

Darwin, Evolution, Charity, and the Moral Questions of Industrial Society

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Introduction

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution changed scientific understandings of life, but it also became entangled with debates about poverty, charity, industrialization, heredity, and social policy. Some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers attempted to apply biological ideas such as natural selection and the "survival of the fittest" directly to human society. These applications sometimes produced harsh arguments against public welfare, medical treatment, disability support, and assistance for people living in poverty.

However, evolutionary biology, social Darwinism, and eugenics are not identical. Darwin developed a scientific explanation for how populations change across generations. Social Darwinists transferred selected biological concepts into economic and political arguments about competition, poverty, and government intervention. Eugenacists then claimed that society could be improved by controlling human reproduction. Although these traditions overlapped historically, they must be distinguished carefully.

Darwin's own writings also contain tensions. He sometimes used the hierarchical and prejudiced language common among Victorian intellectuals, and parts of *The Descent of Man* raise serious ethical concerns. At the same time, Darwin argued that sympathy, cooperation, and concern for vulnerable people were among humanity's most important evolved moral qualities. He did not define charity simply as a method of controlling poor people, nor did he recommend abandoning those who required medical or social support.

The history of evolutionary thought also began long before Darwin. Ancient writers such as Lucretius speculated that some forms of life survived while others disappeared. Later naturalists proposed changing species and historical development in nature. Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace made the decisive scientific contribution by developing natural selection as a mechanism that could explain adaptation and biological diversity.

These ideas influenced education, literature, politics, and responses to the Industrial Revolution. George William Hunter's 1914 biology textbook demonstrates how evolutionary language could be mixed with eugenics and racial hierarchy. William Blake's poetry, by contrast, questioned a mechanical view of nature and presented creation as mysterious, dynamic, and spiritually charged.

How Did Darwin Define Charity?

Darwin did not provide a formal definition of charity as “offering opportunities to the less fortunate.” Nor did he divide charity systematically into public assistance provided by government and private assistance provided by individuals. That distinction belonged to wider Victorian debates about welfare, poverty relief, philanthropy, and the Poor Laws.

Darwin’s most relevant discussion appears in *The Descent of Man*, where he examines sympathy and the moral instincts. He argues that social animals develop instincts that encourage them to remain together, protect one another, and perform services for members of their group. In human beings, intelligence, memory, language, social approval, and habit gradually expand these social instincts into a moral sense.

Darwin therefore understood assistance to vulnerable people as an expression of sympathy. He believed sympathy had developed from the social instincts that helped groups survive and cooperate. As human moral awareness expanded, sympathy could extend beyond close relatives and immediate communities to strangers, people from other societies, and even animals.

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin discusses what he calls “the aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless.” He recognizes that medical care, asylums, welfare, and other forms of assistance enable people to survive who might otherwise have died. Yet he insists that human beings could not suppress sympathy “without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature” (Darwin, 1871/2004, p. 159).

This qualification is essential. Darwin did worry that the preservation of people whom Victorian society regarded as physically or mentally “weak” might affect future generations. Such statements reflect the limited knowledge of heredity and the discriminatory assumptions of his period. Nevertheless, he did not conclude that society should abandon sick, disabled, or poor people. He believed that the moral damage caused by destroying compassion would be worse than the supposed biological consequences of preserving vulnerable lives.

The claim that “impulsive charity” controlled poor people and prevented misconduct is more closely associated with nineteenth-century charity-organization movements and social-Darwinist debates than with Darwin’s own definition. Some reformers criticized unplanned giving because they believed it encouraged dependency or attracted people they described as vagrants. They advocated organized investigation and supervised assistance. These attitudes influenced Victorian and Progressive Era welfare systems, but they should not automatically be attributed to Darwin.

Darwin’s position is therefore morally complicated. He accepted some troubling assumptions about heredity and human difference, but he also considered sympathy a fundamental part of human moral development. His argument cannot accurately be summarized as opposition to helping vulnerable people.

Where Did the Idea of Evolution Come From?

Evolution is the scientific understanding that populations of organisms change across generations and that different species share historical relationships through common ancestry. It should not be defined merely as a process through which species become more complex.

Evolution does not have a fixed goal. It does not always produce greater complexity, intelligence, size, or moral superiority. Natural selection favors inherited characteristics that improve reproductive success within a particular environment. A simpler organism that is well adapted to its environment is not biologically inferior to a more complex organism.

Ideas resembling evolution appeared long before Darwin. Some ancient Greek philosophers speculated that nature changed over time. Empedocles proposed that different combinations of body parts had arisen, with viable forms persisting while unsuccessful forms disappeared. Ancient atomists explained natural events through matter and motion rather than continuous supernatural intervention.

