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Social Darwinism Educational Materials

In this essay, Bradley C.S. Watson gives an introduction to Social Darwinism and its relation to earlier ideas about natural law. The biological theories of Darwin cast into question long-cherished ideas about the human race and led many people to doubt the reliability of traditional arguments about human society. John Dewey and other Social Darwinists attempted to put sociology and politics on a scientific footing by thinking about them in terms of natural selection. Like an organism, they argued, society must grow and develop or die, and just as in Darwin's *Origin of Species*, this growth and development could take place only in an environment of adaptation and change. Old philosophical ideas based on putatively permanent and universal truths needed to be discarded in favor of this new philosophy. For the Social Darwinists, traditional thinking about natural law was irrelevant in a scientific age; the purpose of political philosophy would no longer be to discover first principles or ethical rules, but to develop practical solutions to concrete problems. In the source readings associated with this section, you will be able to compare the ideas of the Social Darwinists and consider their implications for society and for morals. As you read, try to determine how these thinkers relate to each other, and how they set up their arguments in opposition to the tradition of natural law thought.



[Print](#)

JOHN DEWEY

John Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1859. As an undergraduate at the University of Vermont, he was first exposed to the evolutionary theory that later shaped his own philosophy. His time as a Ph.D. student at Johns Hopkins University introduced him to Hegelian idealism and its organic model of nature (that nature grows continually to surpass checks on its progress). Dewey's later work exposed this philosophical model to scientific methodology, the usefulness of which he first discovered through American experimental psychologist G. Stanley Hall.

After completing his doctorate, Dewey taught at the University of Michigan for ten years. He published two works that arose out of his background in idealism: *Psychology* (1887) and *Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding* (1888). In 1894, Dewey moved to Tufts University for the second post of his academic career. There he developed a theory of knowledge that accorded with pragmatism, a new American philosophical movement. His work was published by his students and colleagues as *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903). At this time Dewey also founded a laboratory school, where he put his expanding theory of education into practice. His research allowed him to publish *The School and Society* in 1899.

Taking up his final academic position in 1904 at Columbia University, Dewey began to write on the relationship between his theory of knowledge and metaphysics. His continued publications in the fields of philosophy and education theory paralleled one another. 1910 saw the release of [The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought](#) and *How We Think*, and in 1916 he published *Essays in Experimental Logic and Democracy and Education*. In his later years at Columbia, Dewey became a leading public commentator on a number of issues, including women's suffrage and teacher unionization. His frequent lectures were published in several book collections throughout the 1920s. After he retired in 1930, Dewey spent the final years of his life producing a large body of work, including the final form of his logical theory, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Some of his other works from this period include *Art as Experience* (1934), *A Common Faith* (1934), *Freedom and Culture* (1939), and his *Theory of Valuation* (1939). Dewey died in June 1952.

To read more about Dewey's life and works, please click [here](#).

WOODROW WILSON

Woodrow Wilson was born in Staunton, Virginia on December 28, 1856. His father was a slave-owning Presbyterian minister who sympathized with the confederacy. Wilson did not learn to read until age 10, or later. He graduated from Princeton University in 1873, received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in Political Science in 1885 and began an academic career, teaching at Bryn Mawr College and Wesleyan University, where he coached the football team.

Wilson joined the faculty of Princeton University in 1890, eventually moving through the ranks to become President of the University in 1902. He ran for Governor of New Jersey in 1910 on a progressive platform, and was nominated as the democratic candidate for President in 1912. He won, and after a first term, he ran for re-election on a non-interventionist platform, promising to stay out of World War I. Within the first year of his second term, however, Wilson asked Congress to declare war, and the United States joined the British and French on the western front. After the war, Wilson advocated an international treaty organization, the League of Nations, as outlined in his famous "Fourteen Points". The League was a failure, Wilson died in 1924, and the second World War began in 1939.

To read more about Woodrow Wilson, click [here](#).



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anachronism:

something belonging to a different period of time.

Aristotle:

(384 – 322 B.C.) a Greek philosopher whose thought had an enormous influence on later understandings of nature. For more information, please see the section of this website on "[Aristotle on Natural Law and the Founders](#)."

consequentialism:

the theory in ethics that the rightness or wrongness of an act depends only on its consequences. See also [UTILITARIANISM](#).

Dewey, John:

(1859 – 1952) an American philosopher and psychologist whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform. He was a leading proponent of the school of thought called "pragmatism," and was greatly influenced by the Darwinian revolution.

