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Darwin and Nietzsche

Selection, Evolution, and Morality

CATHERINE WILSON

ABSTRACT: This article discusses Nietzsche's interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection and the basis for his rejection of the major elements of Darwin's overall scheme on observational grounds. Nietzsche's further opposition to the attempt of Darwin and many of his followers to reconcile the "struggle for existence" with Christian ethics is the subject of the second half of the essay.

1

Unlike Darwin himself, Darwin's followers were eager to expand and expatiate on what they saw as the cultural implications of the theory of evolution by natural selection. Ernst Haeckel, one of the prominent popularizers of Darwinism, declared that it would bear "immensely rich fruits—fruits which have no equal in the whole history of the civilization of mankind."¹ Darwin's theory was, however, fused and frequently confused with theories of cultural and moral progress to which he was not especially committed. The view that nature possesses an inherent tendency to bring forth a succession of ever more superior forms, and that combat and struggle between populations eliminates the weaker, allowing the stronger to flourish, had been in play since the late eighteenth century. Darwin was viewed as having strengthened the scientific case for what had been a mere conjecture. Herbert Spencer, who introduced the phrase "the survival of the fittest" in 1864, argued that there is a natural course of development from simple to complex forms, and David Strauss referred to the "inherent aspiration of nature after an unceasingly progressive improvement and refinement of her organic forms" and to the work remaining to be done by human beings in ennobling nature, "especially by the consciousness of their kindred and the mutual obligation of race."² Such utopianism gained significance against the background context of fears over, on one hand, the negative effects of the "domestication" of human beings, on the other, their physical or

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moral degeneration to a more primitive condition. The late nineteenth-century context abounds with references to vitality, instinct, force, progress, degeneration, extinction, race, and eugenics. Nietzsche's relationship to Darwinism has been studied repeatedly, and the conclusions at which scholars have arrived—both as regards the depth of Nietzsche's engagement with Darwin and as regards the positive and negative features of his reception of Darwinism—have diverged pointedly.

Nietzsche, all agree, is unlikely to have read either Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) or his *Descent of Man* (1871). However, he had a basic if not entirely accurate grasp of Darwinism derived from popularizers and synthesizers, and his direct engagement with the evolutionary theory of Spencer, in the latter's three-volume *System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1862–67), is evident.³ He mentions Darwin, Darwinism, and Darwinians in works ranging from his early *Untimely Meditations* (1873) on the rationalist critic of Christianity, David Strauss, to the notes of the late 1880s that were assembled into a book by his sister and later published under the title *Der Wille zur Macht*. The critical divide among commentators is between those who see Nietzsche as familiar with and committed to the Darwinian image of nature and those who regard the will to power, eternal recurrence, and the Overman as elements of a conceptual scheme entirely different in form and content from the methodical, detail-oriented empiricism—and moral caution—of Darwinism. Most recently, John Richardson has argued for a “close affinity” between Darwin and Nietzsche.⁴ Dirk Johnson,⁵ however, has emphasized the discrepancy between the Nietzschean account of the origins of altruism and the Darwinian account, and pointed to profound differences in their moral and scientific understandings.⁶ In the judgment of Gregory Moore, while Nietzsche's work “was not immune from the influence of . . . the ‘biologism’ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the dissemination of the language of evolutionary naturalism and racial degeneration”—his work espouses an “anti-Darwinian theory of evolution.”⁷

Arguments for a positive influence must contend with the site in *BGE*, where Nietzsche cites Mill, Darwin, and Spencer as “mediocre Englishmen” and attacks Darwinism for the “narrowness, aridity, and industrious diligence” that is causing an “over-all depression of the European spirit” (*BGE* 253).⁸ There are similarly scornful remarks in *GS* evoking Victorian shop keeping, Malthusianism, and bad air: “The whole of English Darwinism breathes something like the musty air of English overpopulation, like the smell of the distress and overcrowding of small people” (*GS* 349). Finally, defenders of a positive relationship must contend with the critical remarks about Darwinian evolution that appear in Nietzsche's notebooks, where his treatment of biology is far more detailed than it is in his published writings.

In this article, I side with those commentators who agree that antitheological, somatic, future-oriented themes are prominent in Nietzsche's writings, but who

deny that those themes are Darwinian. Where Nietzsche is responding to Darwin, he never directly approves a claim of Darwin's; and he disputes every serious claim of Darwin's and of his contemporary Darwinians. Like many of them, he is engaged with biopolitical themes, and like them, he looks hopefully toward the future and toward a condition of the world beyond contemporary decadence and hypocrisy. However, he finds their hopes misguided or confused. In short, as far as Nietzsche was concerned, the "narrowness, aridity, and industrious diligence" of Darwin himself had given rise to a moral and social philosophy that was not to his taste. This negative stance motivated him to raise criticisms of the mechanisms of natural and sexual selection, and to question whether the sort of progress—biological and cultural—mooted by Victorian Darwinists was really occurring.

