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## Darwinian Evolutionary Theory and Constructions of Race in Nazi Germany: A Literary and Cultural Analysis of Darwin's Works and Nazi Rhetoric

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Darwinian Evolutionary Theory and Constructions of Race in Nazi Germany: A Literary and Cultural Analysis of Darwin's Works and Nazi Rhetoric

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An Honors Thesis Submitted  
for partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors in  
English from Hamline University

April 17, 2017

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## **Acknowledgments**

First, I would like to thank Dr. Kristina Deffenbacher for her mentorship during my time at Hamline and her contributions to this work. Without her encouragement, support, and feedback this project could not have been nearly as successful.

I would also like to acknowledge the English Department and the professors who have helped me to develop as both a writer and researcher and the Biology Department for providing me with a deep knowledge of biology, particularly evolutionary theory, that contributed my understanding of Darwin's texts and to this work. In addition, I would like to thank both the biology and English departments for their support of my broad and interdisciplinary interests.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends—especially Tim and Stacy Wollmuth and Austin Conery—for their support and willingness to listen to my ideas as they developed from the beginning to final stages of this work.

**Abstract**

First published in 1856, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* is one of the most impactful scientific writings in history. While the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on historical events has been widely studied, no single work of scholarship has previously combined close reading of *Origin's* representations of "race" with analysis of how those constructions of "racial" difference are (mis)translated across the cultural discourses of the eugenics movement and Nazi Germany. Through comparative cultural studies and close literary analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Darwin's works—including *Origin*, *Descent of Man*, and *Voyage of the Beagle*, this paper examines how evolutionary theory and Darwin's work have been (mis)applied to and used to defend the differentiation of groups and the human social construct of race. The influence of Darwin's evolutionary theory on eugenic policies in Nazi Germany is evident, yet close examination of *Origin* shows that Darwin's theories were often inaccurately applied. While Darwin does point to the elimination of inferior species in nature over vast periods of time, the Nazis pulled this idea out of the broader context of Darwinian theory, ignoring aspects that complicate and contradict their invocation of evolutionary discourse. Not only does Darwin outline the importance of diversity within species through his theory of divergence of character, but he also credits nature as a superior mechanism of selection, particularly when compared to human attempts to cause evolutionary change. The murder of Jews and other "undesirable" groups in Nazi Germany is one of the most well-known instances of genocide in history; it provides one example of the ways scientific ideas have historically been skewed and used to promote a social agenda. By acknowledging the potential for misapplication of scientific work, scientists and all people should be reminded to examine closely the nature of justifications for social and political policies.

## Introduction

The potential influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on the eugenics movement of Nazi Germany has been identified by a number of scholars, and there is certainly a great deal of evidence that supports this interpretation. However, the relationship between these discourses is complex. The connections between Darwinism and Nazism are debated today in both academic and popular circles. Many blogs and forums explore the relationship between Darwinism and Nazi German eugenic and racial policy. These popular sources tend to take on extreme viewpoints, ranging from blaming Darwin's theories for the holocaust to entirely exonerating Darwin from any influence at all. Additionally, while a number of historians have explored this question, they rarely engage in close reading of Darwin's texts. This paper explores the complicated relationship between these discourses and relies on close reading to explore both the connections and misalignments between Darwinian evolutionary theory and the eugenics policies of Nazi Germany.

First published in 1859, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* is arguably one of the most influential and well known works of scientific writing in history. Although the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on historical events, from European colonization to the Nazi program of mass genocide, has been widely studied and written on, no single work of scholarship has combined close reading of *Origin's* various representations of "race" with a comparative analysis of how those specific constructions of "racial" difference were mistranslated across multiple cultural discourses and in Nazi rhetoric in particular. This research aims to do that close analysis and integrative work, and thereby contributes to both the literary

studies and cultural histories of *Origin of Species* and its impact—specifically on understandings of race—to this day.

Charles Darwin is viewed as the father of evolution. Although Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had previously proposed that organisms evolve from simple to complex over time, *Origin of Species* provided an answer to the question of what mechanisms cause evolutionary changes to occur. Darwin proposed that within a species the individuals with the traits best adapted to a given environment will survive to pass on these traits to the next generation and called this phenomenon Natural Selection. Every species also undergoes what Darwin referred to as Divergence of Character, that is, a diversification of characteristics to allow a species to survive in a wider variety of environments and thereby reproduce and raise their population numbers. Darwin's theory drew support from many scientists, including Thomas Huxley, John Hooker, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Earnest Haeckel, despite its moral implications. Today, the concepts of Natural Selection and Divergence of Character are core theories in biology, commonly used in many facets of the field, and are applied to living organisms ranging from single-celled prokaryotes to vertebrates.

Darwin did not secure his place in scientific history without conflict. Shortly after the publication of *Origin*, the moral implications of Darwin's work were the subject of concern by naturalists, political figures, and religious figures alike (Weikart, *Darwin to Hitler* 1). Unlike previous work that had outlined the theory of evolution, *Origin* was respected as a “serious work of science” even by those who rejected the theory of evolution itself (Hull 262). Nevertheless, moral concerns about and social implications of Darwin's work continued to be at the center of its reception by the public. As historian and philosopher of science John Durant asserts, “Darwin's evolutionary writings were capable of any number of different interpretations, and

they were pressed into service of a great variety of intellectual and social interests. It is these interests, rather than Darwin's original claims, or the internal logic of his writings, which give meaning to the debate on social Darwinism" (qtd. in Crook 30). A major proponent for the application of evolutionary ideas to social structures in addition to the natural world was the well-known sociologist Herbert Spencer, who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest."

Shortly after the publication of *Origin*, the question of how these theories might apply to human populations arose. Historically, in contexts ranging from European imperialism to eugenics, this tendency to apply Darwin's core theories to society has extended to justifications of racial violence and genocide. In an attempt to defend Darwin's theory in his 1893 essay "Evolution and Ethics," Huxley pointed out that the idea that evolution was directly connected to morality had "risen out of the unfortunate ambiguity of the phrase 'survival of fittest'. 'Fittest' has a connotation of 'best'; and about 'best' there hangs a moral favour" (501), pointing to the influence Spencer and his book *Principles of Biology* were to have on the reception and future human applications of Darwin's work.<sup>1</sup>

Across much of modern Western history, biology has been used as a justification for racial prejudices through attempts to encourage the view that race is a "natural" part of society rather than a culturally constructed one (Nealon and Giroux 192-93). The publication of Darwin's *Origin* brought broad attention to evolutionary theory and increased scientific backing for the idea that biological differences between and within species exist. However, as Kenan Malik points out, "Darwinian man ... was not manufactured by Darwinian theory. He already existed in Victorian culture, whether in the theories of Herbert Spencer and Henry Maine, or in

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<sup>1</sup> At Alfred Russel Wallace's suggestion, Darwin inserted the phrase "survival of the fittest" in his fifth edition of *Origin* as a synonym for the term "natural selection" (Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian* 89).



the novels of Emile Zola and George Eliot. What Darwin did was to give him a scientific cloak” (qtd. in Moore and Desmond lvi).

The idea that Africans, Australian aboriginals, and indigenous Americans were “savages” who needed to be civilized for humanitarian reasons was a common nineteenth-century justification for British colonization of Africa and beyond. One could read in Darwin’s assertion that “civilized” nations would beat out “savage” ones as strongly pointing to the connection made between evolution and colonialism at the time (Byrd 13). In such ways, the language of Darwin’s texts can easily be compared and extended to the language of colonialism. As anthropologist Pat Shipman points out, “It was the age of imperialism and most non-Europeans were regarded, even by Darwin, as ‘barbarians’” (19). In fact, Europeans typically viewed colonialism and the civilizing of “cannibals” and “savages” as humanitarian and as a way to save such people from themselves. Even if the Europeans could not “tame” them all, civilizing even one justified imperial intervention “because a soul [would] be saved” (Brantlinger 3).

Well before the publication of Darwin’s theory, from about 1790 to 1830, the idea that racial differences were naturally determined became strongly entrenched in British thought (Brantlinger 5). It was such conceptions of race that led the Victorians to categorize all humans hierarchically, including themselves. They, “the imperial race,” conquered and colonized, but consider themselves to be humane “Anglo-Saxons” (Brantlinger 19). In England, concern about the overpopulating poor, the fitness of workers, and the growing belief that progress and civilization worked to counteract “natural selection” led to a great deal of anxiety about racial degeneration in the 1860s. As Brantlinger describes the belief, in human society

the effectiveness of Darwin’s evolutionary mechanism diminished or perhaps ceased to operate altogether.... [S]avage costermongers and paupers within the

gates of civilization threatened to overrun it. This happened because civilization reversed the formula of “survival of the fittest”: it encouraged the unfit to overpopulate, while it did nothing to encourage the fit to keep pace. (19)

Even before Darwin published *Origin*, Spencer was exploring the concept of evolution. Spencer argued that human society progresses from simple to complex structures and that evolution is the result of competition between races rather than individuals (Jackson and Weidman 77, 97).<sup>2</sup> However, Spencer’s work was later influenced by Darwin as well. In fact, Spencer’s term “survival of the fittest” was used to describe how the theory of Natural Selection applied to culture and society. Spencer’s work played a role in the rise of social Darwinism. The term “social Darwinism,” the belief that societies, classes, and races are both affected by and a result of natural selection, can be traced back to the 1870s or early 1880s (Crook 29). Although the idea of social Darwinism had existed previously, by the early twentieth century many scientists began to consider the scientific implications of evolution and natural selection in the context of the human race.

When combined with the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in the 1900s, evolutionary theory and the desire to “improve” the human race resulted in the rise of eugenics (Crook 227). This principle of attempting to alter the evolutionary process through encouraging breeding of individuals with “desirable” traits and discouraging breeding among individuals with “undesirable” ones was prominent in the early twentieth century. In fact, the application of Darwinian evolutionary theories to humanity is often blamed for the rise of eugenics. However, evolutionary theory itself had already been adapted to different sociopolitical contexts; after

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer’s beliefs are in some ways more similar to Lamarckian evolutionary theory, centered on the belief that organisms evolve from simple to complex over time, than Darwinian evolutionary theory. However, Spencer was influenced by both theories.

Darwin's work was originally published and integrated into society, other scientists modified and added their own ideas to it. One prominent evolutionary biologist was Ernst Haeckel, who during the late nineteenth century extended scientific thought into ideas about government and social policy based on Darwinism (Shipman 92). However, even Haeckel's science was socially charged. To him, race was not a regional subdivision of a species or a group with shared variations in phenotype or genotype as it is defined by some scientists today. To Haeckel, race was determined by cultural difference between nationalities, tribes, or ethnic groups which he connected to biological differences (Shipman 102). Shipman describes Haeckel's work as a "sinister devolution of Darwin's theory" (69). The work and influence of scientists such as Haeckel contributed to worldwide adoptions of eugenics.

British scientist and explorer Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the term "eugenics," from the Greek root meaning "good in birth" or "noble in heredity." Galton believed that both physical features and mental ones were inherited and wondered if the principles of plant and animal breeding could be applied to humans (Kevles 45). Beginning in the 1920s and into the mid 1930s, eugenics were at their peak, accepted by many scientists worldwide (Crook 231). The practices of eugenics varied geographically, but eugenics became a "shared language" among areas that were radically different—focusing on population, quality, territory, and nation. Eugenic practice on humans ranged from sterilization, contraception, and segregation to treatment of infertility and public health. In extreme cases, it involved euthanasia of the disabled or infanticide (Levine and Bashford). By the early 1930s, some scientific journals like *Discovery* and *Nature* cut ties from eugenic and social planning scientists, and *Nature* began to publically advocate for "socially responsible science." By the late 1930s, most scientists had rejected eugenics, but some groups still hoped to achieve a more perfect human race (Crook 239).