However, many influential ancient philosophers supported the permanence of species. Aristotle's biological philosophy generally treated species as stable forms reproduced through generations. Medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers also debated creation, generation, natural causation, and the historical appearance of living organisms, but these discussions did not produce modern evolutionary biology.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European naturalists increasingly investigated fossils, anatomy, geographical distribution, classification, embryology, and the history of Earth. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, considered whether environmental conditions could alter species. Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather, speculated that living things might share common ancestors.

Jean-Baptiste Lamarck later proposed a developed theory of species transformation. Lamarck argued that organisms changed through use and disuse and passed acquired characteristics to their descendants. Although his proposed mechanism was largely incorrect, he helped establish the idea that species had histories and could change.

In 1844, Robert Chambers anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, which popularized a progressive account of development in nature. The book prepared many Victorian readers to consider the possibility that species were not permanent.

Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace independently developed the theory of natural selection. Both recognized that organisms produce more offspring than can survive, individuals vary, and some variations affect survival and reproduction. When advantageous characteristics are heritable, they become more common over generations.

Darwin's major achievement was not inventing the general idea that life changes. He developed an extensively documented mechanism that could explain adaptation, diversification, and common descent. His *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, transformed earlier speculation into a powerful scientific research program.

Did Lucretius Describe Survival of the Fittest?

The Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius lived during the first century BCE. His poem *De rerum natura*, commonly translated as *On the Nature of Things*, presents Epicurean philosophy in poetic form. It explains nature through atoms, material processes, and natural causes rather than constant divine intervention.

Lucretius did not use the phrase "survival of the fittest." The philosopher Herbert Spencer coined that phrase in the nineteenth century after reading Darwin's work. Darwin later adopted it as an alternative description of natural selection.

Nevertheless, Lucretius offered an early account of differential survival. In Book V of *On the Nature of Things*, he imagines that the young Earth initially produced many unusual forms of life. Some lacked the physical characteristics necessary to feed themselves, reproduce, avoid danger, or survive. These forms disappeared because they could not continue their kind.

Other animals persisted because they possessed strength, speed, cunning, or traits that enabled them to live and reproduce. Some domesticated animals survived partly because human beings protected them in exchange for labor, food, transportation, or companionship.

When older translations refer to "races" that disappeared, the word generally means kinds, breeds, or species of organisms. Lucretius was not arguing that certain human racial groups should depend upon the mercy of supposedly superior people. Interpreting the passage as a hierarchy of human races seriously distorts the text.

Lucretius's account resembles natural selection because it recognizes that viable forms persist while forms unable to survive or reproduce disappear. However, it is not equivalent to Darwin's theory. Lucretius did not possess modern knowledge of inheritance, population variation, geological time, ecology, or common ancestry. His argument was a philosophical explanation of why malformed organisms were not still present in nature.

The comparison is historically valuable because it shows that people had considered selective survival long before Darwin. Darwin's originality rested in the systematic evidence and explanatory mechanism he provided, not in being the first person to notice that some organisms survive while others do not.

Did Darwin Believe That Medical Care Harmed Humanity?

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin observes that civilized societies attempt to protect their vulnerable members. He mentions institutions for people with physical or mental impairments, laws supporting poor people, medical treatment, and vaccination against smallpox.

Darwin then considers a biological consequence. If people with serious heritable conditions survive and have children, characteristics that natural selection might once have removed can remain within the population. He compares this process, somewhat uncomfortably, with the selective breeding of domesticated animals.

This passage has often been quoted to portray Darwin as believing that treatment of disease and disability should end. That interpretation leaves out the conclusion of his argument. Darwin explicitly states that sympathy for the vulnerable cannot be suppressed without damaging humanity's highest moral qualities.

Darwin therefore describes a perceived tension between biological selection and moral civilization. Medicine changes which people survive, but compassion is itself part of human evolution. A society that intentionally allowed people to die for the sake of supposed biological improvement would sacrifice the social instincts that made moral life possible.

It is also important to recognize how scientifically outdated Darwin's assumptions were. Victorian thinkers had little understanding of genetics, the complex causes of disability, environmental influences on illness, or the ways different traits are inherited. Terms such as "weak" and "inferior" combined medical judgments with class prejudice, ableism, racism, and moral condemnation.

Modern biology does not divide humanity neatly into biologically superior and inferior groups. A characteristic may be disadvantageous in one environment and neutral or beneficial in another. Many medical conditions are influenced by numerous genes and environmental factors. Human worth cannot be calculated through reproductive fitness.

Darwin's passage should therefore be studied critically. It contains ideas that later eugenicists could exploit, but it also contains a clear defense of sympathy and care.