2

Like his atheistic and agnostic contemporaries, Nietzsche was perturbed by the question of what, if anything, makes human beings not just another form of animal, given that they are not creatures specially created by God in his own image and loved and favored by the divinity. A common form of answer was that humans were the only animals that exhibited intellectual and technological progress. Apes could not prove a theorem or advance a proposition of metaphysics, Darwin noted, and countless writers pointed to the difference between "civilized" humans—technologically competent, militarily sophisticated, literarily and musically cultured—and the indigenous people they had been encountering and describing for centuries, most recently in the scramble for Africa. Whether the "progress" of the human type was natural or cultural was open to question.

Whereas the Comte de Buffon, the transformist of the mid-eighteenth century, had seen the other "races" as degenerate versions of the European type, after Darwin it was more common to identify Africans as a link intermediate between the ape or monkey and the "higher" European type. Haeckel, with his four "lower species" of humans and his eight "higher species," topped by the Mediterranean type, concluded his book on the *History of Creation* (i.e., evolution) with the observation that the "ape-like negro tribes" of the Upper Nile "stand far below unreasoning animals" in mental aptitude and moral competence.⁹ Darwin, who had firsthand experience both of the remarkable mental competence of apes and of the transformative powers of education and acculturation on natives of Tierra de Fuego, did not share these dismissive views. In any case, the proposition that humans were superior to all the other animals and engaged in ever more desirable forms of scientific and cultural development does not seem to have persuaded Nietzsche of the excellence of his contemporary Europeans and their

accomplishments He was not alone in his skepticism. As noted, the rhetoric of progress sat side by side with anxieties about domestication and degeneration. It had long been observed that domesticated animals, dependent on human protection, were uglier and weaker than their wild counterparts. Had humans effectively domesticated themselves, becoming passive, weak, dependent herd animals that had lost the noble characteristics of the wild type? Were the poverty, insanity, criminality, and birth defects and diseases that had become so visible in the industrial age signs of this deterioration? Didn't the women's movement suggest the ascendancy of the sad, the weak, the incapable? Especially for a well-read philologist, the classical ideal—those splendidly marmoreal male bodies, formed by outdoor exercise, games, hunting, and loose clothing, unmarred by venereal disease—as described by Winckelmann might have seemed to present the antithesis of European actuality.¹⁰

Another feature of human beings that was claimed to raise them above the other animals was their capacity to cultivate an ever-wider morality of compassion in the face of misfortune and misery. For benevolent and redistributive schemes were at the same time rising up to meet the evident needs of capitalism's underclass. The positive reception of Buddhism—a religion at once fatalistic, nonpaternalistic, minimally supernatural (if one looked aside from transmigration), and compassionate—by Mme Blavatsky, Schopenhauer, and T. H. Huxley—testifies to a wave of influence from the East with the rise of Orientalist philology spearheaded by Max Müller and his translations of Sanskrit texts. Eastern religion answered to the need for a non-Christian foundation for morality, which Strauss's devastating portrait of Jesus as a flawed human being and Christianity as codified irrationality in his *Life of Jesus* had made amply clear.

That the special nature of humans consisted in part in their ability to build on an evolutionary platform of altruism was Darwin's own view. He believed he could reconcile Bentham's utilitarianism, with its concern for the greatest happiness of the greatest number, with moral sense theory, explaining the evolution of the moral sense from its precursor states in animals.

[A]s man gradually advanced in intellectual power . . . as he regarded more and more not only the welfare, but the happiness of his fellow-men; as . . . his sympathies became more tender and widely diffused, so as to extend to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals—so would the standard of his morality rise higher and higher.¹¹

That the progress of the species entailed the widening of moral concern was also the view of the non-Darwinian Spencer. Spencer argued that ethical conduct is conduct conducive to the aggregate happiness, and that conscience is formed by processes of association that are both learned and inherited. In a future, perfect state of society, the egoistic and altruistic drives of individuals will be perfectly adapted to their social environment.¹²

This was not Nietzsche's view. In *BGE* 62, he laments the ruination of the race through the Christian practices of care for the sick, the lame, and the misbegotten. The early confrontation with David Strauss, and Nietzsche's attack on what has been described as a "blockbuster,"¹³ Strauss's much later book, *The Old Faith and the New* (1872), is the key to understanding not only Nietzsche's view of Darwinism but also much of his moral philosophy. So let me begin by reviewing Strauss's moral philosophy within its theoretical landscape and Nietzsche's reactions to Strauss in his *Untimely Meditations*.

