

Social Darwinism: a Socratic Dialogue

Introduction:

What is the import of evolutionary theory on the question of improving the social condition? Social Darwinism old and new, seeks to answer this, and to apply its insights.

I define Social Darwinism as any Darwinian thinking applied to society, particularly with regards to a search for the most valuable social arrangement(s). I aim to present a spectrum of Social Darwinian ideas as explored by important historical figures. In that sense, this is a history paper. But presenting them is not enough: I also wish to question these figures and have them dialogue, to get closer to the bottom of these matters. In that sense, this is a political philosophy paper. The hope is to disentangle the compelling ideas from the mistakes and open up paths for finding answers to our questions.

I propose a Socratic dialogue on the topic. Having the ideas literally dialogue seems to be just the solution. Below I introduce our principal speakers.

Prima facie, it appears Darwinian reasoning was applied to opposite ends. In the 1880s, classical liberals such as Herbert Spencer and then William G. Sumner and Andrew Carnegie used Darwinian reasoning to justify small government and *laissez-faire* economics. These classical liberals will be the voices that represent Historical Social Darwinism. Not two decades later though, eugenicists such as Charles B. Davenport, Paul Popenoe and Roswell H. Johnson (representative figures of Eugenics in the U.S.) used Darwinian reasoning to justify heavy government intervention in private relations.¹

¹ As Davenport put it: "society may take life, may sterilize, may segregate so as to prevent marriage, may restrict liberty in a hundred ways" (Davenport, *Heredity*, 267).

Darwin himself wrote on the question of improving the social condition, if only briefly, at the end of *Descent of Man*.² It is with him we will start. From there onward, we hope our good Socrates can unravel this mystery by dialoguing with the eugenicists and then the classical liberals. To help us along and tie the pieces together, Thomas Huxley will regularly drop in: he explored many of the ideas we are about to expose, as well as their failings and remedies, in his *Evolution and Ethics*. I find the analogies and examples he uses in the *Prolegomena* of his work to be particularly helpful. For want of space though, I cannot focus much on his own complex answer to how we should understand society as Darwinists.

With this explanation made, we can begin.

The dialogue:

Darwin: Advancing the welfare of mankind is a most intricate problem.³ Tis true, I worry that vices such as imprudence will propagate should we not restrict marriage between the imprudent: assuming such a vice can be inherited, it seems the imprudent, given their imprudence, will marry recklessly and rear as many offspring as possible, whereas those who are prudent will not do so. And so the imprudent may supplant the prudent.⁴ Thus I feel the draw towards Eugenics. However, I also worry mankind will fall from his supreme rank unless Man be subject to a continued struggle for existence; our rate of birth should not be too regulated and the most free competition must be allowed so that the most able succeed and rear the greatest offspring.⁵ Thus, I feel the draw towards the Social Darwinism of the liberals. However, I must

² Darwin, *Descent*, Vol. II, 403, 404.

³ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 403.

stress that evolution by natural selection is no longer the primary manner by which our moral sense is now developed: habits, reasoning, instruction and religion appear more important in our current state.⁶ Insofar as this is true, neither the proposals of eugenicists nor those of the liberals have all the answers. More than this I cannot say. And these public talks strain me so: I take my leave. My friend Huxley here will carry on in my stead. He has the tenacity of a true orator.

Huxley: Fear not, Mr. Darwin.

Socrates: Before us are a number of wise men who claim to have answers. Let us question them and see if they are not able to shed some light on the matter. I begin with the eugenicists. Mr. Popenoe and Mr. Johnson, you write that Eugenics is a constructive project: through Eugenics, humanity has the hope of ascending to a supposedly higher life.⁷ We might begin by asking how you plan to bring this about.

Popenoe & Johnson: First and foremost, we would put in place laws to restrict the intermarriage of physical, mental, and moral cripples that, under the state of nature, would have never survived.⁸ Besides marriage laws, we might pursue other negative eugenic policies that will discourage undesirables from proliferating.

Socrates: Do these undesirables form only a minority of the population?

P & J: We can suppose this.