While most of the world began to distance themselves from eugenics, the Nazi party remained invested in human “improvement.” German society was influenced by Darwin’s publication of *Origin* just as much of Europe had been, and by the end of the nineteenth century Darwinism had become important in German science and culture. Racial science, which often included Darwinian rhetoric, was dispersed and accepted by wider audiences (Weikart, *Darwin to Hitler* 195). During the early twentieth century German scientists were publishing at least thirteen scientific journals devoted primarily to “racial hygiene” and had established over 30 institutions devoted to “racial science” (Bergman 41).

As the debate over race grew, the Aryans’ racist views of the Jewish people began to influence legislation. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws, which discriminated against Jewish people, were enacted. Eventually, the German oppression of Jewish people led to segregation and genocide. In 1939, Nazis forced the Polish Jews into ghettos, and by 1941 they had begun the systematic killing of Jews in death camps. The influence of eugenics in Germany was strong; abortion was legalized in the case of “hereditary illness” in 1935, and by 1939 it was legal to euthanize the disabled (Weikart, *Ethic* xxi). The genocide of Jewish people, individuals with disabilities, and other “undesirable” groups in Nazi Germany is arguably the most well-known instance of eugenic-influenced mass genocide in history. As with many eugenic policies, social Darwinism significantly contributed to its rise and justification, and some scholars such as linguist Andreas Musolff have called Nazi racism “a special, vicious variant of Social Darwinism” (32).

However, the role of evolution and Darwinism in the Nazi party is debated by a number of historians. Historian George Mosse asserts that many “Nazi thinkers did not accept Darwin’s theories and referred to them as the ‘English disease,’” and others “remarked that natural

selection did not produce any new hereditary qualities” (103). By contrast, Weikart points out that the biology curriculum under the Nazi regime integrated evolution and human evolution, asserting that “[i]t held a prominent place in the Nazi school curriculum and training courses in the Nazi worldview. On the whole, these ideas were not just Nazi ideas, but they were in line with the thinking of many of the leading German biologists and anthropologists before the Nazis came to power” (Weikart, *Nazi Racial Thought* 552). Further, many of Adolf Hitler’s speeches relied on Darwinian concepts including evolution, struggle for existence, and selection (Weikart, *Nazi Racial Thought* 541).

While there is a discursive relationship between evolutionary theory, eugenics, and discrimination and genocide in Nazi Germany, often the historical scientific validity of such relationships is left unexamined. As Weikart points out, “Many historians mention the Nazi embrace of social Darwinism, but they do not explore the scientific underpinnings of it” (*Nazi Racial Thought* 539). Similarly, while a number of historians and cultural scholars explore the “scientific underpinnings” of social Darwinism through examining the history of science in race and eugenics, far fewer scholars return to Darwin’s original work, even though it is often invoked by these later discourses as an authorizing point of origin.

Because science plays a critical role in shaping our understanding of the world, scientific work should be subjected to the same critical analysis as the texts and theories presented in any field. As Koertge points out, it is impossible to achieve complete “scientific objectivity.” Thus, instead of simply encouraging “scientists and policymakers to try harder to remove ideological bias from the practice of science,” we also need to “deliberately introduce ‘corrective biases’ and ‘progressive political values’ into science” (309). Recognizing that science can never be fully objective and is subject to the same biases as any other field can prevent the manipulation of

science to support unjust, oppressive, and harmful intentions. In addition, it is important to recognize that scientific work is shaped and communicated through metaphor, which carries inherent cultural assumptions. Metaphor is used to describe a scientific observation or theory in terms of another accepted reality (Wall 33), and such metaphors are made up of language. As Wall asserts, language itself is inherently figurative and metaphorical: “There is not a ‘poet’s language’ which can be dispensed with, to be replaced by a ‘scientist’s language’” (36). Thus, scientific texts should be scrutinized closely in the same ways that literature and poetry are.

Like many literary texts, science is also often presented in narrative form. As Herman asserts, “Science will not be left unchanged by its encounter with narrative inquiry, but neither will narrative inquiry. Studying science as narrative helps us see that its discourses have a history, a structure, and a rhetoric; science is not pure gnosis; it is in some of its phases at least, a mode of praxis subject to narrative mediation” (385). As scientific narrative is written, read, and verbally communicated, it becomes subject to the views and interpretations of those who interact with it. In fact, narrative is a part of all disciplines and found across human cultures. Through its narrative structures, science is inherently both a product of and has an influence on societal values. Evolutionary theory is one example of such culturally influential scientific narratives.

This project uses the tools of literary and cultural analysis to address the following question: How has the concept of evolution and Darwin’s work been misapplied to and used as a defense for the differentiation of groups within the human social construct of race? This question will be examined in relation to the example of Nazi Germany. Many scholars have analyzed primary texts from this historical period and identified that the assumption of evolutionary superiority was often used as a defense for eugenics. However, despite the wide array of

historical work on this topic, little work has been done to examine misappropriations of Darwin's theories in relation to close readings of representations of "racial" difference in *Origin*.

Science itself is shaped by its cultural context and in turn shapes and is reshaped by the societies in which its language and ideas are imposed and circulated (Iaccarino). This is especially true of historical race science. As race and gender literary theorists often describe, if a difference is suggested to be "essential" and defended with biology, differences can then be integrated into a culture as a "natural" part of society. Evolutionary theory is an example of a biological defense that has been employed in this way, and scientific texts and culture are influenced by one another. Like all texts, *Origin of Species* is a product of its cultural moment and of its author's cultural location. Thus, obtaining an understanding of Victorian racial science and cultural ideas about race as well as the shifts in racial scientific thought that occurred both during and since the nineteenth century is imperative to interpreting *Origin*. Similarly, it is necessary to examine additional texts written by Charles Darwin—including *Descent of Man* and *Voyage of the Beagle*—to obtain a clearer understanding of his theory of evolution and his personal views that helped shape that theory.

That contextualized understanding of Darwinian discourse will then be compared to Nazi rhetoric; primary sources such as *Mein Kampf* and secondary sources outlining Nazi rhetoric and the regime's history in relation to eugenics will be analyzed in direct relation to Darwin's works. While many scholars have pointed to the connections between evolutionary theory and the rise of Nazi eugenics, a full understanding of the complex relationship between these discourses can be furthered through close reading of Darwin's texts. Together, these primary and secondary texts will be examined to find points of comparison and contention among representations of "racial" difference in Darwin's work and Nazi racial and eugenic ideologies.

In Chapter 1, both blatant racism and the application of animal husbandry metaphors to humans in several of Darwin's works and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* will be examined. Darwin often describes people he encounters in his travels as "savages" and less evolved than Europeans; Hitler describes the Jewish people in similar terms. However, while Darwin is careful to draw distinctions between humans and animals, Hitler actively applies animal husbandry principles to humans. This distinction, however, is not straightforward, as Darwin makes some statements that could be interpreted as encouraging the application of animal breeding to humans.

In Chapter 2, the relationship between Hitler's and Darwin's representations of diversity will be explored. In *Origin*, Darwin outlines the role diversity plays in health and wellbeing and the competitive advantage diversity brings, an assertion which he later applies to humans in *Descent*. While Darwinian evolutionary theory states that diversity within species is beneficial for promoting the evolution of a species, Hitler asserts that racial purity will bring greater fitness and that the loss of "blood purity" can result in the extinction of a race of people.

In Chapter 3, the role of nature in narratives of evolution in *Mein Kampf* and *Origin* will be compared. In *Origin*, Darwin points out the slow, continuous nature of the process of evolution. He also frequently points out the inability of humans to comprehend the complexity of traits that result in the "fittest" individuals and to mimic the time scale employed by nature as major reasons for the superiority of nature as a vehicle for evolutionary change. Further, he asserts that humans are selfish when selecting what they consider to be desirable traits. Like Darwin, Hitler expresses in *Mein Kampf* that nature is a superior source of selection rather than artificial selection controlled by humans; however, his later actions to try to control evolution through eugenics and his assertions that ruthless actions will be needed to advance humanity complicate and contradict his earlier points.



In Chapter 4, evidence will be presented to support the assertion that Hitler viewed the Jewish people as a threat to the survival of the Aryan race. The belief that Jewish people and Aryans were on the same “evolutionary level,” the violent and fearful version of natural selection presented in Hitler’s works, and the Nazis’ desire for greater possession of land and to increase the population size of the Aryan race together support this claim. Darwin’s works describe the instinct of self-preservation possessed by all animals, including humans, and the importance of morality in both distinguishing all races of humans from lower animals and relating human races to one another, directly contrasting with Hitler’s belief that the Aryans’ self-sacrificing nature distinguished them from other races by showing their “higher evolution.” Furthermore, Hitler’s view that the Jewish people both pose a threat to the Aryans by occupying the same “evolutionary level” and are inferior to Aryans is a notable point of contradiction within *Mein Kampf*, one that points to contradictions at the heart of racist ideologies to this day.

## Chapter 1: Racism and Animal Husbandry Metaphors

As many scholars point out, it was not Darwin's theories that led to the holocaust and extreme "racial cleansing" initiatives in Nazi Germany. However, Darwin's work was often applied to and used as defense for such policies. His work gave the appearance of scientific backing to the racism that had existed long before he published *Origin of Species*. Unfortunately, the application of Darwin's work for the justification of racism long outlived Darwin himself. With the rise of eugenics in the early 1900s, and eventually the broad use of Darwinism to justify mass killings and genocide, Darwin's theory has had profound impacts on the human race, not only by explaining how we came to be, but also by widening the divisions among us. As Weikart says well, "Darwin never advocated using brutality in the human struggle for existence, and he certainly never called for purposeful killing of the 'unfit'—as some more radical Darwinists did later. However, he did recognize that the struggle could be severe and produces 'evils', which he considered necessary for further progress" (*Ethic* 34). The evils that humans have committed against one another—motivated and rationalized by racist ideas—likely far surpass the evils that Darwin observed in the natural world.

Both blatant racism and animal husbandry metaphors recur in several of Darwin's works and in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Darwin often describes the "savages" in the "uncivilized world" as "dirty" and less evolved than Europeans, which is similar to Hitler's descriptions of the Jews as "ugly" and "parasitic." While Darwin is generally careful to draw distinctions between humans and animals, Hitler directly promotes the use of animal husbandry techniques in humans. However, the relationship between these texts is complex and Darwin does make statements that could be interpreted as encouraging the application of animal breeding to humans. In addition,

Darwin occasionally mentions parallels that exist between animal breeding and human evolution in his texts.

### **Part A: Racism**

It is no secret that the discourse of Nazi Germany was fraught with racialized ideology and the belief that racial purity should be the priority of the German people. This belief is often viewed as associated with the principles of social Darwinism and, in turn, Darwinian evolutionary theory itself. However, this relationship is far from simple. While Darwin never advocated the harnessing of evolution to improve the human race, in *Voyage of the Beagle* and *Descent of Man*, he often describes the “savages” of the “uncivilized world” as both dirty and less evolved than Europeans. In a similar manner, Hitler describes the Jews as both ugly and parasitic, a belief that translated to policy, eventually leading to the imprisonment, segregation, and mass genocide of millions of Jewish people.

