



## TOPIC 8.2. SOCIAL DARWINISM

Supplement to Chambers, *The Western Experience*, Chapter 25: European Power, pp. 897-900.

<b>SOCIAL DARWINISM</b>	SOCIAL DARWINISM, a popular belief in late Victorian England and America, stated that the strongest or FITTEST SHOULD SURVIVE and flourish in society, while the weak and unfit should be allowed to die. The theory was chiefly developed by HERBERT SPENCER, whose ethical philosophies always held an elitist view and received a boost from the application of Darwinian ideas such as adaptation and natural selection.
<b>Herbert Spencer</b>	Herbert Spencer, the father of Social Darwinism as an ethical theory, thought in terms of elitist "might makes right" views long before Darwin published his theory. However, Spencer quickly adapted Darwinian ideas to his own ethical theories. The concept of ADAPTATION allowed him to claim that the rich and powerful were better adapted to the social and economic climate of the time, and the concept of NATURAL SELECTION allowed him to argue that it was natural, normal, and proper for the strong to thrive at the expense of the weak. After all, he claimed, that is exactly what goes on in nature every day. However, Spencer did not just present his theories as placing humans on a parallel with nature. Not only was survival of the fittest natural, but it was also MORALLY CORRECT. Indeed, some extreme Social Darwinists argued that it was morally incorrect to assist those weaker than oneself, since that would be promoting the survival and possible reproduction of someone who was fundamentally unfit.
<b><u>Justified:</u> Colonialism, Military Exploits, and Oppression</b>	Social Darwinism was used to justify numerous trends that had dubious moral value. COLONIALISM was seen as natural and inevitable, and given justification through Social Darwinian ethics. People saw natives as being weaker and more unfit to survive, and therefore felt justified in seizing land and resources. Social Darwinism applied to military action as well. The argument went that the strongest MILITARY would win, and would therefore be the most fit. Casualties on the losing side, of course, were written off as the natural result of their unfit status. Finally, it gave the ethical nod to brutal colonial governments who used OPPRESSIVE TACTICS against their subjects.
<b>Capitalist Exploitation</b>	Social Darwinism applied to a social context too, of course. It provided a justification for the more EXPLOITATIVE FORMS OF CAPITALISM in which workers were paid sometimes pennies a day for long hours of backbreaking labor. Social Darwinism also justified big business' refusal to acknowledge labor unions and similar organizations, and implied that the rich need not donate money to the poor or less fortunate, since such people were less fit anyway.
<b>Eugenics</b>	In its most extreme forms, Social Darwinism has been used to justify EUGENICS programs aimed at weeding "undesirable" genes from the population. Such programs were sometimes accompanied by sterilization laws directed against "unfit" individuals. The American eugenics movement was relatively popular between about 1910-1930, during which twenty-four states passed sterilization laws and Congress passed a law restricting immigration from certain areas deemed to be unfit. Social Darwinist ideas were also applied by the Nazi party in Germany to justify their eugenics programs.
<b><u>Favorable Effects:</u> Discouraged Handouts, Encouraged Philanthropy</b>	Not all Social Darwinists were quite so extreme. In fact, the early Social Darwinists, who regarded the theory as a logical extension of laissez-faire capitalism, would have been appalled at the use of the concept to promote state-run eugenics programs. Though its moral basis is now generally opposed, Social Darwinism did have some favorable effects. Belief in Social Darwinism tended to DISCOURAGE WANTON HANDOUTS to the poor, favoring instead providing resources for the fittest of all walks of life to use, or choosing specific, genuinely deserving people as recipients of help and support. Some major capitalists, such as Andrew Carnegie, COMBINED PHILANTHROPY with Social

<p><b><u>Philosophical Error:</u></b> <b>Naturalist Fallacy</b></p>	<p>Darwinism. He used his vast fortune to set up hundreds of libraries and other public institutions, including a university, for the benefit of those who would choose to avail themselves of such resources. He opposed direct and indiscriminate handouts to the poor because he felt that this favored the undeserving and the deserving person equally.</p> <p>Social Darwinism's philosophical problems are rather daunting. First, it makes the faulty assumption that <b>WHAT IS NATURAL IS EQUIVALENT TO WHAT IS MORALLY CORRECT</b>. In other words, it falls prey to the belief that just because something takes place in nature, it must be a moral paradigm for humans to follow. This problem in Social Darwinist thinking stems from the fact that the theory falls into the <b>NATURALISTIC FALLACY</b>, which consists of trying to derive an “ought” statement from an “is” statement. For example, the fact that you stubbed your toe this morning does not logically imply that you ought to have stubbed your toe. The same argument applies to the Social Darwinists' attempt to extend natural processes into human social structures.</p>
<p><b>Social Darwinism v. Darwinism</b></p>	<p>Many negative reactions to Darwinism come from the confusion of Darwinism as a scientific theory with Social Darwinism as an ethical theory. In reality, the two have very little in common, aside from their name and a few basic concepts, which Social Darwinists misapplied. Unfortunately, much of today's opposition to the application of Darwinian thinking to human behavior comes from a fear of Social Darwinism and its implications for today's moral codes. However, Social Darwinism is based on a logical fallacy, and does not really follow from Darwinian thinking in any way.</p>
<p><b>ONLINE RESOURCES</b></p>	<p>For more information on this topic, explore one or more of the following online resources:</p> <p><a href="#">Modern History Sourcebook: Herbert Spencer: Social Darwinism, 1857</a>: Excerpts from Spencer's famous work.</p> <p><a href="#">Does Evolution Make Might Right?</a> Addresses the philosophical error inherent in social Darwinism.</p> <p><a href="#">"Self-Made Men" and Social Darwinism</a>: Challenges the myth of the “Self-Made Man.”</p> <p><a href="#">Student Essays on Social Darwinism</a>: Various perspectives on Spencer's theory.</p>
<p><b>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</b></p>	<p>Drawing on the resources you have had an opportunity to explore (textbook, course documents, online resources, library resources), answer one or more of the following questions:</p> <p><b>How does social Darwinism characterize the evolution of a society?</b></p> <p><b>How was Social Darwinism used to provide a justification for both social conservatism and social reform?</b></p> <p><b>How does social Darwinism "naturalize" global inequality?</b></p>