Socrates: Then these measures on their own only prevent undesirable traits from becoming more prevalent than desirable traits, and so cannot be construed as constructive – it cannot lead to any ascension of humanity.

P & J: It must be conceded.

⁶ Ibid., 404.

⁷ Popenoe and Johnson, *Applied Eugenics*, 148, 150.

⁸ Ibid., 149.

Huxley: Indeed it must – what sort of a sheep breeder would he be who should content himself with picking out the worst fifty out of a thousand, leaving them on a barren common till the weakest starved, and then letting the survivors go back to mix with the rest?⁹

Davenport: This is precisely why Eugenics must be permitted to pursue much more intrusive policies. And in addition to precautionary policies of negative eugenics, we must pursue positive eugenics, encouraging those of highest character to leave the greatest number of offspring.¹⁰

Socrates: This may be so. But I have another question pertaining to the “standard of perfection” Mr. Popenoe and Mr. Johnson mention. You do not wish to set any uniform standard of excellence – you recognize this would have its problems. Instead you simply wish to favour those traits that are valuable in *any way*.¹¹

P & J: This is correct.

Socrates: Now imagine: in some situations it is valuable to have tall and bulky folk while in other circumstances it is valuable to have short and thin folk. These traits mentioned are all valuable so we should select for them, correct?

P & J: Yes.

Socrates: But an interbreeding between these people would yield offspring with perhaps none of the valuable traits (if the traits dilute) or perhaps a combination of traits that is not valuable (perhaps tallness and thinness).

P & J: As far as we know, that is correct.

⁹ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 57. This line is verbatim Huxley's.

¹⁰ For details on the methods of Eugenics, see Davenport, *Heredity*

¹¹ Popenoe and Johnson, *Applied*, 166.

Socrates: Then such interbreeding should be avoided? More generally speaking, insofar as some valuable traits are incompatible or only valuable in certain combinations, we should only permit the interbreeding of members of society that are valuable in similar ways?

P & J: Admittedly.

Socrates: In short then, eugenicists would have humans procreate such that we create different breeds of humans?

Huxley: Precisely – we are to have a pigeon-fancier’s polity,¹² in which we are both the pigeons and the fanciers.

P & J: Very witty...

Socrates: But now, as you well know, if different species arise through this same process that you wish to apply to humans (with the exception that here, we are the ones selecting the traits instead of nature) then these new human breeds will eventually lead to the creation of separate species. It appears that your Eugenics would not lead to any ascension of humanity but instead to the branching of humanity into different species.

(*aside* — Wells: This sounds eerily familiar... it seems the future is here.)

P & J: We may have to give up our constructive project. Nevertheless, limited negative eugenics, as we first suggested, will still produce a positive net value for society: by curbing the proliferation of wastrels, inefficients and cripples, we will be curbing the resources expended on these less valuable members of society. It would be against our moral sentiment to leave these undesirables to die, let alone eliminate them in cold blood¹³ – but we must guard against a multiplication of the cost society pays for accommodating them.¹⁴

¹² Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 47. Verbatim.

¹³ Popenoe and Johnson, *Applied*, 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 168, 172.

Huxley: This will be true *if* you can reliably extirpate *only* the *hereditary* criminals and the *hereditary* paupers. But how many of these are there? It seems obvious to me that more often than not, criminality and pauperism arise from a combination of the wrong circumstances with the possession of wrong traits; traits that, under other circumstances, might have led to a virtuous and admirable life. There is a great risk you might extirpate some of the endowed members of society.¹⁵ In fact, there exists not only the threat of losing valuable members of society but also the threat of loosening or entirely destroying the social fabric, should our program of extirpation be faulty.¹⁶

Davenport: This is precisely why I founded the Eugenics Record Office. We must indeed be as scientific as possible.

Huxley: I doubt this will be enough...

Spencer: Why take these risks when another solution is at hand? The survival of the fittest is the law that rules the animal kingdom. Why should it not apply to Man? Mightn't it lead to mankind's further ascension?