Darwin’s descriptions of “savages” in *Voyage of the Beagle* and his comparisons between them and animals dehumanize the “savages.” When Darwin and the crew of *The Beagle* encounter a village of native New Zealanders, he describes them stating, “Both their persons and houses are filthily dirty and offensive: the idea of washing either their bodies or their clothes never seems to enter their heads” (Darwin, *Beagle* 306). In this quotation, Darwin implies not only that the savages are dirty, but also that this is a result of their lesser intelligence. In fact, the idea of cleaning themselves “never enters their heads.” Darwin also describes the “savages” as wild and violent like animals. When Darwin sees a group of Spaniards and indigenous South Americans clash, he describes the indigenous people as “[l]ike wild animals, they fight against any number to the last moment” (Darwin, *Beagle* 110) implying they do not have the intelligence to know when a fight is lost instead of admiring their courage to defend their land. Finally, the

differences Darwin points out between the “savage” and “civilized” person are great. He states, “I could not believe how wide was the difference, between savage and civilized man. It is greater than that between a wild and domesticated animal, in as much as in man there is a greater power of improvement” (Darwin, *Beagle* 172). Here Darwin asserts that the difference between groups of humans is far greater than the differences between wild and domesticated animals. However, he also points out that humans have a greater potential for improvement, implying that the “savages” could be taught to be “civilized” to further close the gap between them and Europeans. It is also important to note that this rhetoric was employed to justify imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Considering this cultural context, this language is especially divisive and constructs a hierarchical difference between the groups, reinforcing the belief that the Europeans are superior to “savages.”

In a similarly racist manner, Hitler describes the Jews as “dirty” and “parasitic.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler asserts that the Jews’ “whole existence is an embodied protest against the aesthetics of the Lord’s image” (178). Here Hitler reduces the Jewish people’s “existence” to an embodiment of the unaesthetic. Beyond this attack on their outward appearance, Hitler also describes them as being both physically and morally unclean: “The cleanliness of his people, moral and otherwise, I must say, is a point in itself.... Later I often grew sick to my stomach from the smell of these caftan-wearers. Added to this, there was their unclean dress and generally unheroic appearance” (Hitler 57). Here Hitler points out that the Jews appear “unheroic,” implying that they lack the courage that other races, especially the Aryan race, possess. Finally, Hitler often describes the Jews as parasites, a move also made in many speeches where he compared “the Jews to bugs and called for their extermination” (Mosse 143). In *Mein Kampf*, he

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<sup>3</sup> Europeans often viewed colonialism as humanitarian and as a way to save “savages” from themselves. For further information on this see pg. 6-7 and Patrick Brantlinger’s *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians*.

states that “the whole of honest humanity is suffering” from such parasitic people (Hitler 150). This language is especially dehumanizing because parasites are viewed as very low animals and are typically unwanted. Parasites take from their host, but do not give anything in return. Thus, Hitler is implying that the Jewish people take from society but do not contribute to its growth or prosperity in any way. Throughout *Mein Kampf*, such phrases are used to both create divisions and point out hierarchical, biological differences between Aryan and Jewish individuals, with the ultimate goal of dehumanizing Jewish people. These tactics to dehumanize the Jewish people are similar to those evident in Darwin’s writing in *Voyage of the Beagle*.

Darwin describes “savages” as notably different from “civilized” people. In an encounter with a tribe of Fuegians while traveling with the crew of *The Beagle*, Darwin states, “Viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe they are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world. It is a common subject of conjecture what pleasure in life some of the less gifted animals can enjoy: how much more reasonably the same question may be asked with respect to these barbarians” (Darwin, *Beagle* 178). Darwin directly compares the “savages” to “less gifted animals,” pointing out that these “barbarians” can only feel pleasure to the degree that “less gifted animals” do. He even goes as far as to say that he can “hardly believe they are fellow-creatures.” This implies that he draws a wide distinction between “savages” and “civilized” individuals, even going so far as to compare them to animals, yet he does view them as “fellow-creatures.” While it is clear that Darwin views the “savages” as different from “civilized” people, he does not define them as separate species.

Like Darwin, Hitler points out that the Jews are different from Aryans, but, unlike Darwin, he attempts to classify them as a lesser “species.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler describes how mating does not occur between species and uses this as a transition to discussing interracial

relationships.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Hitler represents the Jews as selfish as a defense for his view that they are “less evolved.” He calls this trait “primitive” and asserts that this differs from the “self-sacrificing” Aryans: “In the Jewish people the will to self-sacrifice does not go beyond the individual’s naked instinct of self-preservation. Their apparently great sense of solidarity is based on the very primitive herd instinct that is seen in many other living creatures in this world” (Hitler 301). Hitler argues that the Jews are like primitive animals, ruled by nothing more than instinct. As Weikart points out, “Every time Hitler bashed Jews for their selfish, immoral behavior, he assumed that it was an inherent biological trait that would persist as long as the Jews continued reproducing” (*Ethic* 95). Hitler believed that the Jews were inherently driven by self-preservation and selfishness.<sup>5</sup>

Hitler also believed that European, specifically Aryan, races were superior to other races. As historian Richard Weikart outlines, the Nazis had several goals: to improve the biological quality of the German people, to propagate the superior Aryan race, to eliminate the inferior Jewish race, and to prevent biological decline caused by interracial reproduction (*Ethic* 8-9). In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler asserts that the Aryan race should be credited for the rise of the first cultures: “Hence it is no accident that the first cultures arose in places where the Aryan, in his encounters with lower people, subjugated them and bent them to his will” (Hitler 295). Here Hitler states that “lower people” are necessarily dominated by the Aryan race, a statement that is similar to the rhetoric used to justify colonialism. Hitler also asserts that the early members of the Aryan race were never inherently “barbaric”; rather, it was their environment that limited their ability to

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<sup>4</sup> Hitler takes advantage of the lack of clarity in Darwinian evolutionary theory about the differences between species and varieties to assert that distinctions between races and species are the same. Refer to Chapter 1B for further discussion of this topic.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on this refer to Chapter 4.

form culture. He writes, “[I]t is an unbelievable offense to represent the Germanic peoples of the pre-Christian era as ‘cultureless’, as barbarians. That they never were. Only the harshness of their northern homeland forced them into circumstances which thwarted the development of their creative forces” (Hitler 393). With this statement, not only does Hitler assert that “barbarians” are “cultureless,” but that even when the Aryans were “without culture” it was a result of their environment rather than their nature and inherent traits.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Hitler describes how the German people could never become an “oppressed nation” simply because they are aware of others’ “racial inferiority.” Hitler states, “I am prevented by mere knowledge of the racial inferiority of these so-called ‘oppressed nations’ from linking the destiny of my own people with theirs” (Hitler 659). In this quotation Hitler distinguishes the German people from “oppressed nations” stating that their paths cannot be the same. However, this belief that European races are inherently superior is not unique to Hitler.

Throughout his texts, Darwin generally describes Europeans as superior to “savages.” As Darwin describes in *Descent*, “The variability or diversity of the mental faculties in men of the same race, not to mention the greater differences between the men of distinct races, is so notorious that not a word need here be said” (Darwin 45). Darwin points out that the differences between races is so well known by Victorians that he need not state the variability between groups of humans. Not only did Darwin believe there were differences in the capabilities of different races of humans, but he also believed that Europeans were at the top of a racial hierarchy. As Weikart describes, “While Darwin expressed sympathy for those of other races, he also exulted in the European triumph” (*Ethic* 188). This is evidenced in *Voyage of the Beagle*

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<sup>6</sup> Hitler theorized that this was because the harsh weather during the Ice Ages had increased the struggle for existence, allowing only the fittest of the Aryans to survive (Weikart, *Nazi Racial Thought* 538).

when Darwin describes the admiration the “savages” have for white Europeans. When Darwin and his companions encounter a group of “savages” in Tierra del Fuego, Darwin observes that “[t]hey expressed the liveliest surprise and admiration at its whiteness” in reference to his own and his fellow Europeans’ skin (Darwin, *Beagle* 174). A few pages later Darwin outlines their return to the Fuegians the next year and again describes their awe at the white men: “Simple circumstances, –such as the whiteness of our skin, the beauty of scarlet cloth or blue beads, the absence of women, our care in washing ourselves– excited their admiration far more than any grand or complicated object” (Darwin, *Beagle* 183). This assumed admiration demonstrates Darwin’s pride in “European triumph” (Weikart, *Ethic* 188). He assumes that their curiosity is the result of admiration rather than the simple fact that the white men look different from the people they are accustomed to encountering.

Despite holding these views, in other cases Darwin does recognize that he himself and other Europeans are racially biased. For example, Darwin recognizes that the same actions committed by people of different races are often interpreted differently and that the Europeans are not the “superior” race in every aspect. While on his voyage with the crew of the *Beagle*, when Darwin witnesses a woman committing suicide to avoid being brought back into slavery, he states that “in a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy” (Darwin, *Beagle* 59). Darwin’s recognition that the same action by people of different races and backgrounds are perceived differently is a rare instance of cultural relativism for his time. He recognizes that what would be viewed as noble and brave in a Roman woman is viewed as brutal and stubborn in a black woman. In addition, as Darwin describes in *Descent*, the Europeans are “inferior” in eyesight compared to the “savages” (52). While this is a generalization of both groups of people, this also demonstrates that Darwin



recognizes the “savages” have some abilities that the Europeans do not and that no race is superior in all traits.

However, Darwin generally describes the “savages” as “dirty” and less evolved than Europeans in *Voyage of the Beagle* and *Descent of Man*. Similarly, Hitler describes the Jews as parasitic and physically abhorrent. Although the discourse of Nazi Germany was laced with racism and, in some cases, Darwinian evolutionary theory is blamed for the scientific racism that dominated the late 1800s and early 1900s, close examination of Darwin’s texts reveals a complicated relationship between Darwinian evolutionary theory and eugenics in Nazi Germany. While Darwin was in some ways ahead of his time, in other ways his writings were racist and gave power and influence to eugenics movements such as the one in Nazi Germany.

### **Part B: Animal Husbandry Metaphors**

The connection between Darwinian evolutionary theory as outlined in *Origin* and the application of this theory to justify eugenics in Nazi Germany is easily observable through a general reading of Hitler’s writing, and critics have previously drawn parallels between these two discourses. However, close literary analysis of the Darwin’s works reveals the complexity of the relationship between these discourses. Connections are particularly pronounced in the application of animal husbandry principles to the human race. However, Hitler applied these principles to justify his agenda, outlined in *Mein Kampf*, in ways that often do not align with the core theory of evolution as proposed by Darwin in *Origin of Species*. While Darwin did not actively encourage the application of many of his principles to humans and in some cases speaks out against such actions, throughout *Origin* Darwin makes statements that could be interpreted in this manner.

In his writing, Hitler frequently encourages applying animal husbandry techniques to humans. While Darwin draws distinctions between humans and animals, he also points out the lack of clarity in the distinction between species and varieties within a species. Hitler takes advantage of this ambiguity to apply beliefs about the difference between species to differences between human races. Darwin does not advocate for this application and instead supports the idea the human species comes from one evolutionary line. However, despite his intentions, Darwin does make statements that could be interpreted as encouraging the application of animal breeding to humans, uses language common to animal husbandry in his discussion of human evolution, and, in *Descent*, points out direct parallels between animal breeding and human evolution.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler actively encourages the application of animal breeding techniques to humans. As historian Jerry Bergman describes, “Hitler believed humans were animals to whom the genetics laws, learned from livestock breeding, could be applied. The Nazis believed that instead of permitting natural forces and chance to control evolution, they must direct the process to advance the human race” (102). It is this belief, dominant throughout *Mein Kampf*, that lead to the hijacking of Darwin’s theory.<sup>7</sup> In his chapter on international relations between Germany and the rest of the world, which primarily focuses on Eastern Europe, Hitler points out that in order to gain power on the world stage the Germans must never forget their role as “guardians of the highest humanity on this earth” (646). He continues by explaining that they are obligated to “[strive] to bring the German people to racial awareness so that, in addition to

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<sup>7</sup> Hitler is not the sole “hijacker” of Darwin’s theories. Haeckel and other scientists modified and added their own ideas to evolutionary theory, influencing how it was understood by scientists and non-scientists alike. See the introduction for a history of the rise of eugenics and information about the cultural contexts around evolutionary theory.

breeding dogs, horses, and cats, they will have mercy on their own blood, the more it will be able to meet this obligation” (Hitler 646). Here Hitler makes a direct plea to the German people to treat themselves as they would animals that are bred to display “superior” traits. Like these superior bred animals, Hitler desires members of the “highest humanity”—Aryans—to maintain their status as such, thus directly advocating for the application of breeding techniques to humans. In fact, he does not view this as a mere metaphorical suggestion, but rather as something they must do in order to maintain their “superiority.”