In his *Life of Jesus*, after giving his account of the historical person Jesus, Strauss argued that ascetic Christian ideals were self-justifying in the absence of his divinity. Jesus furnished an ethical model for humanity through "the restraint of his sensual inclinations and passions, and a scrupulous obedience to the voice of his conscience."¹⁴ Here, as later in *The Old Faith and the New*, Strauss appeals to Kant, whose reformulation of Christian ideals is a point picked up with the opposite emphasis by Nietzsche in *TI*. The value of organized religion, according to Strauss, is that it promotes "a strengthening of our consciousness of God, in its relation to our sensuous existence. . . . [I]t is rendered easier to us to deprive the senses of their ascendancy within us."¹⁵ Christ, he says, "works in us as a more and more complete conquest over sensuality."¹⁶ Regarding human beings as the union of two natures, the divine and the material, Strauss argues that "pollution cleaves only to the individual," and that in the course of history spirit subdues nature so that it is "[h]umanity that dies, rises, and ascends to heaven."¹⁷

In the chapter titled "What Is Our Conception of the Universe?," Strauss first presents a monistic view of the cosmos according to which life arises out of inorganic matter. Then he goes on to expound and endorse the evolution of humans from the apes, referring not only to Darwin's posit of an extinct anthropoid ancestor for all humans, but also to the views of Schopenhauer, who posited, quite arbitrarily, separate origins for the human races in the chimpanzee and the orangutan.¹⁸ Following Darwin closely, Strauss exalts the intelligence, capability, and moral conscience of animals and explains and defends the Darwinian interpretation of modification by descent against creationism.¹⁹ Unlike Haeckel, however, Strauss emphasizes that we must face up to the eventual annihilation of the world. The earth will vanish as a planet; all human products, all art and science, and all memory of them will disappear. Yet our ascent and the decline that will usher in that frozen future, he says, are only "relative conceptions":

The brooding warmth, the luxurious fruitfulness, the vast creative power [of the earth] have decreased; while the delicacy, the elaboration, the spiritualization have increased. It is probable that a time will come in which the earth will grow yet colder, dryer, and more sterile than she is at present; we may feel inclined to conceive of the men of that period as debased, decrepit, Samoyed-like. . . .²⁰

This antithesis—between the warm, luxurious, and fruitful and the appearance of the delicate and spiritual that heralds the decline of the world before it turns

cold and sterile—becomes a dominant image for Nietzsche. His own “gay science” resists these implications; and to forestall decline, he not only denies that the arrow of time is unidirectional, with his doctrine of eternal recurrence; he opposes for the meantime the delicate and spiritual, and the morality of fatalism and compassion—and with them, the reasonable bourgeois life—that Strauss presents as the ethical scheme most suited to the natural world he has just described.

Turning to the alleged implications of his monism and evolutionary theory for morality in the chapter titled “What Is the Rule of Life?,” Strauss refers to the gradual evolution, through social experience, of laws and codes in repressing violence and suffering.²¹ He expresses his agreement with Schopenhauer’s morality of compassion and points to its relation to “that principle of benevolence which it was the custom, especially of the Scotch [*sic*] moralists in the last century, to oppose to that of self-love.”²² All moral action, he says, arises from the individual’s acting in consonance with the idea of kind (i.e., for the good of the species).²³ He goes on to discuss marriage—the need to compromise between ideals of permanence and inconstant human nature—and the questions of property and democracy, about which he holds distinctly conservative views.

Nietzsche’s reaction to this portrayal of evolution, finitude, decline, and bourgeois morality was derogatory and dismissive: “The universe, [Strauss] is happy to inform us, is a machine with jagged iron wheels, stamping and hammering ponderously,” but “we do not only find the revolution of pitiless wheels in our world-machine, but also the shedding of soothing oil” (*DS* 42). Strauss, like Haeckel, sees Darwinism as “a railway track that is just marked out [. . .] where the flags are fluttering joyfully in the breeze” (*DS* 90). Nietzsche is disgusted with Strauss’s timidity. An opportunity, he thinks, has been lost: the opportunity to draw the truly radical and correct conclusions from the nonexistence of God, the inauthenticity of Christ, the mortality of the soul, and the mutability of the human species. “No aggressive action is performed [. . .],” he charges. “With admirable frankness, [Strauss] announces that he is no longer a Christian, but disclaims all idea of wishing to disturb the contentment of anyone [. . .]. With a certain rude self-satisfaction, he swathes himself in the hirsute garment of our Simian genealogists, and extols Darwin as one of mankind’s greatest benefactors, but our perplexity is great when we find him constructing his ethics quite independently of the question, ‘What is our conception of the universe?’” (*DS* 50). Strauss’s conception of the universe is scientific and Philistine: “Soberly and limpidly, it welcomes us: its mural decorations consist of astronomical charts and mathematical figures; it is filled with scientific apparatus, and its cupboards contain skeletons, stuffed apes and anatomical specimens” (*DS* 77–78). In its innermost chambers, however, the enlightened ones sit with their “wives, children, and newspapers, occupied in the commonplace discussion of politics,”

with the most conventional imaginable views on marriage, universal suffrage, capital punishment, and workman's strikes. "We can scarcely believe it to be possible that the rosary of public opinion can be told off so quickly" (*DS* 78). Strauss's mechanical cosmos is apparently as gray, Cimmerian, and deadly as the "melancholy atheistic twilight" of Holbach's *Système de la nature* as reported by Goethe: "To such a man the ground seems strewn with ashes and all stars are obscured; while every withered tree and field laid waste seems to cry to him Barren! Forsaken! Springtime is no longer possible here" (*DS* 58). In *TI*, following his biological idol, William Rolph,²⁴ Nietzsche insists on the abundance of nature, its "wealth, luxury, even absurd prodigality." Nature shows no signs of the scarcity that makes competition and destruction inevitable, and in the *Untimely Meditations* he warns the reader not to take the grim views of Malthus (likely one of the inspirations for Darwin) for nature as it really is (*TI* "Expeditions," 14).