How Did George William Hunter Promote Eugenics?

George William Hunter's *A Civic Biology Presented in Problems* was published in 1914. It became historically famous because John Scopes used a later version while teaching evolution in Tennessee

before the 1925 Scopes trial.

Hunter's textbook did more than explain biological evolution. It incorporated early twentieth-century eugenics, racial hierarchy, public health, heredity, and social reform. It presented human populations as though they could be managed through principles similar to those used in breeding domesticated animals.

The textbook claimed that society contained so-called good and bad families. It portrayed people with intellectual disabilities, criminal records, alcoholism, illness, or poverty as hereditary burdens. Hunter suggested that the reproduction of people classified as unfit should be prevented, while supposedly healthy people should select healthy marriage partners.

Hunter also presented a racial hierarchy in which white Anglo-Saxons were placed above other human populations. These claims reflected scientific racism rather than valid evolutionary biology. Modern genetics shows that race is not a biological ladder of separate human types. Human genetic variation does not support the ranking of races promoted in Hunter's book.

The textbook's discussion of eugenics demonstrates how scientific authority can be misused. Social problems such as poverty, crime, illness, or limited education were attributed largely to inherited biological defects. This approach ignored working conditions, unequal schooling, discrimination, housing, nutrition, public health, and political exclusion.

Eugenicists often described coercive interventions as beneficial to society. Their proposals contributed to marriage restrictions, institutionalization, immigration controls, and compulsory sterilization laws. People with disabilities, poor people, racial minorities, immigrants, and women considered socially unacceptable were disproportionately targeted.

Hunter did not merely explain the "survival of the fittest." He converted a biological concept into a social policy that judged some people worthy of reproduction and others unworthy. That application was ethically destructive and scientifically unsound.

What Were the Negative Effects of the Industrial Revolution?

The Industrial Revolution transformed production, transportation, agriculture, technology, and global commerce. It eventually contributed to rising productivity, increased availability of goods, medical innovation, and higher living standards in many industrialized societies. However, its early stages imposed severe costs on workers and urban communities.

Child Labor

Factories and mines employed large numbers of children because they could be paid less than adults and assigned to work in small or dangerous spaces. Children frequently worked long hours that limited their education and exposed them to machinery, dust, physical injury, and exhaustion.

The scale of child employment eventually produced demands for legal reform. Britain's Factory Act of 1833 prohibited factory employment for children under nine and limited working hours for older children, although even the permitted hours would be considered excessive today.

Dangerous Working Conditions

Industrial workers operated machinery with few safety protections. Factories were often poorly ventilated, noisy, crowded, and contaminated with dust or chemicals. Mine workers faced explosions, collapsing tunnels, polluted air, and chronic illness.

Workers had limited bargaining power, employment protection, or compensation for injuries. Long shifts and physical fatigue increased the likelihood of accidents.

Urban Overcrowding and Disease

Industrialization encouraged rapid migration from rural areas to expanding cities. Housing construction frequently failed to keep pace with population growth. Working-class families lived in crowded buildings with poor drainage, limited clean water, and inadequate waste disposal.

These conditions encouraged outbreaks of cholera, typhus, tuberculosis, and other diseases. Government records on Victorian industrial towns identify overcrowding, pollution, poor drainage, and the absence of effective sewerage as central urban problems.

Environmental Pollution

Factories burned large amounts of coal, producing smoke and harmful air pollution. Industrial waste and human sewage contaminated rivers and drinking water. Mining altered landscapes and exposed communities to toxic substances.

The environmental effects extended beyond immediate industrial centers. Industrialization established patterns of fossil-fuel consumption and resource extraction that continue to influence contemporary environmental problems.

Economic Inequality

Factory owners and investors could accumulate substantial wealth, while many employees received low wages and experienced insecure employment. Economic growth did not benefit all social groups equally.

The dependence of workers on wages made families vulnerable to unemployment, illness, injury, and fluctuations in the economy. Women and children were often paid less than adult men for demanding work.

Disruption of Family and Community Life

Factory schedules replaced many rhythms associated with agricultural and craft production. Workers were required to follow the clock and the demands of machinery. Families sometimes worked in different locations or depended on the wages of children.

Industrialization did not destroy every traditional community, but it altered household relationships, work patterns, and social identities. These changes encouraged new labor movements, political reforms, unions, and campaigns for public health and education.

How Did William Blake's View of God Differ From Deism?

William Blake's poem "The Tyger" uses the language of a forge. The speaker asks about the "hammer," "chain," "furnace," and "anvil" involved in creating the tiger. These images compare creation to the dangerous and skillful work of a blacksmith.