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler also makes direct comparisons between animal breeds and human races, stating that “[a]s long as people do not recognize and give heed to the importance of the racial foundation, they are like men who would like to teach poodles the qualities of greyhounds, failing to realize the speed of the greyhound like the docility of the poodle are not learned, but are qualities inherent in the race” (338). Here Hitler implies that human races are like dog breeds. He also points out that certain “racial qualities” are not learned but rather are biologically inherent. By contrast Darwin describes that “savages” can be taught to be “civilized.”<sup>8</sup> While Hitler asserts that “racial qualities” are biologically inherent, Darwin holds the belief that such traits are often a product of culture and knowledge; these viewpoints are in disagreement. While Darwinian evolutionary theory is often blamed for Hitler’s belief in the application of animal husbandry principles to humans, Hitler’s claims are not always accurate representations of Darwinian evolutionary theory.

In fact, scholars disagree about the extent to which Darwinism is responsible for the rise of Nazi eugenics. As Bergman describes Hitler was “[f]irmly convinced that Darwinian evolution was true” and “saw himself as the modern saviour of mankind” (111). Bergman further

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<sup>8</sup> Refer to Chapter 1A pg. 15 for more information.

points out that Hitler believed that “[b]y breeding a superior race, the world would look upon him as the man who pulled humanity up to a higher level of evolutionary development” and “would someday regard him as a great ‘scientific socialist’, the benefactor of all humankind” (111). However, this viewpoint is by no means accepted by all scholars. Some vehemently defend Darwin from responsibility for Hitler’s ideas including historian and philosopher of science Robert J. Richards, who asserts that “[e]ven if Hitler had the *Origin of Species* as his bedtime reading and clearly derived inspiration from it, this would have no bearing on the truths of Darwin’s theory or directly on the moral character of Darwin and other Darwinians” (*Was Hitler a Darwinian* 197). While Darwin certainly did not morally support the use of evolutionary theory to classify and divide the human race or to justify the killing of “unfit” individuals, throughout both *Descent* and *Origin* Darwin makes statements that could be easily used as support, and perhaps even inspiration, for these actions.

For example, Hitler takes advantage of the lack of clarity within Darwinian evolutionary theory about the differences between species and varieties and uses this to support his beliefs about distinctions between races. In his essay examining the use of metaphor in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, literary critic and linguist Andreas Musolff touches on the idea that the Nazis’, particularly Hitler’s, use of evolutionary theory in relation to eugenics was fallacious: “If a naive reader opened *Mein Kampf* at the beginning of the chapter [“Nation and Race”], he or she might think they were glancing at a grotesquely oversimplified account of heredity in the ‘animal kingdom’, rather than at a political treatise” (30). In this chapter, Hitler lists various species, stating that they would never mate with one another or “show humanitarian tendencies” toward one another (285). He says, “There is no cat with a friendly inclination toward mice” and asserts that Nature’s rule is “the inner segregation of the species of all living beings on this earth”

(Hitler 285, 284). Musolff describes these comparisons and others like them found in the chapter as “childish-sounding” (30). While Darwin does state “how entirely vague and arbitrary is the distinction between species and varieties” (*Origin* 32), pointing out that the differences between species and varieties or “races” within a species are not very clear, he means this in the case of animals that are closely related to one another. Hitler takes advantage of this grey area, and not only includes descriptions of species that vary greatly, but in some cases species that have a predator and prey relationship. In addition to simply being different species, the relationship between cat and mouse makes Hitler’s metaphor especially irrelevant for the defense of divisions between human groups and races. As Weikart asserts, “Hitler then moved seamlessly (and illogically) from species to human races, implying that races are subject to the same natural segregation that species are” (*Ethic* 139). Hitler’s inaccurate and oversimplified version of evolutionary ideas in a central Nazi text reveals the assumption that Darwinian evolution in itself, as opposed to an illogically extended cartoonish version of it, was responsible for Nazi eugenics as fundamentally flawed.

Darwin also draws distinctions between humans and animals, further discouraging the application of animal breeding techniques to humans. In a time when many people, scientists included, believed that “lower” races were less evolved and evolutionarily closer to apes, Darwin spoke out against these ideas. In *Descent* Darwin makes a point to address the beliefs of Alfred Russel Wallace, a naturalist who co-published a paper about Natural Selection with Darwin shortly before the publication of *Origin*: “I cannot therefore understand how it is that Mr Wallace maintains, that ‘natural selection could only have endowed the savage with a brain a little superior to that of an ape’” (Darwin, *Descent* 68). Darwin also points out that “of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is the most

important” (Darwin, *Descent* 120). Darwin viewed morality as an important aspect of all races of humans, distinguishing humanity from lower animals. Additionally, there is evidence that Darwin himself was concerned about the social influences his theories may have if applied to humanity, as he waited over ten years after the publication of *Origin* to describe his theories in relation to humans at length in *Descent*. However, this is an assertion questioned by some scholars (Richards, *Why Darwin Delayed* 47; van Wyhe 196). Nevertheless, Darwin was known to be a passionate abolitionist and in *Descent* refers to slavery as “the great crime” (142).<sup>9</sup>

While Darwin does draw parallels between animal husbandry and the evolution of the human race, he did not actively advocate for this approach to racial differentiation. In fact, Darwin was an advocate for monogenism, the belief that various races had evolved from a common ape-like ancestor, which Alter calls the “doctrine of humanity’s original unity” (241). Other naturalists at the time, such as Alfred Russel Wallace and Ernst Haeckel, asserted that human races had separate or “polygenetic” origins (Alter 240). As Crook points out, this belief helps to contrast Darwin’s work from the racist and imperialist doctrines that it might inspire.

Darwin’s theories could be read to validate doctrines of racist imperialism.

Although white racism predated Darwin, and humans were classified by racial type well before the *Origin*, Darwin’s conflict model could be used to justify conquest and repression of subject people, to draw up evolutionary ladders which placed at the top peoples supreme in war and trade, while relegating others to the lower rungs. On the other hand, Darwin conceived of *Homo sapiens* as one

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<sup>9</sup> For further information about Darwin’s involvement in abolition movements refer to Moore, James. “Darwin’s Progress and the Problem of Slavery.” *Progress in Human Geography*. 34.5 (2010): 555–582.

species, and opposed rigid racial taxonomies, explaining base differences in terms of adaption, selection, divergence and geographical isolation. (Crook 40)

Here Crook describes the conflict that exists within Darwin's work. While his work can be used as support for racist policies and doctrines, racism and constructions of racial difference existed long before his work.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, while his theory is a "conflict model" which describes the competition between organisms to survive and be the most successful, Darwin was a strong advocate for the view that humans are all members of the same species, encouraging the view that races are more similar to each other than many other naturalists believed at the time.

Despite what his intentions may have been, Darwin often makes statements that can be easily manipulated to support the use of animal husbandry methods in the human race. Darwin claims that "[i]mprovement and modification" cannot withstand "a large amount of crossing with inferior animals" (Darwin, *Origin* 65). Darwin's use of the word "inferior" is of particular interest, as this distinction between variations of a species as "superior" and "inferior" to one another was at the core of the application of Darwin's ideas in Nazi eugenic policy. People who met the requirements to be considered a member of the "superior Aryan race" benefited from the policies of the Nazi party, while anyone who did not meet these criteria was originally ostracized for being biologically inferior, then likely eventually became a victim of eugenic-influenced mass genocide (Weikart, *Ethic* 63, 189). While Darwin is careful to avoid calling a particular group of humans superior or inferior in all traits, he does point out that particular traits vary among humans by group or race.<sup>11</sup> For example, in *Descent*, Darwin asserts that "[v]iolent,

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<sup>10</sup> For more information of the history of racism see John P. Jackson and Nadine M. Weidman. *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*, Rutgers University Press, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> In *Descent of Man*, Darwin points out that "savages" have superior eyesight compared to Europeans (52).

melancholic, profligate people will not reproduce” and that “such men are the black sheep of the family” (163), an animal metaphor about humans that he directly connects to animal breeding: “In the breeding of domestic animals, the elimination of manner inferior, is by no means an unimportant element toward success” (Darwin, *Descent* 163). The racialized metaphor of “black sheep” is also present in *Origin* where Darwin points out the threat posed by literal black sheep: “Nor ought we to think that the occasional destruction of an animal of any particular colour would produce little effect: we should remember how essential it is in a flock of white sheep to destroy every lamb with the faintest trace of black” (Darwin 54).<sup>12</sup> Considering the variety of coat colors that naturally occur in sheep go beyond black and white, the implications of Darwin’s reduction of that spectrum to two opposed colors and the meaning he attaches to them should be acknowledged. While it is uncertain if he intended for this statement to be interpreted as an allegory for human races, the parallels are evident, much more so than if he had chosen to mention brown sheep, for instance.

In addition, Darwin uses language that is typically used to describe animals to describe humans in his accounts of his journey to the “uncivilized world” in *Voyage of the Beagle*. He states, “The greater number of men were a mixed breed between Negro, Indian, and Spaniard” (Darwin, *Beagle* 88). Darwin’s reference to mixed-race individuals as “mixed breed,” a term that is typically used to describe different groups of animals such as dog breeds, is problematic as it draws a comparison between humans and animals. Throughout his work, Darwin makes statements that can be manipulated to defend animal husbandry practices being applied to

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase “black sheep” dates back to the 1600s and has been critiqued by many scholars as racially biased. For more information, see “black sheep, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017 and “The Language of White Racism.” Haig A. Bosmajian, *College English*, 31.3 (1969): 263-272.



humans, but Darwin takes this a step further in *Descent*, potentially encouraging the misapplication of his claims.

In *Descent*, Darwin draws direct parallels between animal breeding and the evolution of the human race. He states, “No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed” (Darwin, *Descent* 159). However, Darwin goes on to add that “[t]he aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy.... Nor could we check our sympathy, if so urged by hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature (*Descent* 159). As Paul Crook, a historian specializing in social Darwinism, points out, the second half of this quote is often left out of scholars’ citations, resulting in Darwin’s belief that the “instinct of sympathy” is the “noblest of our nature” being ignored (40). Despite this, Crook also points out that while Darwin “acknowledged man’s ‘noble qualities’, ‘exhausted powers’, ‘god-like intelligence’, social sympathy and benevolence,” he also “insisted that humans still bore the indelible stamp of their lowly origins” (13-14). This belief that human beings are in some ways little better than animals can give rise to the idea that animal breeding techniques can be applied to humans as well. In some cases, this viewpoint had been applied to specific groups of human beings, including, as Crook asserts, “classes of human beings, or races of human beings” that “were seen to be little better than lowly animals, which were assumed to be unreasoning and motivated by simple primal instincts, aggressive and territorial” (14). Darwin’s relation to the application of animal husbandry techniques to humans is complex, and to attribute

responsibility to one individual or group oversimplifies the issue. Colonial discourse, Darwinism, eugenics, and Hitler himself all directly or indirectly contributed to the rise of such discourses.

Throughout *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*, Darwin makes statements that could be interpreted to support the use of animal husbandry techniques for the improvement of the human race. Darwin did not actively encourage this use of his theories, and in some cases speaks out against such actions. However, Hitler often applies principles of evolutionary theory in attempts to justify his agenda as outlined in *Mein Kampf*, which in many cases do not align with the core theory of evolution as proposed by Darwin. While the connection between Darwinian evolutionary theory and the application of this theory to justify eugenics in Nazi Germany is observable from a general reading of Hitler's writing, the relationship is complex and requires close analysis of Darwin's work to fully understand the comparisons and distinction between these discourses. Critics have a wide range of beliefs about the degree to which Darwin's theories are responsible for the mass genocide suffered by the Jewish people and other groups during the Nazi German era. However, the use of animal husbandry metaphors are not the only parallels that can be drawn between Darwin's work and Hitler's principles.