Already the theme of a gay science to counter the pessimism of the theory of natural selection, a cheerful philosophy of abundance as opposed to one of scarcity, is present in this early piece of Nietzschean critique. At the same time, the crosscutting theme of the exceptional man versus the prolific breeding masses has made its appearance. The bourgeois reality of the drawing room and the newspapers as depicted by Strauss in his objections to trade unionism, his defense of private property, his demand for mitigation but not abolishment of capital punishment, and his overall sensible position on divorce appears to Nietzsche stuffy and cramped. Strauss's reservations about Schopenhauer are another mark of his Philistinism, which is Nietzsche's main charge against him. Strauss's hatred of genius and intellectual aristocracy is only tempered by his fear of social democracy (*DS* 57).

A consistent, aggressive and honest Darwinian, Nietzsche thinks, "ought to have turned his back on [Strauss's] 'we' and established a moral code for life out of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* and the privileges of the strong" (*DS* 50). Straussian morality is mere placation of the bourgeois, who might approve of Strauss's outburst against parsons, miracles, and the "humbug" of the resurrection, but who would shrink back "had he been confronted with a genuine and seriously constructed ethical system based on Darwin's teaching." "His ethical rule is to behave as though there were no individual distinctions!" Nietzsche exclaims. "Where is the Strauss-Darwin morality here, Whither, above all, has the courage gone?" (*DS* 53). According to Darwin, Nietzsche ventures, "man is indeed a creature of nature, [. . .] and his ascent to his present stage of development has been conditioned by [. . .] the very fact that he was continually forgetting that others were constituted like him and shared the same rights with him; by the very fact that he regarded himself as the stronger, and thus brought about the gradual suppression of the weaker types" (*DS* 52).

In order to clarify Nietzsche's seemingly more critical relationship to Darwinism in the years after the Strauss essay, let me propose six theses that Nietzsche came to associate with Darwinism, or simply with "the biologists." These are not, it should be emphasized, theses to which a contemporary neo-Darwinian would subscribe, insofar as the current understanding of natural selection rejects the view that Nature is an agent with the goal of species preservation and improvement who has various devices at her disposal. Natural selection, we recognize, is not "for" any purpose: nature does not care whether any particular species becomes numerous or goes extinct, or whether any new competencies develop in plants and animals. It is simply a process that inevitably occurs when living forms have the power to self-replicate and to vary and when resources are limited and not all replicants can survive. Sexual reproduction, sexual selection, and altruism are accidental developments that have turned out to be favorable to the multiplication of the bodies in which the genes that make them possible reside. However, it is not implausible to ascribe the six theses below to Darwin himself, as he did not take a fully individualistic, let alone genocentric perspective on evolutionary theory, and they are well represented among the Darwinians of the late nineteenth century:²⁵

1. Nature strives to preserve and improve *the* (various) *species*, generating ever stronger, better, living individuals and more complex and superior forms.
2. Sexual reproduction is a device of nature for preserving the species.
3. Natural selection, a device whereby nature destroys the weaker members, allowing the stronger to survive and reproduce, is a device for improving the species.
4. Sexual selection is a device for improving the species.
5. Altruism in social animals is a device for preserving the species.
6. Christian ethics—as altruistic and as dedicated to the preservation of the species—are consistent with naturalism.

In one set of notes, Nietzsche appears to endorse the two-step process—variation and deletion—of Darwinian natural selection. "Countless individuals," he muses, "[are] sacrificed for the sake of a few [. . .]; it is just the same with peoples and races; they constitute the 'body' for the production of isolated, valuable individuals, who carry on the great process" (*KSA* 12:7 [25]; *WP* 679). Elsewhere, however, Nietzsche seems drawn to the idea of a single continuous productive process, an immanent developmental force, that brings forth higher forms from some plastic substrate in which they are potentially present, by utterly unknown means, through a "will to power in the organic process." This

is an *internal* force, not a set of external, environmental forces in the face of which the individual is passive. “The influence of ‘external circumstances,’” says Nietzsche, “is overestimated by Darwin to a ridiculous extent: the essential thing in the life process is precisely the tremendous shaping, form-creating force working from within which utilizes and exploits external circumstances” (*KSA* 12:7 [25]; *WP* 647).

In this regard, Nietzsche resembles his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, especially Wilhelm Lange, Carl Naegeli, the embryologist Wilhelm Roux, and the zoologist William Rolph.²⁶ The conceptualization of these writers was conditioned by the background of romantic *Naturphilosophie*, with its focus on inner development, conflict, subordination, and harmonization of parts, the “mastery of a community” of cells.²⁷ Haeckel describes the evolution of the one-celled amoeba “creeping by means of the ever-changing processes of their body-substance and nourishing and propagating themselves” in the primeval Laurentian ocean,²⁸ and as giving rise to the “heap or small community of simple, equiformal and equivalent cells,”²⁹ and then to differentiated swimming things, moving by their cilia, then to gastrulated organisms with a mouth and an internal stomach, and so on.