Socrates: It is time we turn to our friends the classical liberals. Let us question them about their proposals. I understand that you advocate for some form of intense and highly unregulated competition to take place between members of society – this will be our starting point. I will begin with the most influential of you: Mr. Spencer. I understand you are a staunch utilitarian, no?

Spencer: Correct.¹⁷

¹⁵ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ Weinstein, "Herbert Spencer", intro.

Socrates: You tell us that we cannot hope to reach the so-called social state unless we let a struggle for existence take place in society, correct?

Spencer: Indeed.¹⁸

Socrates: Your reasoning, I am told, goes roughly as follows. The individuals who have the greater capacity to perform utilitarian calculations and respect their results, sacrificing a small immediate gratification for a future great one¹⁹ – these individuals are more socially fit; their utilitarian results will supposedly agree with our moral rights, and thus their actions will better respect our moral rights, indefeasible rights justified on utilitarian grounds.²⁰ You further argue that these utilitarian calculations performed by the socially fit would eventually become utilitarian intuitions: thus they would intuitively respect our moral rights, leading only to a greater maximizing of utility.²¹ Continuing, you argue with some form of Lamarckian reasoning, that these utilitarian intuitions would become inheritable.²² And presumably the socially *unfit* would soon waste away in a struggle for existence – there would be a tendency for the socially fit to survive and spread. (Or, at the very least, groups with more individuals that are socially fit, would be the groups that win in competition with other groups and thus survive and spread).²³ Finally, the more socially fit there are, the closer humanity is to the social state. In addition, you claim that there are those who have *latent* social fitness who will raise themselves up and develop their fitness only if subjected to a struggle.²⁴

Spencer: This strikes me as accurate enough for our discussion.

¹⁸ Spencer, *Social Statics*, qtd. in *Man Versus the State*, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108. Verbatim.

²⁰ Weinstein, “Herbert Spencer”, §1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, §1, para 5.

²² *Ibid.*, §1, para 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, §1, para 3, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, §1, para 5.

Socrates: You say, however, that we have not yet arrived at the social state – presumably among us there are still those that are socially unfit and perhaps many that have only latent fitness.

Spencer: Correct,²⁵ and thus a struggle for existence between men is justified.

Socrates: Tell me though, is this social state a state of harmony?

Spencer: It must certainly be construed as such.

Socrates: To be subject to a severe struggle for existence, in competition with your fellow citizen for the means of *existence*, is presumably *not* a state of social harmony, correct?

Spencer: This is true. To the extent that the struggle for existence is justified, there is unfortunately a *normal* amount of suffering that *must* be endured so mankind might reach the social state.²⁶

Socrates: You would not have us move backwards though, into an outright war of all against all in which moral rights are respected by none, no? To the extent that the struggle is absent we should consider mankind as having made progress?

Spencer: This sounds reasonable. No doubt the struggle for existence I envision would be increasingly felt in the lower orders of society where there are presumably fewer socially fit. The progress towards the social state that I speak of, is the progress made *when the socially unfit traits disappear*. This is a natural process.²⁷

Socrates: Then progress has only been made insofar as the absence of a struggle in the higher orders *is due to the higher orders being composed primarily of socially fit*? Insofar as the absence of a struggle depends on the *total* social arrangement, which does not directly depend on

²⁵ Spencer, *Social Statics*, qtd. in *Man Versus the State*, 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

the laws of nature but instead on our policies, we cannot say progress has been made? In other words, to the extent that the struggle is absent due to how *all* members of society, fit or unfit, *depend on and interact with one another*, we cannot say progress has been made? Or finally, to the extent that the struggle is absent in the higher orders, *considered in isolation*, we can claim progress has been made?

Spencer: Tentatively, I will agree.

Socrates: But now, insofar as we are considering the group of socially fit in isolation from the group of presumably unfit, and supposing this unfit group lacks the means of existence while the other group has enough or more than enough, the two groups must be in an antagonistic relation. Are you proposing the socially fit go to war against the unfit? This appears to compliment your hypothesis on how utilitarian intuitions spread.