## Chapter 2: The Role of Diversity in Strengthening Species

Although Darwinian evolution was used as a defense for eugenics, this was in many ways a misapplication of Darwin's core ideas, particularly in relation to what Darwin calls "divergence of character." Darwin defines "divergence of character" as the diversification of characteristics to allow a species to survive in a wider variety of environments and thereby reproduce, in turn raising its population numbers. The concept of "divergence of character" is in direct conflict with the Nazi's desire for the creation of a homogenous Aryan race. In *Origin of Species*, Darwin outlines the importance that diversity within species holds for the health and wellbeing and the competitive advantage, over both other species and individuals within the same species, that diversity brings. Darwin also briefly applies these principles to humans in *Descent of Man*. While Darwinian evolutionary theory describes diversity within species as beneficial for promoting the evolution of a species, Hitler believed that racial purity would be more effective in achieving this goal. Finally, Hitler asserts that the loss of "blood purity" can even result in the extinction of a race of people.

An important distinction between Darwin and Hitler's beliefs about the evolutionary process lies in their definitions of race. Hitler often equates races and species, asserting that the differences between individuals of different races and individuals of different species are similar in scope, blurring the line of distinction between species and race. Alternatively, for Darwin, races are defined by distinctions that exist within a species or subgroups. While Darwin does point out that there are differences between races, he also asserts that these differences are insignificant compared to the differences observed between species. Darwin particularly distinguishes humans from other animal species citing our "moral sense" (Darwin, *Descent* 120). Darwin extended this distinction between human and animal to all races and believed in

monogenism, the belief that all races of humanity are descended from the same common ancestor, sometimes called the “doctrine of humanity’s original unity” (Alter 241).<sup>13</sup>

In *Origin*, Darwin outlines the importance diversity within species holds for the health and wellbeing of a species. Darwin states that “[c]rosses between different varieties or between individuals of the same variety but of another strain, gives vigour and fertility to the offspring” (*Origin* 61). Here Darwin outlines the necessity of genetic variation. Without variety within a species, it will suffer from lack of fertility and, in turn, suffer from poor health. Darwin goes on to provide more reasoning that diversity is essential: “I believe it can and does apply most effectively, from the simple circumstance that the more diverse the descendants from any one species become in structure, constitution, and habits, by so much will they be better enabled to seize on many and widely diversified places in the polity of nature, and so be enabled to increase in numbers” (Darwin, *Origin* 71). This quotation describes the theory that more varied species are able to take over a greater range of habitats. With more areas available to them, and in turn greater access to resources, a species will thrive and multiply in number. In addition, it is important to note that both Darwin and Hitler emphasize the need for a high birth rate to ensure a species’ health. In Hitler’s case this was achieved through the restriction of access to birth control for members of the Aryan race.<sup>14</sup>

While Darwin describes the importance of diversity to achieve the highest numbers and greatest fitness of a species, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler calls for a species to remain racially unmixed in order to improve its fitness: “If, for example, an individual specimen of a certain race were to enter into a union with a racially lower specimen, the result would first be lowering of the

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of monogenism and polygenism see Chapter 1B page 25.

<sup>14</sup> Refer to Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of birth control in Nazi Germany.

standard itself; but, in addition, there would be weakening of the offspring as compared to the environment that had remained racially unmixed” (Hitler 400). This belief directly conflicts with Darwin’s assertion that diverse populations produce the most “vigorous” offspring. Nevertheless, the idea that the most diverse species will be the healthiest, is one Darwin frequently points out in *Origin*.

Indeed, the advantage of intra-species diversity goes beyond health; species that are more diverse also have a competitive advantage over both other species and individuals within the same species. As Darwin puts it, “[I]n the general economy of any land, the more widely and perfectly the plants and animals are diversified for different habits of life, so will a greater number of individuals be capable there of supporting themselves,” while on the other hand “[a] set of animals with their organisation but little diversified, could hardly compete with a set more perfectly diversified in structure” (Darwin, *Origin* 73). Darwin points out that it is not only the benefit of increased population size that results from diversity within a species but also a competitive advantage over less diverse counterparts. This advantage might be observed in access to food, protection, or other factors necessary for survival. Alternatively, Hitler viewed one particular race, the Aryan race, as better adapted to succeed in the environment and more deserving of resources. Hitler believed that they were the “bearers of culture” and had the duty of bestowing their wisdom onto those of “lower races” through geographic expansion of the Nazi empire. This rhetoric is similar to that invoked to defend British imperialism.

Upon examining Darwin’s ideas of competition amongst species, it is also important to acknowledge that the fight for resources extends beyond only interspecies relationships. Often members of the same species are forced to compete as well. Again, Darwin points out the immense consequence that diversity holds: “It is the most closely-allied forms, —varieties of the

same species, and species of the same genus or related genera” that “generally come into the severest competition with each other” (Darwin, *Origin* 70). In other words, a more diverse species will face less competition with its peers; less competition equates to greater survival for a species as a whole. As Darwin clearly demonstrates in *Origin*, diversity is both necessary and beneficial to a species. Competition either between or among species can harm its ability to survive, multiply, and thrive, and diversity is key to reducing this competition.

While Darwinian evolutionary theory describes diversity within species as beneficial for promoting the evolution of a species, Hitler asserts that racial purity will be more effective in achieving this goal. As Weikart summarizes the Darwinian view, having a greater population creates more competition and variation within a species, which brings about evolutionary progress: “Natural selection can only function if there are variations, and the more individuals that are produced, the more variations there are likely to be. Also more individuals competing among themselves tends to heighten the selective pressure. Thus high reproduction rates should bring about more rapid evolutionary progress” (Weikart, *Darwin to Hitler* 81). While Hitler viewed maintaining a high birth rate as imperative to maintaining competition and in turn the improvement of the human species, a belief that is at the core of evolutionary theory, he did not believe in the value of diversity.<sup>15</sup> Instead, he believed that a racially “pure” population would result in evolutionary improvement. However, according to Darwinian evolutionary theory, if Hitler’s desire was to improve the “fitness” of the human race he should prefer a racially diverse population.

In *Descent*, Darwin extends his belief about diversity within animal species to diversity within the human species. He asserts that there is great variation within humanity, which can be

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 3 for a discussion of birth rate in Nazi Germany.

observed within races, but is even greater between races. In *Descent*, Darwin states, “It is manifest that man is now subject to much variability. No two individuals of the same race are quite alike. We may compare millions of faces, and each will be distinct. There is an equally great amount of diversity in the proportions and dimensions of the various parts of the body” (Darwin 44). Here Darwin points out the immense diversity of features among humans, so immense that each individual is unique. As was previously mentioned in Chapter 1A, in *Descent*, Darwin wrote, “The variability or diversity of the mental faculties in men of the same race, not to mention the greater differences between the men of distinct races, is so notorious that not a word need here be said” (45). In addition, while he doesn't explicitly state this about human diversity, Darwin has a positive view of diversity in general and calls it “wonderful.” In his chapter in *Descent* about butterflies and moths, Darwin describes the “wonderful diversity” among the noises they produce (374). This positive view of diversity differs greatly from the views about diversity expressed in Nazi discourse in works such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

Throughout *Mein Kampf*, Hitler curses the “un-German hodgepodge” that has taken over Germany and expresses concern about the “bastardization” of the world (146, 383). Hitler asserts that the loss of “blood purity” could even result in the extinction of races of people: “If a people no longer wants to respect the Nature-given qualities of its being which root in its blood, it has no further right to complain over the loss of its earthly existence.... The lost purity of the blood alone destroys inner happiness forever” (Hitler 327). In contrast, Darwin describes how as a new species is formed it “will generally press hardest on its nearest kindred, and tend to exterminate them” (*Origin* 70). Therefore, Hitler's desire for a homogenous human race is not evolutionarily ideal. Homogeneity is more likely to lead to the extinction of a group of people than is losing “blood purity” as Hitler asserts, and such extinctions happen across vast time

scales. Darwin states that “utter extinction of a group is generally, as we have seen, a slower process than its production” (*Origin* 202). The perceived time scales of evolution differ greatly between Darwin and Hitler. While Darwin both saw the production and extinction of new species as a slow process, taking many millions of years, Hitler believed momentary and rapidly occurring “catastrophes” were capable of driving evolutionary change.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout his work, Darwin describes the value of diversity within species for promoting the health and wellbeing of and providing a competitive advantage for a species. While Darwinian evolutionary theory asserts that diversity within species is beneficial for promoting the evolution of a species, Hitler cites “racial purity” as the most effective means for achieving this goal and avoiding extinction. Competition either between or among species can harm its ability to multiply, survive, and thrive. Darwin’s assertion that diversity is not only beneficial, but also necessary for survival, greatly complicates the application of evolutionary theory as a justification for decreasing the diversity within the human race through eugenics.

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<sup>16</sup> The variation in time scales of evolutionary change described in *Mein Kampf* and Darwin’s works will be discussed further in Chapter 3.



### Chapter 3: Natural Selection as a Superior Source of Evolution

Although Darwinian evolutionary theory does describe the creation of superior versions of species, an idea that was cited as justification for eugenics and particularly in the Nazi regime, Darwin frequently asserts that nature is far more effective at producing these ideal versions of species than human-controlled artificial selection could ever be. In *Origin of Species*, Darwin points out the slow, continuous nature of the process of evolution and frequently cites the inability of humanity both to comprehend the complexity of traits that result in the “fittest” individuals and to mimic that time scale employed by nature as a major reason for the superiority of nature as a vehicle for evolutionary change. In addition, he asserts that humans are selfish when selecting desirable traits. Like Darwin, Hitler expresses in *Mein Kampf* that nature is a superior source of selection over artificial selection by humans; however, his later actions to try to control evolution through eugenics and his assertions that ruthless actions will be needed to advance humanity complicate and contradict his earlier assertions.

In his work Darwin asserts that nature slowly shapes species over millennia, and, thus, does not support the use of artificial selection to speed up evolutionary processes. By contrast, Hitler asserts that devolution could result from reproduction between just one pair of “higher” and “lower” human individuals. On several occasions, Darwin implies this is possible for animals, yet asserts that “undesirable” human traits will naturally be selected against. In addition, Darwin’s evolutionary theory and Nazi rhetoric both support the idea that the needs of the community should come before those of the individual. However, Darwin points out that nature would most effectively achieve this goal, while Hitler credits “ruthless” acts that must be committed by humans for the betterment of the species. Finally, both Darwin’s work and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* support the belief that nature is superior to humanity in selecting the fittest

individuals, and both discourses point out the importance of large populations for maintaining competition. However, in *Mein Kampf*, it is evident that Hitler desires to “mimic nature” to achieve the political and social goals of the Nazi party; yet in doing so, he discounts the extent of nature’s power.

The belief that nature slowly shapes and alters species over many millions of years is central to Darwinian evolutionary theory. As Darwin asserts in *Origin*, “We see so many strange graduations in nature, as is proclaimed by the canon, ‘Natura non facit saltum,’ that we ought to be extremely cautious in saying that any organ or instinct, or any whole being, could not have arrived at its present state by many graduated steps” (288). This Latin phrase, which translates to “nature does nothing in jumps,” goes back to the concepts of uniformism and gradualism in geology, which were proposed by James Hutton and Charles Lyell, both of whom likely influenced Darwin’s work (Papacosta 14). However, Darwin also referenced this canon to advocate for a conception of evolution as the smooth and slow transition of species rather than the violent and rapid changes that others at the time believed to be dominating forces in the evolutionary process. As science historian Pangratios Papacosta asserts, “Darwin wanted to silence supporters of spontaneous generation and those who proposed that violent catastrophes were the dominant shapers of our physical and biological landscape” (14). Thus, Darwin’s work advocates for the view of slow, natural selection as superior to rapid and forced artificial selection.