As Nietzsche reads Haeckel’s amoeba, “Life is not the adaptation of inner circumstances to outward power, but will to power, which, working from within, incorporate and subdues more and more of that which is ‘outside’” (*KSA* 12:7 [9]; *WP* 681). The “will to power” is already manifested in the amoeba’s extending its pseudopods, and incorporating its food, and the will to power can even divide itself into two wills. While Clark questions whether Nietzsche really understood the will to power in a biological sense,³⁰ a number of passages are difficult to explain on any other grounds. Thus:

Greater complexity, sharp differentiation, the contiguity of developed organs and functions with the disappearance of the intermediate members—if that is perfection, then there is a will to power in the organic process by virtue of which the dominant, shaping, commanding forces continually extend the bounds of their power, and continually simplify within these bounds. [. . .] (*KSA* 12:7 [9]; *WP* 644)

And:

The organic is rising to yet higher levels [. . .]. [H]undreds of thousands of experiments are made to change the nourishment, the mode of living, and of dwelling of the body: consciousness and evaluations in the body, all kinds of pleasure and displeasure are signs of these changes and experiments. (*KSA* 10:24 [16]; *WP* 676)

Following Rolph, Nietzsche denies that there is an instinct or a drive for self-preservation that determines morphology and behavior. It is symptomatic of “consumptive” philosophers like Spinoza, he declares, that they emphasize the instinct for self-preservation. Darwinians, too, favor an “incomprehensibly

one-sided doctrine of the struggle for existence.” The underlying pathology in the latter case, Nietzsche speculates, is the lower-class origin of most English scientists (*GS* 349). Rather than striving to maintaining itself, an organism “wants above all to *discharge* its force,” and this happens to result in its survival (*KSA* 12:2 [63]; *WP* 650). He reads all organic functions, including mitosis and other forms of reproduction, in this light.³¹ The failure of protoplasm in the form of the amoeba to preserve itself instead of splitting in two shows that preservation, as opposed to the exercise and increase of its powers, is not its aim (*KSA* 13:11 [121]; *WP* 651). Nor is it really the aim of any organism. As he says in *GS*, “To will to preserve oneself is the expression of distress [. . .]. The struggle for existence is only an *exception*, a temporary restriction of the will to life [. . .]. The great and small struggle always turns upon superiority, upon growth and expansion, upon power in accordance with the will to power, which is just the will of life” (*GS* 349).

The belief of early Darwinists that reproductive behavior was “for” the preservation and therefore the good of the species was rejected indignantly by Nietzsche, again on the grounds of intentionality: “The isolated individual does not have the good of his species in view: the sexual instinct does not prove this”; it expresses rather a “real achievement of the individual, his highest interest, his highest experience of power” (*KSA* 12:7 [9]; *WP* 680).³² Sexual selection is rejected as inconsistent with observation. Nietzsche doubts that there is selection for beauty; rather, “males and females take advantage of any chance encounter” (*KSA* 13:14 [133]; *WP* 684).

Contrary to his suggestion at *WP* 679 (*KSA* 12:7 [9]), Nietzsche argues that Darwin’s theory predicts the opposite of what we observe. Nature does not eliminate the weak and so strive to perfect the species; rather she lops off the tallest, most exposed shoots. “Chance serves the weak as well as the strong,” and fruitfulness is balanced by liability to destruction (*KSA* 13:14 [133]; *WP* 684). Average and lower types propagate the most, and what is conducive to long life is “unfavourable to [. . .] strength and splendor” (*KSA* 12:7 [25]; *WP* 647). Higher types are more complex and more fragile; their disintegration is more likely, so beauty and genius are rarely inherited. The latter point is the critical objection to Darwinism for Nietzsche. “I see science kneeling before a reality that is the reverse of the struggle for existence as taught by Darwin’s school—that is to say, I see on top and surviving everywhere those who compromise life and the value of life.—The error of the school of Darwin becomes a problem to me: how can one be so blind as to see so badly at *this* point” (*KSA* 13:14 [123]; *WP* 685). Precisely the opposite, he thinks, is obvious to the social observer: “[T]he elimination of the lucky strokes, the uselessness of the more highly developed types, the inevitable dominion of the average, even the sub-average types [. . .]. [. . .] The school of Darwin has been deluded everywhere.” He sees “the opposite of that which Darwin and his school see or want to see

today; selection in favour of the stronger, better-constituted, and the progress of the species” (*KSA* 13:14 [123]; *WP* 685). The majority, he thinks, strives to defeat the higher types, and usually does; the mediocre are viewed as worth more than the exceptions. “Strange though it may sound, one always has to defend [. . .] the healthy against those degenerating and afflicted with hereditary taints. . . . The weaker dominate the strong again and again” because they are stronger together and more clever (*KSA* 13:14 [123]; *WP* 685).