Spencer: Again, I will tentatively agree. Perhaps this is not so incorrect. Perhaps in some sense we *are* at war with the fundamentally unfit. Some states still execute their worst criminals and sentence others to lifetime imprisonment. Cannot these be construed as acts of war on the socially unfit, insofar as courts truly identify the fundamentally unfit?

(*aside* — Popenoe and Johnson: A war against the fundamentally unfit? This sounds like our negative eugenics.)

Spencer: ...We also mustn't forget that some in the unfit group are not fundamentally unfit: some have latent fitness that I believe only develops in a struggle to survive. Once these potentially fit have distinguished themselves, we should certainly not war with them but accept them into the fold of greater society. Warring with the socially fit is clearly against the general good: this is the opposite of social harmony.

Socrates: And how are they to distinguish themselves, these potentially fit? Recall, we are considering this group of currently unfit in isolation.

Spencer: I suppose they are to prove that they can band together and respect the moral rights of one another. They are to prove they possess the correct utilitarian intuitions.

Socrates: Consider where we have arrived. This means any group considered in isolation shown to band together in social harmony counts as a group of socially fit. This would include for example, a group of bandits loyal and true to one another. They must possess the correct utilitarian intuitions, having banded together harmoniously – we should reason that they only became outlaws due to their circumstances as part of greater society, just as Mr. Huxley put it.²⁸ Would it not be wise for society at large to remove the circumstances that drove this band of brothers to crime?

Spencer: I might agree with all this, in theory. But it is practice that concerns me...

Huxley: Let me, Herbert. The business of the moral and political philosopher appears to me to be the ascertainment, by the same method of observation and experiment practised in other scientific work, of the course of conduct that most effectively furthers the general good.²⁹ In the case of the bandits, the state has reason to remove the circumstances conducive to criminality and provide opportunities of reconciliation with society at large. But there is also motivation to limit government reach: we still wish to facilitate the free expansion of the innate faculties of the citizen. Both concerns should be respected insofar as they promote the general good.

Spencer: Well put Thomas. I believe that, having done our moral science, we will find that policies of limited government action are in fact the policies most conducive to our goal.

²⁸ See page 6.

²⁹ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 59. Almost verbatim.

Socrates: We will leave it hanging on that empirical question then, Mr. Spencer. I should like to speak with Mr. Sumner and Mr. Carnegie, who have a much looser notion of the “survival of the fittest”, I suspect. Let us begin with you, Mr. Sumner. You once stated mankind has but two options: liberty, inequality and a survival of the fittest; no liberty, but equality and a survival of the unfittest. Is this accurate?

Sumner: It is.³⁰ And to be clear, we classical liberals use “liberty” to refer to what some term “negative liberty”.³¹

Socrates: Understood. Now, I suppose you know something of Mr. Darwin’s theory. You know that what counts as the fittest here will depend on the environment, correct?

Sumner: Certainly.

Socrates: In society, Man’s environment is a social one, no?

Sumner: One could argue this.

Socrates: Then what counts as fittest will depend on the social environment we create, correct? For example, if we did not enforce private property laws, might we not become subject to the law of the highwayman? Bullies and ruffians, might be favoured in this unpoliced environment, no?

Ward: A fine question Socrates!

Socrates: I have you to thank for the example, Mr. Ward.³² Now, what is Mr. Sumner’s answer?

Spencer: I can answer for him. We classical liberals do not recommend a non-existent government – but an extremely limited government that only protects our moral rights to life and

³⁰ Sumner, *Challenge of Facts*, 90.

³¹ For more see Carter, “Positive and Negative Liberty”

³² Ward, “False Notions of Government”, 371.

equal liberty.³³ We should consider the highwayman as infringing on the liberty of the passerby: the highwayman poses as an unjust obstacle to the passerby (unjust, on utilitarian grounds).

Sumner: Quite right. The state will guarantee this equal liberty. And by ensuring this correct notion of liberty, we will foster the fiercest and freest competition such that only the most capable members of society rise to occupy the highest offices, reducing costs to the lowest terms³⁴ in all departments.