The idea that change within species is gradual is opposed to the belief that evolution should be controlled and sped up by artificial selection. As Crook points out, “Darwin provided a broad perspective on change which emphasized the operation of natural selection over eons of time upon multitudes of finely gradated variations, ultimately resulting in a careful matching of

organisms to environment. He pictured change as a slow, gradual and continuous process and played down the importance of ‘leaps’” (22). As Crook asserts, Darwin was not an advocate for eugenics because “any proposal for genetic planning, for the reconstruction of human nature itself through directed evolution ran counter to naturalistic gradualism” (22). Darwin’s description of evolution as a slowly shifting continuum is in major conflict with any eugenics movement as these movements aim to “direct evolution.” While the Nazis aimed to alter the gene pool of the human race quickly and thereby force evolution to occur, Darwin advocated against this approach. By contrast, Hitler viewed these rapid and “violent catastrophes” as central to the evolution, or devolution, of humanity.

Indeed, the Nazi regime aimed to control the evolution of the human race by artificial selection. In his essay, Musolff points out that Hitler “had no concept of continuous evolution that could seriously be compared to Darwin’s fundamental insight that ‘species have changed, and are still slowly changing...’” (33). This severe lack of comprehension or denial of the basic principles outlined in *Origin* by the leader of the Nazi party, demonstrates as extremely flawed the claim that Nazi eugenics policies were truly Darwinian in nature. Hitler believed that rapid evolution through “catastrophes” was ideal because, “[i]f [diseases of national bodies] do not take the form of catastrophe, man slowly begins to get accustomed to them and at length, though it may take some time, perishes all the more certainly of them” (Hitler 232). Hitler believed that the slow, continuous form of evolution described by Darwin was to be feared because people would “grow accustomed” to the “disease,” causing it to be ignored and even accepted, and therefore more dangerous.

In addition, Hitler believed that evolution could be undermined in one swift blow. As he states in *Mein Kampf*, “No more than Nature desires the mating of weaker with stronger

individuals, even less does she desire the blending of a higher with a lower race, since, if she did her whole work of higher breeding, over perhaps hundreds of thousands of years, might be ruined with one blow” (Hitler 286). Here Hitler asserts that the many millions of years of natural selection can be negated by reproduction between one pair of “higher” and “lower” races of humans ignoring that evolutionary change in any direction takes many millions of years.

However, Hitler’s belief about the breeding of “lower” and “higher” humans should not be viewed as entirely in opposition to Darwinian thought. While the overall belief demonstrated by Darwin in his texts is that nature takes millennia to change a species, Darwin asserts the importance of destroying “every lamb with the faintest trace of black” in a flock of white sheep (Darwin, *Origin* 54), a metaphor which he extends to humans in *Descent*, where he asserts that “[v]iolent, melancholic, profligate people will not reproduce” and that “such men are the black sheep of the family” (Darwin, 163). In addition, Darwin also claims that “[i]mprovement and modification” cannot withstand “a large amount of crossing with inferior animals” (Darwin, *Origin* 65). Although it is unclear the extent of breeding that Darwin means by “a large amount,” this belief is strikingly similar to what Hitler describes in *Mein Kampf*, particularly when the racialized “black sheep” metaphor is considered. While Hitler directly asserts that “one swift blow” is enough to set back evolutionary progress, Darwin’s beliefs are less clear. Darwin supports the view that the progress of evolution is slow but also acknowledges the possibility that this progress can be reversed by the presence of a single “black sheep.”<sup>17</sup>

However, an important distinction to make is that Darwin typically describes animals in this context while Hitler refers to humans. When Darwin does extend this theory to humans, he is careful to describe the naturally occurring lower rate of reproduction of such “profligate” people,

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<sup>17</sup> Refer to Chapter 1B for further discussion of the “black sheep” metaphor.

and never advocated for the killing or forced sterilization of such individuals. Thus, this is one of many examples of Hitler invoking scientific theory and bending it to support his political and social agenda. Hitler tries to avert “catastrophic events” that could devolve humanity, but in doing so he acts in ways that Darwin warned against: ignorantly isolating single factors at a particular moment as sources of profound evolutionary change and self-interestedly interfering in the process of natural selection.

Darwin cites the ignorance of humanity as a major contributing factor for the superiority of natural selection over artificial selection as a vehicle for evolutionary change. Darwin directly addresses the inability of humans to accurately identify the most important factors in the selection of a strong species, stating that “[i]n looking at many small points of difference between species, which as far as our ignorance permits us to judge, seems to be quite unimportant, we must not forget that climate, food, etc., probably produce some slight and direct effect” (54). While humans may observe some “small difference” between two species or two varieties of the same species, the differences that they observe are often “unimportant” in comparison to the seemingly slight, yet instrumental, differences resulting from environmental factors such as climate and availability of resources. Darwin also asserts that nature has perhaps more “selfless” intentions than humans do in its reasons for selection. As Darwin states, “Man selects only for his own good; Nature only for that of the being which she tends” (53). It is not only Nature’s superior knowledge but also its selflessness that makes natural selection more desirable than artificial selection for producing evolutionary change. Natural selection brings balance to the entire system while artificial selection might, and only temporarily, meet the desires of a select few individuals.

Invoking a similar idea to a very different end, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler states that “ruthless” decisions will have to be made and that humans will need to look past their own needs for the benefit of the race as a whole: “The right of personal freedom recedes before the duty to preserve the race. Only after these measures are carried out can the medical struggle against the plague itself be carried through with any prospective of success. But here, too, there must be no half-measures; the gravest and most ruthless decisions will have to be made. It is a half-measure to let incurably sick people steadily contaminate the remaining healthy ones” (Hitler 255). Here Hitler describes the potential for contamination of the human race by the “sick.” He also describes how those who are sick should be segregated from the healthy: “For, if necessary, the incurably sick will be pitilessly segregated—a barbaric measure for the unfortunate who is struck by it, but a blessing for his fellow men and posterity” (Hitler 255).<sup>18</sup> Although in this context he is referring to physical illness, this would extend to mental and racial “illnesses” as well, as is evidenced by the later actions of the Nazi party.<sup>19</sup> He calls this segregation both necessary for the wellbeing of all humanity but also barbaric. Despite the barbaric nature of such actions, he believed they were an inevitable part of life. As Weikart points out,

Hitler admitted that this struggle was not pleasant, but he did not think it could be avoided. Atrocities were inevitable parts of these human conflicts, but they brought advance to those who ultimately triumphed.... This philosophy of cruel struggle would steel Hitler to commit unspeakable atrocities, all of which he

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<sup>18</sup> This quotation is found in the heart of Hitler’s argument about the evils of prostitution. Here he describes the threat of syphilis as a result of prostitution. The fear of syphilis was fueled by a belief that sexually transmitted diseases would harm the health of offspring produced by infected individuals.

<sup>19</sup> Refer to the introduction for a summary of the history of eugenics in Nazi Germany.

explained as natural events caused by unavoidable natural forces. (Weikart, *Ethic* 42-3)

By describing the horrors that are inherent to “ethnic cleansing” as unavoidable, Hitler attempts to provide a justification for such actions and for the use of artificial selection within the human race rather than respecting nature’s superior power.

Darwin’s view that nature is superior over humanity in the creation of new species and in the elimination of unfit species, is in conflict with Hitler’s assertion that humans are responsible for making “ruthless” decisions for the improvement of humanity. Darwin describes the efficacy of natural selection as a means of destroying inferior species: “Within the same large group, the later and more highly perfected sub-groups, from branching out and seizing on many new places and in the polity of Nature, will constantly tend to supplant and destroy the earlier and less improved subgroups. Small and broken groups and sub-groups will finally tend to disappear” (Darwin, *Origin* 79). In this passage, Darwin outlines the idea that species of less perfect forms will tend to cease to exist over time. This demonstrates the strength of Darwin’s conviction that nature will eliminate species that are less well-adapted. This being said, if so-called “inferior” humans were to theoretically exist, it would be logical to assume that under Darwinian evolutionary theory “inferior” groups of humans would also be destroyed naturally over an extended period of time, thereby eliminating any need for human involvement in attempting to skew selection through eugenic activities. However, Darwin occasionally uses language from animal breeding to describe humans, blurring the line between animals and humans.<sup>20</sup> Thus, this conviction that “inferior” species exist and will be wiped out over time can be easily manipulated

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<sup>20</sup> Refer to Chapter 1 for more details on Darwin’s use of the language of animal husbandry and breeding.

to support racism and both the creation and segregation of various “classes” of humans, or even the extreme violence of “ethnic cleansing”—such as forced sterilization and mass killings—supported by advocates of eugenics.

While Hitler fails to understand or denies parts of Darwin’s theory, he does at points agree with Darwin that nature is superior to humanity in bringing about evolutionary change. However, Hitler’s idea that artificial selection by humanity and nature could work together to bring about evolution most effectively, does not align with Darwin’s belief that natural selection is superior to artificial selection in all circumstances. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler mirrors Darwin’s idea that nature is more selfless and knowledgeable than humans: “For Nature itself in its inexorable logic makes the decision, by causing the different groups to enter into competition with one another and struggle for the palm of victory, and leads that movement to the goal which has chosen the clearest, shortest, and surest way” (Hitler 511). Here Hitler points out that nature will choose the path of evolution that is “shortest” and “surest.” However, this agreement between Darwinian evolutionary theory and Hitler’s beliefs, is not entirely straightforward. As Weikart articulates well, “[s]ince the Darwinian struggle for existence had produced so much biological progress, Hitler and other social Darwinists considered competition—resulting in the death of the vanquished—a positive force” (*Ethic* 5). However, “they also approved of measures to artificially improve the human species, such as compulsory sterilization of the congenially disabled. Sharpening natural selection by increasing competition and introducing policies to artificially select humans were twin prongs of a concerted effort to foster upward evolution” (Weikart, *Ethic* 5).

In his attempts to foster more rapid evolution, Hitler also wanted to ensure that nature was not disrupted by any human efforts to decrease the birth rate. After being elected the Nazis



closed birth control clinics and limited access to birth control, eventually banning its sale and production (Weikart, *Ethic* 130-31). However, this applied only to Germans of good health. As Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf*, he believed that “defective people” must be “prevented from propagating equally defective offspring” (255). Nazi policies inspired by this idea were eventually implemented and it was made legal to sterilize forcibly individuals who were mentally or physically ill or had “criminal tendencies” (Weikart, *Ethic* 153-4). As Weikart asserts, Hitler believed that for healthy Germans, “[I]mitations of birth, then, would lead to biological degeneration” and he “based his opposition to birth control on evolutionary ethics. In his view the struggle for existence was a positive force in history, and birth control would diminish the beneficial effects of that struggle” (Weikart, *Ethic* 126). As Hitler states in *Mein Kampf*, “Nature must help again and make a choice among those whom she has chosen for life; but again man helps himself; that is, he turns to artificial restriction of his increase with all the above indicated dire consequences for race and species” (Hitler 134). Here Hitler points out that humans select for their own benefit and how this could bring about consequences for his ideas of racialization. This is ironic considering his later actions of defying nature to select for the benefit of the Aryan race, as will be discussed further in Chapter 4. Hitler also states that “as soon as procreation as such is limited and the number of births is diminished, the natural struggle for existence which leaves only the strongest and healthiest alive is obviously replaced by the obvious desire to ‘save’ even the weakest and most sickly at any price” (132). He calls such actions “deplorable” and a “mockery of Nature and her will” (Hitler 132).