However, Blake does not simply define God as a blacksmith. The metaphor emphasizes the terrifying energy, courage, artistry, and power required to create a creature that is both beautiful and destructive. The poem repeatedly asks questions rather than giving a final theological answer.

"The Tyger" is closely connected to Blake's "The Lamb." The lamb represents innocence, gentleness, childhood, and Christ, while the tiger represents experience, power, violence, energy, and fear. Blake asks whether the same creator could have made both creatures.

This vision differs from conventional deism. Deism generally holds that reason and observation of nature are sufficient to establish the existence of a creator. In its familiar form, the deistic God establishes the universe and its laws but does not continue to intervene through miracles, revelation, or providential action. The universe operates like a well-designed mechanism after its creation.

It would be more accurate to say that the deistic creator withdraws from active involvement than to

say that God “vanishes.” The creator continues to exist but does not regularly interfere with the natural order.

Blake opposed the reduction of God and nature to a distant designer and a mechanical universe. His religious imagination was visionary, personal, symbolic, and dynamic. He believed that divine reality was encountered through imagination, creativity, human relationships, spiritual perception, and the continuing drama of creation and redemption.

Blake was also critical of religious institutions when they used doctrine to suppress imagination, sexuality, freedom, or compassion. He was neither a conventional church theologian nor a deist. His Christianity was highly individual and often challenged orthodox interpretations.

The blacksmith imagery in “The Tyger” therefore expresses a creator actively shaping a powerful and mysterious world. The poem confronts readers with a difficult theological question. How can the source of innocence also create violence and terror?

Unlike a simplified deistic model, Blake’s creator is not detached from creation. Divine energy remains present within the world’s beauty, danger, imagination, and contradictions.

The Difference Between Darwinism and Social Darwinism

The questions about charity, eugenics, industrial poverty, and the survival of the fittest reveal why Darwinism must be distinguished from social Darwinism.

Darwinian evolution describes biological change. It does not tell societies what they morally ought to do. Natural selection can explain why a trait spreads, but it cannot establish whether an action is fair, humane, or desirable.

Social Darwinists often treated competition as a moral law. They argued that poverty demonstrated weakness, wealth demonstrated fitness, and government assistance interfered with natural progress. This reasoning commits what philosophers call the naturalistic fallacy by moving directly from claims about nature to conclusions about morality.

Disease, hunger, violence, and death occur in nature, but their existence does not make them morally good. Medicine interferes with natural disease processes, yet few people consider this a reason to reject medical care.

Darwin himself recognized that civilization transforms natural selection. Human beings create laws, hospitals, schools, and systems of mutual assistance. These institutions are not necessarily opposed to evolution because cooperation and sympathy are also parts of evolved human behavior.

Hunter's eugenics represents a particularly dangerous form of social Darwinism because it converted assumptions about hereditary fitness into coercive policies. Blake's poetry, by contrast, resists a purely mechanical understanding of life by emphasizing imagination and moral mystery.

Conclusion

Darwin did not define charity simply as an opportunity offered to less fortunate people or as a strategy for controlling the poor. He understood assistance to vulnerable people primarily through the evolved human capacity for sympathy. Although he worried that medicine and welfare might preserve characteristics considered hereditarily harmful, he insisted that suppressing compassion would damage the noblest part of human nature.

The idea of evolution developed over many centuries. Ancient philosophers, Lucretius, Enlightenment naturalists, Lamarck, Chambers, Darwin, and Wallace all contributed to debates about change in nature. Darwin's distinctive achievement was explaining evolution through natural selection and supporting the theory with extensive evidence.

Lucretius anticipated the idea that forms unable to survive or reproduce would disappear, but he did not use the phrase "survival of the fittest" or present a theory of human racial superiority.

George William Hunter's textbook applied evolutionary language to eugenics and racial hierarchy. It promoted the false belief that social problems could be solved by preventing people classified as unfit from reproducing. This history demonstrates that scientific concepts can become dangerous when transformed into unsupported moral and political judgments.

The Industrial Revolution generated enormous economic and technological change, but it also produced child labor, dangerous workplaces, urban overcrowding, pollution, disease, and inequality. These conditions encouraged debates about charity, public responsibility, labor protection, and social reform.

William Blake offered a very different response to the age of mechanism. In "The Tyger," he imagined creation through the fire and tools of a blacksmith. His God was not simply the distant designer of deism but a mysterious and active creative power present within innocence, danger, beauty, and human imagination.

Together, these subjects show that scientific descriptions of nature cannot replace ethical reasoning. Evolution can explain aspects of human development, but it cannot determine the value of a human life or society's obligations toward vulnerable people.

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