Nietzsche perceives individuals of higher types as born into a mediocre herd, and it is an urgent cultural task to recognize and validate these persons. They may have qualities that do not fit them well for prolonged survival, for “that which preserves the individual might at the same time arrest and halt its [development],” whereas “a *deficiency*, a *degeneration* can be of the highest utility insofar as it acts as a stimulant to other organs” (*KSA* 12:7 [125]; *WP* 647). This is how his claim that the “weaker natures” help to develop the species further is presumably to be understood.³³ To the truly weak, Nietzsche concedes “subtlety, consideration, spirituality”; these are qualities that have achieved something in human history, and for which he says we should feel “profound gratitude.” Now, however, they have become a burden (*KSA* 12:5 [58]; *WP* 404). To restore the natural order, and encourage vitality against decadence and cowardice, Nietzsche demands selective breeding, destruction, and an end of restraint from mutual injury, mutual violence, mutual exploitation, as well as the direction of aggression outward to other groups and societies. “To equate one’s will with that of another,” as he maintained in his criticism of Strauss, is nihilistic.

As Johnson points out,³⁴ in his Strauss essay, Nietzsche explicitly recognizes that goodness, mercy, love, and self-abnegation are pervasive in human society, and he reproaches Strauss with an inability to derive these traits from his naturalism. In passages ridiculed by Nietzsche, Strauss claims that “all moral action arises from the individual’s acting in consonance with the idea of (human) kind. . . . To bring himself into abiding concord with the idea and destiny of mankind is the essence of the duties which man owes to himself.”³⁵

Nietzsche’s references to the “false altruism of the biologists” (*KSA* 12:10 [13]; *WP* 653) are a direct challenge to Strauss, to Spencer, and to Darwin himself. In fact, Darwin had, a year before the publication of Strauss’s *The Old Faith and the New*, and presumably unbeknownst to Strauss, attempted precisely the task of naturalizing morality in his *Descent of Man*. He noted, first, that altruism was common in the nonhuman animals and was conducive to the survival of the species.³⁶ Second, he posited a form of selection among competing tribes of early man, whereby the more virtuous groups preserved themselves better than the less virtuous.³⁷ The emotional and cognitive platform of the human species, he thought, permitted the cultural development of advanced codes that preserved those who in a state of nature could not preserve themselves—the sick, the severally mentally deficient, the elderly and feeble. With savages, he noted,

the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized 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 civilized 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.³⁸

Darwin worried that the careful and frugal tended to marry late in life and to have fewer children than the more careless and irresponsible members of the population. In the first edition of the *Descent of Man*, he warned that unless a means could be found to prevent “the reckless, the vicious and otherwise inferior members of society from increasing . . . the nation . . . will retrograde.” The passage was removed, however, from the second edition, where he insisted that we must bear “the undoubtedly bad effects” of moral progress. We cannot check our sympathy “even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature.”³⁹ The neglect of the unfortunate would involve overwhelming present evil that could not be justified in the same way as the surgeon’s action of cutting out part of a diseased organ, by the prospect of a greater good. The control of breeding, though perhaps scientifically sound, would, he conceded, be unacceptable to the public. He consoled himself with the thought that “some elimination of the worst moral dispositions is always in progress”—through imprisonment and suicide—and that truly profligate men and women had few children.⁴⁰

For Nietzsche, the task was not, however, to explain the naturalistic origins of altruism and thereby to render it consistent with science and to give it cultural validation, but rather to invent an historical genealogy that would explain it as an unnatural cultural development and thereby problematize it, as he eventually succeeded in doing in his tour de force, *GM* (1887). In the Strauss essay, he is inclined to regard philanthropy as Philistinism, cowardice, and concession, and this remains his fixed opinion. The Darwinians fail to prophesize the return and rule of the “haughty, manly, conquering, domineering [. . .] highest and best-turned-out type of ‘man’ [. . .]” (*BGE* 62). Real Darwinism, Nietzsche thinks, can have no truck with the morality system, or with Christian values; the principle of selection is the opposite of Christian morality. “The species requires that the ill-constituted, weak, degenerate perish: but it was precisely to them that Christianity turned as a conserving force” (*KSA* 13:15 [110]; *WP* 246). Accordingly, “Christian presuppositions and interpretations still live on” under Darwinian formulas of social progress and moral perfectibility (*KSA* 12:10 [7]; *WP* 243). This stance is reproduced many times over: “If one regards individuals as equal, one calls the species into question, one encourages a way of life that leads to the ruin of the species: Christianity is the counterprinciple to the principle of *selection*. If the degenerate and sick [. . .] is to be accorded the same

value as the healthy [. . .] then unnaturalness becomes law—” (*KSA* 13:15 [110]; *WP* 246). In his attempt to find a successor morality to the ascetic, superstitious, life-denying Christian one, “I soon turned my back,” he explains, “on the meagre attempts made to arrive at a description of the origin of [moral] feelings [. . .]. My endeavour to oppose decay and increasing weakness of personality. I sought a new *center*” (*KSA* 10:8 [14]; *WP* 417). His first attempts failed: “Thereupon I advanced further down the road of disintegration—where I found new sources of strength for individuals. We have to be destroyers!—” (*KSA* 10:8 [14]; *WP* 417). “Life itself,” Nietzsche had decided, “is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and, at least, at its mildest, exploitation [. . .]” (*BGE* 259). Exploitation “belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life” (*BGE* 259).