Carnegie: Well said. To frame this in economic terms, with a protection of private property we guarantee a free market. This free market will regulate itself such that the most economically fit, survive. Those that spend poorly will lose in the economic arena. It's true, this gives rise to great inequality which generally creates friction between the rich and the poor,³⁵ but this is the most economically efficient arrangement. And when the economy is most efficient, we improve the material conditions of all. Thus this arrangement is in everyone's interest.³⁶

Zola: If by "survival of the fittest" you mean the "prospering of the frail, fat and licentious", then I could not agree more. Get a taste of these bourgeois pigs from my delightful "Pot-bouille".

(*aside* — Davenport: So eugenics might be of use... but on the upper class?)

Socrates: Sharp as always Mr. Zola! You have a point though, and I believe Mr. Carnegie will recognize it. These wealthy at the top, we hope, are people that will do good with what they have earned, no? You yourself condemn men who hoard large sums that could be put to use for the good of society.³⁷ If it is clear the money could work good to the community,³⁸ why can the community not force the rich to use the money to this end?

³³ Weinstein, "Herbert Spencer", §3.

³⁴ Sumner, *Challenge of Facts*, 90.

³⁵ Carnegie, "Wealth", 654.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 655.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 659.

Carnegie: I agree the wealthy should be encouraged to dispose of their wealth for the good of community, encouraged for example, by taxing large estates left at death.³⁹ But they are not to be forced.

Sumner: What if we were to say that, by not *enforcing* such a policy, society provides a material incentive for the most capable to take the highest roles? By granting them riches, we favour their ascent.⁴⁰

Socrates: Perhaps this is true. But insofar as monetary and crudely material incentives only foster and attract the greedy and the pleasure seekers, this justification is limited.

Carnegie: What if we were to say that, by enforcing such measures we would be infringing on the liberty of the wealthy. You would take away what they have earned. This prosperous society of individualism is built upon the sacredness of property.⁴¹

(*aside* — Spencer: I would have said the *usefulness* of private property laws.)

Socrates: Then you will have a dilemma, Mr. Carnegie. You must either renounce your strict interpretation of the right to private property, or you must renounce your notion of liberty that keeps the highwayman behind bars. If you consider, on utilitarian grounds, that the highwayman unjustly restricts the liberty of the passerby, then you must consider the rich man who hoards resources in a socially useless manner, to unjustly restrict the liberty of those who could benefit from these resources. If the path to a public library is blocked by nothing other than a rich man's avarice, how is he different from a highwayman on the road?

(*aside* — Spencer: Again Socrates, you may have a point. But ultimately, this is an empirical matter: perhaps in practice, leaving the rich to their own devices is better.)

³⁸ Ibid., 659. Verbatim.

³⁹ Ibid., 659. Verbatim.

⁴⁰ Sumner, *Challenge of Facts*, 90.

⁴¹ Carnegie, "Wealth", 656. Verbatim.

Huxley: Let me resolve this. I think we can agree, there is no true “survival of the fittest” being advocated here, simply because nearly all members survive and leave offspring. *Ipsa facto*, a true struggle for *existence* is at end.⁴² What is often called the struggle for existence in society, is a contest, not for the means of existence, but for the means of enjoyment.⁴³ I agree with Mr. Carnegie and Mr. Sumner though: we may justify such a struggle for the means of enjoyment to the extent that it places in the important social roles, those who are endowed with the largest share of energy, industry, intellectual capacity, tenacity of purpose, *while they are not devoid of sympathetic humanity*.⁴⁴ But this struggle has no real resemblance to that which adapts living beings to current conditions in the state of nature; nor any to the artificial selection of the horticulturist,⁴⁵ breeder, or eugenicist. This struggle for the means of enjoyment will not be totally unregulated of course: we will need to restrain the highwayman and create conditions that strongly favour the ascent of those endowed with virtuous character – and of course we must do away with any artificial arrangements by which fools and knaves are kept at the top of society instead of sinking to their natural place at the bottom.⁴⁶ This process of creating the right conditions, strengthening the social bond and arresting the struggle for existence between men, is what I term the ethical process.⁴⁷ And, I might agree with Mr. Sumner and Mr. Carnegie, insofar as inequalities appear in the state with the strongest social bonds, we can accept inequalities. Thusly construed, we might accept Sumner’s original claim: Herbert’s nuanced notion of liberty, a common sense notion of inequality and a prospering of the fittest do appear to go together.

