animal breeders decided which animals could and could not breed: should not these ideas be also applied to humans for the improvement of the race? "Hugo Ribbert, professor of pathology at the University of Bonn, . . . , wrote, 'The care for individuals who from birth onwards are useless mentally and physically, who for themselves and for their fellow-creatures are a burden merely, persons of negative value, is a function altogether useless to humanity, and indeed positively injurious.' Ribbert's rhetoric seems rather shocking to us today, but it was rather commonplace among eugenicists in the early twentieth century and not just in Germany." Now some of this, apart from Ribbert's comments, may have an appeal. Who can find wrong with physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle? Unfortunately, Darwinism not only led many to embrace eugenics but also a new system of ethics based on Darwinism.

"Darwin neatly summed up his view of ethics and morality in his *Autobiography*, stating that one who does not believe in God or an afterlife – as he did not – 'can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best one.' This was a radical departure from traditional ways of grounding morality, for Christianity relied on divine revelation." German intellectuals developed their ethics and morality, as they had eugenics, based on Darwinian evolution. In this context it is not difficult to see how the idea that evolutionary progress could be the highest good. Is it not our responsibility, our moral obligation, to take those steps that will result in improvement in the human race? Who could find fault with that? However, what does it have to say about those who are judged to be inferior or unproductive?

Is it not, then, a logical step to inquire about which race may already be the most advanced among the races of the world? Given that you think you have identified the most superior race, and given that your highest good is improvement of the human race, certainly ethnic cleansing is not far off is it? And would it not also be logical to want to dominate and eliminate inferior races by war, or by gas chambers? And if you think you have something to gain by performing scientific experiments on inferior captives, is it not even your moral obligation to do so?

This story is more terrifying and horrible than any work of fiction such as *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*. The problem is that it is not fiction, but has actually happened, and resulted in a world war and the deaths of millions. Again, no one is saying that such a tale is a necessary outcome of Darwinian evolution. But it did happen, and rightly or wrongly those who did it based it at least in part on Darwinism.