The preservation of the sick and the suffering indicates, for Nietzsche, “an eighteen hundred year effort throughout Europe to make a sublime abortion out of the human race” (*BGE* 62).⁴¹ Society is responsible for procreation and must pay for it; this entitles it to interference. “To this end it may hold in readiness, without regard to descent, rank, or spirit, the most rigorous measures of constraint, deprivation, and under certain circumstances, castration” (*KSA* 13:23 [1]; *WP* 734.) Thus a certain ferocity has succeeded what was originally heavy satire in the *Untimely Meditations*. To quote James Mensch, summarizing *BGE* 259,

In [Nietzsche’s] view, “to refrain from mutual injury, mutual violence, mutual exploitation, to equate one’s will with that of another,” is nihilistic. It is a “denial of life.” As a “principle of society,” it is “a principle of dissolution and decay.” Driving this point home, he writes that every social body “must, if it is a living and not a decaying body, itself do all that to other bodies which the individuals within it refrain from doing to one another: it will have to be the will to power incarnate, it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy—not out of any morality or immorality, but because it lives, and because life is will to power.”⁴²

4

To summarize, Nietzsche was engaged in a three-cornered argument. In one corner stood the traditional Christians with their commitment to the repression of sensuality as evil and sin, and their supernaturalism. In another corner were the agnostic or atheistic philosophers who wanted to assert, preserve, and even extend Christian values in the face of science, including Kant, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Strauss, and Spencer. In the third corner, there was Nietzsche himself, aesthetically repelled by the masses and their unhealthy propensities, distressed by the suffering of superior individuals, and hostile to traces of asceticism and Orientalism in his contemporaries.

In some respects, then, Nietzsche is a Darwinian. He believes that the history of humanity is part of natural history and that there is no sacred history as opposed to a history of sacerdotalism, and he believes (except in his idealist moments) that mental powers supervene on physical organization. Like Darwin, he believes that individuals vary in their intrinsic quality: some are superior to others. He is also much closer to the view of the modern, neo-Darwinian biologist than were the nineteenth-century Darwinians. It is the individual that matters to itself, regardless of the fate of the “species” to which it belongs. But he rejects the basic Darwinian picture, according to which all differences between members of the same species are necessarily minute and often invisible and at the same time cumulatively significant in the production of new “races” and ultimately, new species. He rejects as well the Darwinian postulate that altruism and self-abnegation are human traits acquired in the course of evolution and further refined in the highest forms of civilization, identifying instead an unnatural and sinister origin for them in archaic resentment.

Some aspects of Nietzsche’s rebellion against the Darwinism of his time are sympathetic. The conventionality and smugness of Strauss and the racism and belief in “duty, division of labour and the subordination of egoism to the social collective”⁴³ of Haeckel are repellent. Nietzsche’s criticisms of his contemporaries and his own longings cannot help but endear him to us somewhat. We do not want to live among or to be withered trees, and we can admire his appreciation of the unconscious, his scorn for ascetic pietism, and his reminders that we are energetic creatures with bodies. But apologetics for Nietzsche seem to me deeply unconvincing. His contempt for the masses and admiration for the superior, world-historical individual resist attempts to render them more wholesome. There is a documentable history of Nietzsche’s incorporation into the rhetoric and belief-system of National Socialism. According to Steven Aschheim, “In a spate of publications, Nazism was variously depicted as the realization of the Nietzschean vision, as crucially inspired by it, or as thematically parallel. . . . Nazism was, after all, a regenerationist, postdemocratic, post-Christian social order, where the weak, decrepit and useless were to be legislated out of existence.”⁴⁴ There is no documental history of Nietzsche’s incorporation into any truly admirable later philosophy whatsoever, unless one is prepared to make a case for Sartre’s or Bernard Williams’s Nietzscheanism as well as for their admirability as moral philosophers.