Darwin, Charles:

(1809 – 1882) an English naturalist whose 1859 book *On the Origin of Species* marked a revolution not only in the natural sciences, but in the human sciences of political philosophy and sociology as well.

dilate:

to expand, to expand upon

Hegelian:

having to do with the thought of G.W.F. Hegel (1770 – 1831), a German philosopher who developed a comprehensive theory of the progressive force of history.

inexorable:

unstoppable, impossible to prevent

Plato:

(c. 428 – c. 348 B.C.) a Greek philosopher whose influence has been felt in almost every area of philosophy. For more information on Plato and his relationship to the natural law tradition, please see the section of this website on "[Platonic Philosophy and Natural Law](#)."

stasis:

permanency, absence of change

Sumner, William Graham:

(1840 – 1910) one of the first American sociologists. As a Social Darwinist, he advocated for free-market capitalism and stressed the importance of competition in society.

utilitarianism:

the doctrine that morality is determined by the greatest good of the greatest number

Ward, Lester Frank:

(1841 – 1913) an early American sociologist who emphasized the importance of achieving social progress through laws and government programs. He believed that rational sociological analysis could contribute to policies that would eliminate almost all social ills.



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I. Late 19th-century America witnessed a major change in political thought as the political theories of the [American Founders](#) were replaced by the ideas of Social Darwinism.

II. Social Darwinism

A. Darwin's theory of natural selection was reinterpreted as an explanatory tool for all fields of knowledge, including such human sciences as politics, history, and law.

B. Social Darwinists generally shared six viewpoints:

1. There are no fixed or eternal principles stemming from natural law or natural rights that govern, or ought to govern, the politics of a decent regime.
2. The state is like a Darwinian organism constantly struggling for survival and growth. There is no such thing as a "natural end" for a state.
3. Openness and experimentation are essential for the vigorous growth of the state; new developments should be judged on consequentialist or utilitarian grounds.
4. The state exists only in history, which is to be understood as an inexorable process, rather than a mere record of events.
5. Some individuals stand outside of this process and act to clear the path for historical progress.
6. Morality is relative to one's moment in history; there are no absolute standards.

III. John Dewey, representative of the Social Darwinists of the early 20th century, argued that Darwinian concepts provided a solution to age-old political problems.

A. Dewey argued that the scientific theory of Darwinism had effected a revolution of thought, allowing thinkers to “get over” questions that had plagued philosophy for centuries.

1. Darwinism, he argued, replaced traditional philosophy’s emphasis on fixed, permanent truths with an understanding that all reality is based on change and development. Philosophers should aim not to discover unchanging principles, but to master techniques of adaptation and survival.
2. Material facts, rather than moral principles, must be the basis of any empirical political science. Science should be concerned not with essences, but with particular facts.

B. Dewey argued that Darwin had broken down the boundaries between philosophy and the scientific method.

1. [Aristotle](#)’s belief that different beings required different modes of consideration was abandoned.
2. The Social Darwinists believed they had reintegrated philosophy and natural science by reducing philosophy to the study of empirical processes without concern for the ends or essences of things.
3. There was, therefore, no real distinction between human and non-human sciences.

IV. Dewey’s thoughts on social Darwinism were a synthesis of ideas that were dominant in his time. The idea that society must either change and grow, or die, and that change is always to be preferred over stasis, had a great influence on legal and political thought in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



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I. Basic Interpretation

If you are interested in learning more about Social Darwinism after reading Watson’s essay, please go to the [Primary Source Documents](#) to read some of the texts mentioned in the essay. Biographies of John Dewey, and Woodrow Wilson are also available. As you go back to the primary sources, keep in mind the following questions:

1. Apart from its impact on biology, why was Darwin’s *Origin of Species* a revolutionary book?
2. What does “Social Darwinism” have in common with Darwin’s original theories?
3. Why did the Social Darwinists think it was necessary to reject almost all traditional moral reasoning?
4. In the Social Darwinists’ texts, how do they demonstrate their intention to put thought about history and law on a “scientific” footing?
5. After rejecting traditional political reasoning, how do the Social Darwinists propose to go about making political and legal decisions?
6. What is Lester Frank Ward’s critique of Social Darwinist thought? Would he have considered himself a social Darwinist?
7. Why does William Graham Sumner deny that ethics have a role in politics?
8. How does Social Darwinism reduce philosophy “from the wholesale to the retail level,”

according to John Dewey?

II. Connections to Other Thinkers

In order to understand Social Darwinism, it is important to place it in its proper context. Social Darwinists made a conscious break with the political and legal thought of the past, whether rejecting earlier ideas outright or interpreting them in Darwinian terms. As you learn more about Social Darwinism, consider how it interacts with the ideas of earlier and later thinkers.