⁴² Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 54. Verbatim.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 57. Verbatim.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 58. Verbatim, italics my own.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58. Verbatim.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 58. Verbatim.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54. Almost verbatim.

Spencer: Well said Thomas, only, instead of talking of “state with the strongest social bonds” I would talk of the state with a maximal general utility. But I haven’t the time to elaborate this view.

Rawls: Excuse me, if I could get a word in...

Socrates: By all means, join us!

Rawls: It sounds like you’re all getting at something like my difference principle, except I justified it on an argument from the initial position.

Huxley: I take your point Herbert, and yours, too Mr. Rawls. We might make our justifications on different grounds. What seems clear however is that the import of evolutionary theory on social arrangements, *can* be made sense of. Following my horticultural analogy, our nature, a social nature, has arisen from the natural process and we must learn about our nature so as to create the conditions in which it flourishes...⁴⁸

Spencer: ...or the conditions in which the greatest utility is achieved...

Rawls: ...or the conditions that are considered most fair from the initial position.

Socrates: Your wisdom is remarkable, my fine friends! You will surely illuminate much more for me: I still have many questions. For those who hastily claimed to have answers – I am thinking of the eugenicists, as well as Mr. Carnegie and Mr. Sumner – I suggest you examine your claims a little more closely.

⁴⁸ I admit, I’m making Huxley sound Aristotelian, probably against his will. However, I believe his horticultural analogy is conducive to an Aristotelian view. We might say I’m running with his analogy further than he intended. I believe it leads to interesting places – I believe Virtue Ethics can be complimented by a meta-ethics provided in part by evolutionary theory.

Conclusion:

I hope to have shown Historical Social Darwinism and Eugenics were not solely compilations of hasty generalizations and category mistakes.

Huxley rightly interprets Eugenics as an application of the principles of breeding to humans. It advocated maintaining a state-engineered pressure at a *biological* level. Very charitably construed, it has some pull insofar as it can restrict (or at least discourage) the propagation of inherited anti-social or crippling traits, if any truly exist and we can reliably identify them.

Very charitably construed, the Social Darwinism of Sumner and Carnegie advocated maintaining a state-engineered pressure at a *social* level that supposedly favoured the ascension of members most capable of handling important social positions. Thus their proposals were orthogonal to those of the eugenicists. They thought that the laws fostering a relatively simple struggle for the “means of enjoyment”, as Huxley puts it, were the laws that constituted the right conditions. To my knowledge, their recommendations were too simplistic.

Spencer’s Social Darwinism was significantly different, despite often being lumped with that of Carnegie and Sumner. Most notably Spencer advocated for maintaining a true struggle for existence, a *hands-off* pressure being exerted at the *biological* level, such that the socially unfit, those without correct utilitarian intuitions, would be disfavoured and pressured out. As interesting and reasonable as his ideas are, we cannot forget he relied on a now antiquated Lamarckian theory of inheritable traits. Furthermore, any recommendations he gave based on empirical data from his time, are no doubt out of date.

Of course, historically speaking, these matters were not well worked out and led to many evils.