Arguing for a more sympathetic reading, Richardson describes Nietzsche as seeing us as caught between our natural drives and instincts and our adaptation to society. “It’s a common theme,” he says, “that ‘bodies know best’—that our intellect is a much less reliable guide to our interests than the drives built into us by our evolutionary past. [Nietzsche] wants, familiarly, to restore a ‘good conscience’ to our bodily drives and appetites, which often serve him as a touchstone for health. His stress on will to power and the value of our aggressive impulses

sounds like an effort to revivify naturally selected drives.”⁴⁵ Nietzsche, he goes on to say, wants to “redesign pity and altruism” by having us realize that they are selected for naturally or socially and that we must transcend this imprinting in order to choose them freely.⁴⁶ But Nietzsche does not follow the Darwinians who considered altruism to be a product of natural selection, as opposed to a manifestation of the power of the resentful weak acting en masse to curb the strong. And there is no reason to think that we would be right, in Nietzsche’s view, rather than confused, deluded, and perverse, freely to choose pity, altruism, or social equality rather than persistent hardness, culling of the weak, and a rank-ordered society. Set on the correct path, Nietzsche declares, in passages well known to every commentator, the perfection of mankind, “consists in the production of the most powerful individuals, who will use the great mass of people as their tools (and indeed the most intelligent and most pliable tools)” (*KSA* 12:2 [76]; *WP* 660). For all grand purposes and great wills require “a system of obedient and trained tools” (*KSA* 12:7 [1]; *WP* 666). Every enhancement of the type “man,” he says, again in passages familiar to all,

has so far been the work of an aristocratic society [. . .] a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and difference in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other. (*BGE* 257)

Nietzsche’s message is written clearly and there is no mistaking it: “When the spirit is rich and independent it most resists any preoccupation with morality” (*KSA* 13:14 [92]; *WP* 432). His determined opposition to womanly compassion, to leveling, to the protection of the weak, his obsessive harping on the entitlement of at least a few to resist and transcend morality and to affirm and preserve the values of cruelty, indifference, and hierarchy link him less to the gentle, biology-conscious primitivists like Rousseau and Herder than to anti-Enlightenment rebels like Joseph De Maistre, whose violence-, blood-, and sacrifice-steeped conceptual world shows some remarkable affinities with Nietzsche’s own.⁴⁷

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NOTES

1. Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation; or The Development of the Earth and Its Inhabitants by the Action of Natural Causes*, 3rd ed., 2 vols., trans. E. Ray Lankester (London: Henry S. King, 1876), 2:367.

2. David Strauss, *The Old Faith and the New: A Confession*, trans. Mathilde Blind (1872; repr., London: Asher, 1973), 278–80.

3. John Richardson appropriately devotes a number of pages to Nietzsche’s encounter with Spencer’s *Data of Ethics* in *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147–56.

4. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, 12. While his earlier "Nietzsche contra Darwin" furnished materials for the opposite case, here Richardson describes Nietzsche's thought as "deeply and pervasively Darwinian" (14). Richardson sees a role at the center of Nietzsche's philosophy for a Darwinian selection of animal drives, including the reproductive instinct.

5. Dirk Johnson, "Nietzsche's Early Darwinism: The 'David Strauss' Essay of 1873," *Nietzsche-Studien* 30.3 (2001): 62–79.

6. Dirk Johnson, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

7. Greg Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

8. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966); "David Strauss, The Confessor and the Writer," in *Thoughts Out of Season*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T.M. Foulis, 1909); *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); *Unpublished Writings*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1958), cited in the text as *WP*.

9. Haeckel, *History of Creation*, 2:366.

10. J. J. Winckelmann, *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Ancient Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (1755; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 32ff.

11. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man: And Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004 [1871]), 103.

12. Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Ethics*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Northgate, 1892–93).

13. Jacqueline Stevens, "On the Morals of Genealogy," *Political Theory* 33 (2003): 558–88, 560.

14. David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, 4th ed., 3 vols. (London: Chapman Brothers, 1846), 3:415.

15. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 3:418.

16. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 3:419.

17. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 3:438.

18. Strauss, *Old Faith and the New*, 230.

19. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 233ff.

20. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 259.

21. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 265.

22. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 272.

23. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 275.

24. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, 51.

25. Unlike a modern neo-Darwinian, Darwin was persuaded that acquired characteristics—habits, or use and disuse—were a source of variation for selection to act upon, perhaps because he considered it unscientific to suppose that variation could be random rather than law-governed and perhaps because his pangenetic theory of reproduction did not recognize any barrier between the gametes and the rest of the body.

26. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, 37–47.

27. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, 43.

28. Haeckel, *History of Creation*, 1:124.

29. Haeckel, *History of Creation*, 1:125.

30. Maudemarie Clark, "On Nietzsche's Darwinism," *International Studies in Philosophy* 39.3 (2007): 117–34.

31. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, 48.

32. Cf. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, 49.
33. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, 63.
34. Johnson, "Nietzsche's Early Darwinism," 67.
35. Strauss, *Old Faith and the New*, 274.
36. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 126.
37. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 154.
38. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 159.
39. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 159.
40. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 163.
41. My translation from the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 9 vols., ed. Giorgio Colli,azzino Montinari, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, and Karl Pestalozzi (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), VI 2:81.
42. James Mensch, "Nietzsche-Darwin: Confronting the Janus Head" (paper, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Program, Atlanta, GA, December 1993; Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Post-modern Thought, Ottawa, Canada, 1993), 6.
43. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, 9.
44. Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 239.
45. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, 168.
46. Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, 173–75.
47. Ferdinand Caussey, "The Theory of Sacrifice in Nietzsche and Joseph de Maistre," *Philosophical Forum* 40.2 (2009): 245–63.