1. John Dewey [writes](#) very dismissively of traditional moral and political thought, claiming that theorizing about the natural law is “a confession of inability to master the courses of things that specifically concern us.” This argument should put you in mind of the arguments of Callicles in [Plato’s Gorgias](#), who argues that morality and law are ideas devised by the weak and powerless to assert control over reality. Do John Dewey and the other Social Darwinists really mean to argue for such a “genealogy of morals”? Do they agree with one another on the illegitimacy of moral arguments? Defend your conclusions with reference to the primary sources.
2. Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan*, advances the idea of the state as a single organism, with the ruler and the subjects constituting its various parts. Many Social Darwinists similarly describe the nation as an organism. In your reading of the Social Darwinist thinkers in this section, do you see any similarities to Hobbes’s thought? Is the resemblance merely superficial, or are there correspondences between [Hobbes’s](#) theories about the sovereign and the Social Darwinists’ about the nation?
3. Political thinkers who discuss *raison d’état*, such as [Machiavelli and Guicciardini](#), generally argue that a state is permitted, or even obliged, to do whatever is necessary for its survival and prosperity. Social Darwinists likewise argue that nations are obliged to grow and develop constantly. “[Reason of state](#),” however, mainly referred to the decisions of rulers, while the Social Darwinists concerned themselves with the life of the whole people. Did the Social Darwinists merely propose a “democratized” version of *raison d’état*, or does their Darwinist thinking bring something fundamentally new to their understanding of history and politics?
4. [Oliver Wendell Holmes](#) infamously defended compulsory sterilization for “feeble-minded” persons in the case of [Buck v. Bell](#), contending that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.” In this, he was influenced by the thought of the Social Darwinists, with their emphasis on maintaining a healthy gene pool in society. Are involuntary sterilization, and other coercive means of altering a nation’s racial stock, natural consequences of a Social Darwinist viewpoint, or is this an extreme extrapolation of the Social Darwinists’ arguments? In your opinion, what might the Social Darwinists discussed in this section have to say about the judgment in *Buck v. Bell*?
5. It is characteristic of the Social Darwinists to engage in sweeping dismissals of all earlier moral and political thought, as when Lester Frank Ward [declares](#) that “philosophy has always been negative and nihilistic, and has always antagonized the common sense of mankind.” What does Ward mean by his description of earlier philosophy as “negative and nihilistic”? Is this description accurate? Many of the thinkers discussed on this website claimed that their philosophy was soundly based on common sense, and was an accurate guide to understanding and to action. How might they engage with Ward’s characterization of their thought?
6. William Graham Sumner [describes](#) moral opinion as “an opinion that a usage is favorable to welfare.” Aristotle similarly argued that what was virtuous for man was what promoted human flourishing. Yet Sumner is very clearly not an Aristotelian. What are the differences in worldview that cause [Aristotle](#) and Sumner to reach such different conclusions about morality and politics, starting from such a similar definition? Can these views be reconciled?

7. The Social Darwinists placed great emphasis on the importance of progress. [Progressivists](#), however, typically argue that progress is necessary on account of some moral rule: that justice or equality demands a change in social structures. How is the “progress” advocated by Social Darwinists like and unlike the goals of progressives? What issues might they agree or disagree on?
8. W.E.B. Du Bois founds his argument against racist laws on the premises of Social Darwinism. He does not appeal to any inalienable rights that men of all races share, but he argues that, empirically, no race is inferior to any other. Compare this to the arguments for racial equality advanced by figures such as [Abraham Lincoln](#) and [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), who based their arguments on claims about a universal law. Compared to these, what advantages and disadvantages do you think Du Bois’s arguments have?

III. Critical Interpretation

With a basic understanding of the Social Darwinists, let us examine their ideas more critically. Can society and law be accurately described in Darwinian terms? Are the methods of the natural sciences useful for political and legal thought? Are there implications of Social Darwinism of which its proponents may not have been aware? Use the questions below as a guide:

1. In “[The American Code](#),” Sumner describes what he believes to be the essential values of the American people, including “the rights of conscience, the equality of all men before the law, the separation of church and state, religious toleration, freedom of speech and of the press,” etc. Traditionally, Americans have argued that these values are either self-evident, or are rooted in sound moral and political principles: that is to say, these values are not merely popularly accepted, but generally valid also. Do Sumner’s Social Darwinist ideas allow him to defend these American views, or is he limited to stating that they have found wide acceptance in America? How might Social Darwinists go about arguing for or against a given moral or political value? Do their principles allow them to make such arguments?
2. Sumner [argues](#) that there are no universally valid political principles, but rather “views which prevail, at a time, for a while, and then fade away and give place to other views.” At the same time, he seems to argue that the Social Darwinist view of man and of society is the accurate one. In his view, is Social Darwinism also a view that will “fade away and give place to other views,” or is it true at all times and places? Why might Sumner not consider Social Darwinism to be as provisional and temporary as other political views?
3. Lester Frank Ward argues in [Mind as a Social Factor](#) that other Social Darwinists have been wrong to treat society and human life as a purely biological and material phenomenon. Our mental life as humans, he argues, puts us in a special category as rational beings. Analysis of human life, he argues, must take mind into account. Despite this, Ward is anxious to assert his belief in a Darwinist view of the world. Is his position tenable? Does Ward’s concept of mind differ from that of earlier theorists? If so, how? Has Ward reintroduced “metaphysics” into our understanding of politics?
4. Social Darwinism is based on the idea that the scientific conclusions of Darwinism have philosophical implications; that, after Darwin, all science and philosophy must be remade in a Darwinian form. John Dewey, for example, believes that Darwin has eliminated “permanency” from knowledge, and that universal, timeless truth must now be acknowledged to be an impossibility. Do you think this position can validly be inferred from Darwin’s claims? Did the Social Darwinists exaggerate the implications of the theory of evolution? In your opinion, can a Darwinian explanation of human origins be reconciled with a concept of natural law?
5. One of the themes of Social Darwinism is an insistence that human life and the life of human communities are natural processes that can be studied like any other. Almost all

the Social Darwinists discussed in this section, however, believe that Social Darwinism supports some social arrangements more than others. If Social Darwinism is merely a way of describing and predicting empirical features of society, how can it support policy recommendations like Sumner's call for laissez-faire economics? Do you think there are any hidden moral and political principles in the Social Darwinists' thought?

6. Aristotle argues that an understanding of what is right for man can be derived from an understanding of the sort of thing man is, and therefore that natural law is derived from an understanding of nature. The Social Darwinists believe that their Darwinian science has given them an insight into nature that was not available to previous generations of thinkers. On a traditional understanding, a deeper understanding of nature ought to imply a deeper knowledge of the natural law. Why do the Social Darwinists argue that this is not the case?

IV. Connections to Contemporary Concerns

At the opening of the twentieth century, Social Darwinism was a prominent school of thought that had a great impact on our country's laws. Even today, Darwin's theory of natural selection and its philosophical implications continue to create controversy. Let us now turn to some contemporary issues that may shed light on Social Darwinism and its legacy in our society:

1. In recent American history, there has been a perennial debate over the legitimacy and efficacy of social welfare programs, in which some argue that the state has a responsibility to look after its citizens' needs, and others argue that the state has no right to do for people what they ought to do for themselves. Some Social Darwinists argued that welfare programs were illegitimate because, by preserving members of society that could not preserve themselves, they allowed unfit members of society to survive, bypassing the law of the survival of the fittest that the Social Darwinists believed was the mechanism behind all progress. Do you see traces of Social Darwinism in some contemporary arguments about welfare? Do you think the Social Darwinists' argument ought to be taken seriously, or is it too heartless to deserve our attention?
2. Throughout American history, proponents of social and political change have generally made an effort to cast their proposals in terms of generally accepted values and ideals. How might a Social Darwinist explain this? Is idealist language merely a smokescreen to hide the struggle for dominance that motivates all politics, as some Social Darwinists might suggest? Are there elements in American politics that seem to defy the claims of the Social Darwinists?
3. Social Darwinists generalize a rule from biology to serve as a general principle by which to interpret history. Just as animals struggle to survive and dominate their environment, so also political institutions, races, and ideals struggle for control of the world. Does it follow from this argument that nations should work to spread their culture, ideals, and government as broadly as possible? Can the spread of American culture around the world, and American efforts to establish democracies in other countries, be explained in terms of Social Darwinism? Do you think such an explanation tells the whole story?
4. The basic insight of Social Darwinism is that society and politics ought to be understood in the model of organisms' struggle to survive. In nature, however, the struggle to survive is often brutal, and takes place in the absence of any regulating principles or laws. Consider for a moment what a social system based on Social Darwinism would look like. Some Social Darwinists, like Lester Frank Ward, did not advocate society's emulation of the brutal competition of nature. Is there an inherent tension between the tenets of Social Darwinists and the advocacy by some of its followers for social engineering to solve social problems? In your opinion, what changes to our common understandings of law and politics would be necessary in order to bring them into line with the worldview of the Social Darwinists?

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