Not only does Hitler view a high birth rate for healthy Germans as necessary for maintaining competition and improving the human species, but he also believes that a low birth rate will result in the decline of the species as all humans, even those he viewed as “lower,” will

need to be saved. The belief that a higher birth rate produces a healthier species is at the core of evolutionary theory. In fact, when Darwin first introduces the concept of natural selection in the introduction of *Origin*, he states that “many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive” (3). Later in *Origin*, Darwin describes how the healthiest species will exist in high numbers: “Look at the most vigorous species; by as much as it swarms in numbers” (Darwin, *Origin* 43). However, throughout Darwin’s work, it is evident that he believes that natural selection is the mechanism that produces the fittest species. Hitler directly contradicts this view with his later commitment to artificial selection and eugenics for the “betterment” of humanity.

Through his later policies of eugenics and mass genocide during the holocaust, Hitler attempts to replace natural selection and apply artificial selection in ways that would make him a force like Nature. Interestingly, while Hitler himself attempts to shape humanity and replace natural means of achieving what he views as evolutionary progress, he both advocates against people attempting to alter the course of nature in this way and accuses the Jews of this behavior: “Millions thoughtlessly parrot this Jewish nonsense and end up by really imagining that they themselves represent a kind of conqueror of Nature; though in this they dispose of no other weapon than an idea, and at that a miserable one, that if it were true no world would be conceivable. But quite aside from the fact that man has never yet conquered Nature...” (Hitler 287). Similar to Hitler’s description in this quote, Darwin believes in the superior power of nature and that humanity cannot “conquer” it. As Darwin states in *Origin*, one of the downfalls of animal breeding is that humanity “does not allow the most vigorous males to struggle for the females. He does not rigidly destroy all inferior animals...” (53). While Hitler may have believed that his policies would make him more like nature— “rigidly destroying” those that he viewed as

inferior, thus becoming the first to “conquer nature”—Darwin did not believe highly-evolved humanity would be capable of such ruthless acts, as their superior morality would not allow it.<sup>21</sup> As historian Tony Barta asserts, “It was not natural selection that gave ‘selection’ a terrible new meaning after Auschwitz. It was an undertaking of the human will for a rational end. It was the power to demonstrate total domination, a ruthlessness that pretended to mimic nature while making nature count for nothing” (137). It is evident that Hitler desires to “mimic nature” to achieve the political and social goals of the Nazi party, yet in doing so he discounts nature’s power.

Darwin’s assertion that the process of evolution is slow and continuous and his belief that the ignorance of humans is a major reason for the superiority of nature as a vehicle for evolutionary change is mirrored in Hitler’s writing. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler points out that Nature controls and alters the evolution of humanity, but he contradicts this belief both with his attempts to try to control evolution through eugenics and his assertions that brutal actions are necessary to advance humanity. Although Darwin’s theory, which describes the creation of superior versions of species, was cited as justification for eugenics, particularly in the Nazi era, Darwin frequently asserts that nature is far more effective at producing these ideal versions of species than human-controlled artificial selection. With this in mind, it is important to consider the implications of these ideas in relation to eugenics in Nazi Germany. Undoubtedly, the goals of these policies were much more focused on the benefits of a select group of people who met the requirements to be considered a member of the “Aryan race.” Anyone who did not meet these criteria was originally ostracized for being biologically inferior, then likely eventually became a victim of

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<sup>21</sup> More information on morality as a sign of higher evolution is available in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4.

eugenic-influenced mass genocide (Weikart, *Ethic* 63, 189). This demonstrates one of Darwin's points well; the Nazi regime serves as an extreme example of a group of people selecting "only for [their] own good" (Darwin 53).

#### Chapter 4: The Relationship Between Fear and Hitler's Racism

Racism is often driven by fear, hatred, and the desire for power. Fear of those who differ from ourselves is a commonplace feeling. In some instances, the desire to maintain power and the fear of losing it leads to discrimination. Often in modern history such fear has led to the marginalization and oppression of groups of people. One example of such an oppressed group is the Jewish people in Nazi Germany.

Hitler's actions as leader of the Nazi party, particularly the oppression and genocide of the Jewish people, were both cause and effect of his assertion that the Jewish people were a threat to the survival of the Aryan race. Nazi rhetoric attempted to bolster this assertion through some biologists' belief that Jews and Aryans were on the same "evolutionary level," the violent and fearful version of natural selection presented in Hitler's works, and the Nazis' desire for greater possession of land and to increase the numbers in the Aryan race. While Hitler draws from evolutionary theory and the work of biologists who were influenced by Darwin to support his concerns, his claims often contrast with Darwin's theories. Darwin's works describe the instinct of self-preservation possessed by all animals, including humans, and the importance of morality in both distinguishing all races of men from lower animals and relating human races to one another, which directly contrasts with Hitler's belief that the Aryans' self-sacrificing nature distinguished them from other races by showing their "higher evolution." Furthermore, Hitler's view that the Jews were both a threat to the Aryans by occupying the same "evolutionary level" and inferior to them is a notable point of contradiction throughout *Mein Kampf*.

Hitler viewed the Jewish people as a threat to the Aryan race. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler describes how "the Jew is not the attacked but the attacker" (324). He also describes Jews as plotting to trick Europeans into ignoring race. He writes, "Now the Jew knows only too well that

in his thousands of years of adaption he may have been able to undermine European peoples and train them to be raceless bastards” (Hitler 639).<sup>22</sup> Here Hitler demonstrates his fear of the Aryans losing power to the Jews by describing how they might “undermine” the Europeans and might be able to “train” them. This idea of one group of people being trained by another is especially significant in the context of the many animal husbandry metaphors found in *Mein Kampf*. However, the Jews being in charge of this “training” differs greatly from the typical rhetoric in the text, which is primarily focused on the Europeans’ need to push their evolution forward through artificial selection.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Hitler asserts that the German people must not be defeated by the “Jewish tyrants”: “As often is in history, Germany is the great pivot in the mighty struggle. If our people and our state become the victim of these bloodthirsty and avaricious Jewish tyrants of nations, the whole earth will sink into the snares of this octopus; if Germany frees herself from this embrace, this greatest of dangers to nations may be regarded as broken for the whole world” (Hitler 623). Not only does Hitler describe the Jews as “bloodthirsty,” but he also asserts the importance of preventing the German state from becoming their “victim.” If Germans avoid this fate, Hitler argues the “dangers” will be escaped by the entirety of humanity, reinforcing an assumption of the centrality as well as the supremacy of the Aryan race. He believed that the German people must avoid being defeated by the Jews for the wellbeing of all civilized society. However, these assumptions about the relative evolutionary statuses of Jews and Aryans are contradictory. Hitler describes the Aryan race as being both

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<sup>22</sup> This contradicts Hitler’s claims that “catastrophes” occurring rapidly can bring about evolutionary change. Refer to Chapter 2 for more information on the time scales of evolution presented in *Mein Kampf* and Darwin’s work.

<sup>23</sup> Refer to Chapter 1B for discussion of how animal husbandry and breeding language has been used to describe human populations.

superior and a victim, while the Jewish race is described as being both “inferior” and a “mighty” threat.

Part of Hitler’s concerns and fear about the Jewish people may have stemmed from the belief that the Jewish people and Aryans are on the same “evolutionary level,” and thus the Jews could pose a threat to the survival of the Aryans. Ernst Haeckel, a German evolutionary biologist and eugenicist who wrote on human evolution before Darwin did, asserted that Indo-Germanic groups and Jews were among the superior races (Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian* 141, 188).<sup>24</sup> Hitler mirrors this belief in *Mein Kampf* stating, “The mightiest counterpart to the Aryan is represented by the Jew” (300). It is clear that Hitler was concerned that the Jews were a threat to the Aryans in part due to their “might.” It is also important to note that this comparison between Jew and Aryan is mapped out by Darwin in *Descent*. He argues that the Jews and Aryans are closely related because “Aryan branches” have “largely crossed during their wide diffusion by various indigenous tribes” (Darwin, *Descent* 222). While Darwin does address the relationship between the Jews and Aryans, he views these groups as closely related, a belief that is in sharp contrast with the rhetoric often employed by Nazis to dehumanize the Jewish people.

Another contrast between Darwin’s evolutionary theory and Hitler’s descriptions of the natural world can be observed in their descriptions of competition and struggle. Hitler’s version of natural selection is more violent and filled with fear than the version presented in Darwin’s work. Hitler describes the “struggle” as “hard” and “painful” while Darwin describes the competition between and subsequent elimination of species as “prompt” and asserts that “no fear is felt.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler states, “For anyone is an upstart who rises by his own efforts from his previous position in life to a higher one. Ultimately this struggle, which is often so hard, kills

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<sup>24</sup> For more information on Ernst Haeckel, refer to the introduction.

all pity. Our own painful struggle for existence destroys our feelings for the misery of those who remain behind” (23). Here Hitler asserts that individuals’ “struggle for existence” will leave them less sympathetic to the misery of others as it will “kill all pity”. Alternately, Darwin describes this “struggle” as generally short-lived and painless: “When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply” (Darwin, *Origin* 50). Darwin describes how in the “war” with nature “no fear is felt.” This viewpoint contrasts sharply with the “misery” and destruction described in *Mein Kampf*. It is also interesting to note that Darwin viewed war itself as an undesirable means of “selecting” the “fittest” humans, a view that was common among some Social Darwinists. As Crook asserts, “Overall Darwin accepted the need for humanitarianism. It was part of the ‘instinct of sympathy’, the ‘noblest part of our nature’. Nor did he advocate war as a selective method. He warned that modern warfare at least was dysgenic, a warning conveniently forgotten by militarists” (106). In contrast, Hitler supported war and believed that international agreement was not necessarily valuable, as Weikart notes: “While acknowledging that the racial struggle is bloody, he insisted that it produced beneficial results. On the other hand, the ‘mutual understanding of peoples,’ by which Hitler meant international agreements, were counterproductive. In fact, Hitler believed that Aryans had an inherent feeling or instinct to dominate other races” (*Ethic* 83).

The Nazis’ desire for the Aryans to dominate other races was supplemented by concern about the role of possession of land in competition between groups of people. Both the views outlined by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi’s goal of expanding their empire demonstrate a fear of being outcompeted by and losing power over other races or nations similar to the



competition that Darwin describes occurs between species of animals. As Darwin outlines, “the more diverse the descendants from any one species become in structure, constitution, and habits, by so much will they be better enabled to seize on many and widely diversified places in the polity of nature, and so be enabled to increase in numbers” (71). This quotation describes the theory that a species’ ability to take over a greater range of habitats will result in greater access to resources; thus, that species will thrive and multiply in number. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler fears that the Aryans do not have the greatest access to various habitats, stating, “The culturally superior, but less ruthless races, would in consequence of their limited soil, have to limit their increase at a time when culturally inferior but more brutal and more natural peoples, in consequence of their greater living areas, would still be in a position to increase without limit” (Hitler 135). With this statement, not only does Hitler point out that the group of people with the greatest access to land will multiply and be prosperous, but he also suggests that perhaps it is not the Aryans who will end up the most “prosperous.” He expresses concern that the “culturally inferior” may have greater access to land than the Germans. In *Mein Kampf*, he also describes how the Jews have access to unlimited space stating, “The Jewish state was never spatially limited in itself, but universally unlimited as to space” (Hitler 150). In examining Nazi conquest, parallels can be drawn between evolutionary theory and their attempts to expand their empire. As Weikart asserts, Hitler interpreted “the struggle for existence as primarily a struggle for living space” and “[s]ince land could only be appropriated by conquest, Hitler believed that the struggle for existence among humans necessarily involved military conflict” (*Ethic*, 160). The diaspora resulting from the lack of a Jewish state is represented in Nazi discourses as a “seizing” of “diversified places.” This was in turn used as a justification for increasing “competition”

between Aryans and Jews through warfare against Jewish people, allowing for German domination of those “diversified places.”