A conflation of the natural struggle for existence and the social struggle for luxuries, was the worst blunder of Social Darwinists like Carnegie and Sumner; repeatedly⁴⁹ they naturalized products of artificial social arrangements. Though these artificial social arrangements can be understood, in some sense, as themselves being products of nature insofar as “the gardening of men by themselves”⁵⁰ is natural, Sumner and Carnegie naturalize artificial arrangements to the effect of claiming the arrangements (and its products) are immutable and inevitable for mankind – clearly in opposition with the notion of a *self*-arrangement of humans. The point is a fine one, their confusion, understandable: it is within our nature to arrange ourselves, and it might even be within our nature to arrange ourselves in certain ways – but insofar as we have agency and it is a *self*-arrangement, we will have to *choose* an arrangement. By hastily claiming certain arrangements are not options, Sumner and Carnegie are hastily claiming to have identified certain limits of our agency. I believe their claims were mistaken. Or, in more theoretical terms, after we have done our moral science, as defined by Huxley and Spencer, I believe we will find that the ethical process is multiply realizable, that there is an objective multiplicity of good social arrangements, which very well might include arrangements Sumner and Carnegie dismissed.

We can accuse the eugenicists of not waiting for the science to be completed (the mechanisms of inheritance were unknown) and we can accuse them of improperly assessing the risks involved in their proposals. We can accuse them of hastily assuming that the “undesirable” traits (a severely confused term in itself) were not treatable or manageable in any kind of practical way. But their greatest folly was assuming we could apply the principles of *breeding* to

⁴⁹ Examples: Of millionaires, Sumner says they are “a product of natural selection” (Sumner, *Challenge of Facts*, 90). Of drunkards he says: “A drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be. Nature is working away at him to get him out of the way, just as she sets up her processes of dissolution to remove whatever is a failure in its line” (Sumner, *Forgotten Man*, 480). Of possibly substituting Individualism with Socialism or Communism, Carnegie says “it necessitates the changing of human nature itself — a work of aeons” (Carnegie, “Wealth”, 656).

⁵⁰ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, 58

humanity and still maintain our social fabric, let alone justifying such breeding ironically on the heavily anthropocentric grounds that we might ascend some imaginary organic scale of greatness.

It is a pity these misguided authors did not study Huxley's excellent *Prolegomena*. I hope to have shown that remarkably, in one prologue, Huxley flagged all the potential pitfalls that I have mentioned, well before any mistakes were made. There is only one minor conflation we might accuse Huxley of: at certain times in his horticultural analogy, he places the pressures advocated by Carnegie and Sumner on the same level as the pressures advocated by the eugenicists. According to his phrasing on page 58,⁵¹ we are to understand the eugenicist's pressure as the pressure of direct selection, while the pressures of Carnegie and Sumner, as environmental pressures. This may or may not be true, but in any case Huxley's choice of words here fails to grasp the fundamental difference. I like the garden analogy and believe it only needs a small amendment. I propose we think of the eugenicist as the gardener who is breeding his flowers to shape the species as he sees fit; while on the other hand, a Social Darwinist like Huxley who advocates for some finely crafted struggle for the means of enjoyment, is to be thought of as the gardener who accepts a certain species the way it is and simply wishes to nurture the flowers, such that individually and collectively they flourish.

And what knowledge will the gardener muster to cultivate his flowers? What wisdom does the statesman require to craft those nurturing conditions? Among other things, they both need to know about the nature of their subjects, flower or human. Thus does Huxley show us the import of evolutionary theory on our problems: insofar as it illuminates our nature, it will help us

⁵¹ This is the passage: "To return once more, to the parallel of horticulture. In the modern world, the gardening of men by themselves is practically restricted to the performance, not of selection, but of that other function of the gardener, the creation of conditions more favourable than those of the state of nature; to the end of facilitating the free expansion of the innate faculties of the citizen, so far as it is consistent with the general good."

cultivate ourselves with wisdom. If this is still unsatisfying, still too abstract, I can point out at least one mystery evolutionary theory might demystify: explaining the origins of human morality. To explain this is to broach meta-ethics, I am convinced: we would be partly uncovering the nature of morality and how we should think of moral theory.

I know many are skeptical that evolutionary theory will have great import on these fields. Caution is certainly warranted – the scars of Historical Social Darwinism and Eugenics are vivid reminders of the risks involved. I hope to have made a compelling case that we can and should learn from the mistakes of historical thinkers, but that we should not throw out their questions: there is still fruitful inquiry to be had on the topic of evolutionary theory, Huxley's ethical process and the flourishing of homo sapiens.

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