In addition, the Nazis aimed to increase the population numbers of the Aryan race, perhaps, in part, to avoid being outcompeted. While this mentality aligns with Darwin’s assertion that larger groups tend to be evolutionarily stronger, Hitler also expresses the even greater power of will and determination, a belief that contradicts Darwin’s evolutionary theory. According to Darwinian evolutionary theory, small groups tend to disappear. In *Origin*, Darwin describes that “[s]mall and broken sub-groups will tend to disappear” (79). He also addresses how the size of its population relates to the fitness of a species: “Look at the most vigorous species; by as much as it swarms in numbers, by so will its tendency to increase be still further increased” (Darwin, *Origin* 43). He also connects the number of individuals in a group to the possibility of extinction: “For any form existing in lesser numbers would, as already remarked, run a greater chance of being exterminated than one existing in large numbers” (Darwin, *Origin* 111). Darwin associates larger numbers of individuals with domination and survival. As he outlines, it is “the larger and more dominant groups” that “tend to go on increasing in size; and they consequently supplant many smaller and feebler groups” (Darwin, *Origin* 269). Alternatively, *Mein Kampf* suggests that numerousness and “fitness” of a species do not necessarily go hand in hand. Hitler describes Aryan races as “often absurdly small numerically” (Hitler 291), and the Nazis relied on policies to attempt to raise the Aryan population numbers, such as limiting the access to birth control as discussed in Chapter 3. However, Hitler also points out the strength of “minorities with will.” He describes how when the “highest energy and active force seems concentrated upon one goal and hence is definitely removed from the inertia of the broad masses, this small percentage has risen to be master over the entire number” (Hitler 399). Despite being a small portion of the total

population, Hitler believes that the Aryans can “be master” over all of humanity. He goes on to state that “[w]orld history is made by minorities when the minority of number embodies the majority of will and determination” (Hitler 399). With great effort and determination, he suggests, even a numerically small race such as the Aryans can shape and alter the course of history. However, this trait was not unique to Aryans; Darwin describes all species as having determination to survive.

Throughout his work, Darwin describes the will to survive and instinct of self-preservation that all animals, humans included, possess. In fact, Darwin views the fierce competition between different tribes and races as responsible for the extinction of groups: “Extinction follows chiefly from the competition of tribe with tribe, and race with race” (Darwin, *Descent* 211). As Weikart asserts, “The Darwinian struggle for existence not only pitted members within a society against each other, but it also led simultaneously to competition between organized groups of people—tribes, nations, and races” (*Darwin to Hitler* 161). The desire to survive results in conflict and “struggle” between individuals. However, this view does not fully acknowledge the distinctions that Darwin draws between humans and other animals. In *Descent*, Darwin points out that morality and selflessness distinguish humans from other animals.

Darwin viewed morality as an important value for all races of humans, both distinguishing all races of humans from lower animals and relating human races to one another. Darwin asserts that “of all the difference between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is the most important” (*Descent* 120). In fact, Darwin goes as far as to state that a human who does not display the instinct of selflessness “will be an unnatural monster” (*Descent* 136). However, he continues by asserting that humans are generally free of the animalistic

survival instincts of lower animals: “On the other hand, the desire to satisfy hunger, or any passion such as vengeance, is in its nature temporary.... [T]he instinct of self-preservation is not felt except in the presence of danger” (Darwin, *Descent* 136). While morality and selflessness are important aspects of humanity, Darwin also acknowledges that self-preservation is a natural response in dangerous situations, although not as prevalent as in other animals. However, Darwin also points out that in dangerous situations the most successful group of humans will be “sympathetic and faithful” to one another and describes the value of a group of humans banding together to fight an enemy. In *Descent*, he asserts that “[w]hen two tribes of primeval men, living in the same country, came into competition, if (other circumstances being equal) the one tribe included a great number of courageous, sympathetic and faithful members, who were always ready to warn each other of danger, to aid and defend each other, this tribe would succeed better and conquer the other” (Darwin 155). This importance placed on the willingness to defend a community is also evident in Nazi rhetoric.

Hitler believed that the Aryans’ willingness to self-sacrifice for the good of the race distinguished them from other races. As Weikart asserts, “For Hitler the essence of Aryan morality was the inner inclination or instinct to sacrifice one’s own individual existence for the life of the community, which would preserve the human species and advance human evolution” (*Ethic* 90). However, Hitler’s desires were focused on saving the Aryan race and, although he believed this would advance the human race, he ignored the needs of the entirety of the human species. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler argues that the “instinct of self-preservation” has reached its “noblest form” in the Aryan people:

The self-sacrificing will to give one’s personal labor and if necessary one’s own life for others is most strongly developed in the Aryan. The Aryan is not greatest

in his mental qualities as such, but in the extent of his willingness to put all his abilities in the service of the community. In him the instinct of self-preservation has reached the noblest form, since he willingly subordinated his own ego to the life of the community and, if the hour demands, even sacrifices it. (Hitler 297)

Here Hitler asserts that the Aryan is has reached the “noblest form” of sacrifice. By being concerned for the preservation of the race rather than the individual, Hitler places Aryans above other races, again ignoring that the preservation of one race and the preservation of humanity are not one in the same.

While describing the “higher evolution” of the Aryan race, Hitler simultaneously argues that a lack of willingness to self-sacrifice is a sign of a race’s status as “less evolved.” As Weikart asserts, “Every time Hitler bashed Jews for their selfish, immoral behavior, he assumed that it was an inherent biological trait that would persist as long as the Jews continued reproducing” (Weikart, *Ethic* 95). Hitler believed that the Jews were perhaps the race with the strongest will for self-preservation and that this trait was inevitable: in “hardly any people in the world is the instinct for self-preservation developed more strongly than in the so-called ‘chosen’” (Hitler 300). Due to their biologically-inherent will for self-preservation, Hitler argues that the Jews are less evolved, an assertion that directly conflicts with his claim that the Jews are the “mightiest competitor” against the Aryans. In *Mein Kampf*, he writes, “In the Jewish people the will to self-sacrifice does not go beyond the individual’s naked instinct of self-preservation. Their apparently great sense of solidarity is based on the very primitive herd instinct that is seen in many other living creatures in this world” (Hitler 301). The assertion that the will for self-preservation is primitive is not incorrect. However, Hitler fails to acknowledge that all humans possess this instinct, and no person can be selfless in all circumstances.

Finally, it is important to note that Darwin believes that selflessness and the desire to help fellow people was not be limited to one group or race as Hitler argues. In *Descent*, Darwin states, “As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to men of all nations and races” (Darwin 147). In fact, Darwin argues that the extension of “social instinct” and selflessness to people from all nations and of all races is a sign of evolutionary progress and advancement.

The belief that Jewish people and Aryans were on the same “evolutionary level”, the violent and fearful version of natural selection presented in Hitler’s works, and the Nazis’ desire for greater possession of land and to increase the population size of the Aryan race support the claim that Hitler represented the Jewish people as a threat to the survival of the Aryan race. In addition, Darwin’s works directly contrast with Hitler’s assertion that the Aryans possess a self-sacrificing nature that distinguishes them from other races and shows their “higher evolution”. Darwin describes the instinct of self-preservation possessed by all animals, including humans, and the importance of morality for distinguishing humans of all races from lower animals and relating human races to one another. Finally, a notable point of contradiction within Hitler’s writing is the view that the Jewish people are simultaneously a threat to the Aryans by occupying the same “evolutionary level” and “inferior” to them.

The hierarchical relationship between Aryans and Jewish people in Nazi Germany is simply one example of contradiction and illogic put in the service of oppression and hate. Such contradictions can be seen in the rhetoric surrounding racism today. Both fear of losing power

and vilification of groups of people different from one's self is at the core of racism both in the past and today. With such tragic historical examples of racism and division of groups of people in mind, perhaps humanity can learn to accept our cultural differences rather than let them dominate our interactions with one another or ignore them.

## Conclusion

A relationship between the discourses of Darwinian evolutionary theory and the eugenics movement of Nazi Germany has been identified by a number of scholars, and evidence supports this interpretation. However, close examination of Darwin's work indicates that his theories were sometimes inaccurately applied in defense of eugenic policies. While Darwin does point to the elimination of inferior species in nature over vast periods of time, the Nazis pulled the idea of the elimination of inferior races out of the broader context of Darwinian theory, ignoring those aspects that complicate and contradict their invocation of evolutionary discourse. Not only does Darwin outline the importance of diversity within species through his theory on divergence of character, but he also frequently credits nature as a superior mechanism of selection, particularly when compared to human attempts to cause evolutionary change. These central pieces of Darwin's theory directly rebut the use of Darwinian evolutionary theory as a scientific backing to defend the eugenic policies of the Nazi party. However, the relationship between Darwinism and Nazism continues to be a contested issue among scholars and laymen alike.

The connections between Darwinism and Nazism are debated today in both academic and popular circles. An internet search reveals hundreds of blogs and forums devoted to exploring the role—or lack thereof—Darwinism played in influencing Nazi German eugenic and racial policy. Some websites claim that “Evolutionary theory leads to racism and genocide” (Sarfati). Meanwhile, others declare “The evolution theorist couldn't have known that people like Hitler would exploit his ideas in such horrifying ways” (McMillan) and “Nazi racial ideology was religious, creationist and opposed to Darwinism” (Hellier). In many cases this debate is directly connected to religion and the debate on evolution versus creationism. Some atheist blogs proclaim that Darwinism and Nazi rhetoric have nothing in common, while some creationists'



websites declare that evolution is solely responsible for the actions for the Nazi party. These polarizing views fail to account for the complex nature of the relationship between these discourses.

With the continuing widespread interest in exploring the relationship between Darwinism and Nazism among diverse circles of people, particularly in nontechnical spheres, academics should invest time and energy in researching and clarifying this complex issue, especially given both the continuing influence of Darwinian ideas and the deplorable resurgence of racist, Nazi rhetoric in our culture today. As Levine asserts, “*The Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* have revolutionized the ways we imagine ourselves within the natural world and have raised fundamental questions about the nature of self, society, history, and religion” (659). Evolutionary theory created major changes in the world which are still being experienced today. However, the question of where responsibility lies for the application of evolutionary theory in attempts to defend racism is complex. As Barta asserts, “Darwin was not responsible for ‘euthanasia’, racial categorization and genocide. But the legacy of Darwin promoted the idea that it is natural for beings with more power to displace others, and to intervene in nature for such ends” (135). These legacies, both the generative and harmful ones, need to be examined in relation to the “origin” texts that are invoked to justify them.

The use of evolutionary theory to defend genocide and racism serves as one of the most profoundly harmful instances of science being used to influence human thought and behavior. However, as Huxley asserts in his discussion of evolution and ethics, “Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it” (Huxley 503). We, as humans, must not attempt either to mimic nature or to ignore natural phenomena. Darwin’s work, both related to evolution

and otherwise, expanded scientific understanding of the natural world, and this legacy too will live on.

However, scientists and those who invoke their ideas should consider and be aware of the cultural and social implications of their work. Because science is communicated through metaphor and narrative it is impossible for it separated from culture. For this reason, as Ehrenreich and McIntosh point out, “science needs close and ongoing scrutiny” (421). The application of evolutionary theory to defend colonial racism during Darwin’s lifetime and the rhetoric used to try to justify the murder of Jewish people and disabled people in Nazi Germany, one of the most horrifying and well-known instances of mass genocide in history, are just examples of the way in which scientific ideas have been skewed and used to promote a political or social agenda. Whether a scientist or not, it is imperative that individuals consider both their interpretations of others’ work and the potential for misinterpretation of their own work. Through many people educating themselves and others on the true discourse of justifications invoked for any social policy, it is hopeful that history may not be destined to repeat itself.

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