

“Expelled” and the Darwinism-Nazi Connection:
A Response to Jeff Schloss

In his thought-provoking review essay of “Expelled” Jeff Schloss repeatedly criticizes the film for oversimplifying complex issues.¹ Concerning the claim in the movie that Darwinism had something to do with Nazism, he sensibly states, “This is far too serious an issue to be settled by film clips or sound bites on one side or another.” Thus, it is disconcerting that Schloss—whom I know personally and count as a colleague and friend—misrepresents my views based on a sound bite in the film.

I thoroughly agree with Schloss that “Expelled” did not capture all the complexity of the relationship between Darwinism and Nazism—how could they in five or ten minutes? However, anyone wanting greater nuance and complexity can consult my book, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), a peer-reviewed scholarly book with 233 pages of text and 808 footnotes. I am currently working on a sequel entitled *Hitler’s Ethic* that will examine Hitler’s ideology and demonstrate that evolutionary ethics was a central ingredient in his worldview. I, like Schloss, am uncomfortable with sound bites, but I am hopeful that the sound bites will spur at least some people to investigate the issues more deeply.

I know that Schloss received a copy of *From Darwin to Hitler* almost as soon as it appeared in 2004, though I do not know if he read it. Both my book and my “General Response to Critics” at my website carefully explain my position. Not only that, but they specifically reject the position Schloss attributes to me.²

Schloss wrongly claims that there were two positions about the Darwin-Hitler connection presented in “Expelled.” The one he ascribes to me is that Darwinism logically entails Hitler’s ideology. He claims that Ben Stein and David Berlinski take a different position, merely arguing for Darwinism being a necessary, but not sufficient cause for Hitler and Nazism. The problem with Schloss’s dichotomy here is that in the introduction to my book *From Darwin to Hitler* I clearly state: “Nor am I making the absurd claim that Darwinism of logical necessity leads (directly or indirectly) to Nazism. In philosophical terms, Darwinism was a necessary, but not a sufficient, cause for Nazi ideology.”³ In the conclusion of my book I reiterate: “It would be foolish to blame Darwinism for the Holocaust, as though Darwinism leads logically to the Holocaust. No, Darwinism by itself did not produce Hitler’s worldview, and many Darwinists drew quite different conclusions from Darwinism for ethics and social thought than did Hitler.”⁴ Yet, Schloss criticizes me for allegedly taking a position I specifically reject as absurd and foolish in my book.

So, what in “Expelled” brought Schloss to so badly misinterpret my position? When responding to a question from Stein about Hitler’s sanity, I replied that I did not think he was insane, but that he was taking ideas to their logical outcome. Here I was referring to Hitler’s ideology in toto, not just the Darwinian elements (though it includes them, too, of course). I never referred to Darwinism as the only idea animating Hitler. Once again, in my book and on my website I specifically deny this position. I stated in the introduction of my book, “The multivalence of Darwinism and eugenics ideology, especially when applied to ethical, political, and social

thought, together with the multiple roots of Nazi ideology, should make us suspicious of monocausal arguments about the origins of the Nazi worldview.”⁵

Since Stein and Berlinski specifically made the point that Darwinism was not a sufficient cause, but only a necessary cause, of Hitler’s ideology, I do not know why Schloss concluded that I was taking a different position than they were. In fact, they were almost quoting me (though they could easily have formed their views independently).

Now that I have cleared up this misunderstanding, let’s examine some of Schloss’s substantive criticisms of the claims that I and others make in “Expelled.” One way Schloss tries to defuse the claim that Hitler relied on Darwinian ideology is to argue that Hitler must have been insane (thus, there was no logic to Hitler’s actions and ideology had nothing to do with his atrocities). After listing some of Hitler’s evil characteristics, he then states, “if that is sane, I’ll take the blue pill.” Apparently, Schloss thinks his position on Hitler’s insanity is patently obvious and unassailable. In the following sentence, Schloss claims that “many serious studies of his [Hitler’s] personality conclude” that Hitler was “gravely mentally ill.”

The problem is that Schloss does not seem aware that the vast majority of historians who study Nazism reject the idea that Hitler was mentally ill. And, if Hitler was mentally ill, what about the many eminent scientists and physicians (many of whom embraced a social Darwinism similar to Hitler’s, by the way) who cooperated with him, some even in the concentration camps and killing centers for the disabled, where Hitler never set a foot? The infamous physician at Auschwitz, Joseph Mengele, held two earned doctorates, one in anthropology and one in medicine. Were he and all his colleagues mentally ill, too? They were much more involved in the nitty-gritty of genocide than Hitler himself, who made decisions, but stayed aloof from the process. Further, I am confused about why Schloss, as an evangelical Christian, does not seem to consider human depravity rather than mental illness a reasonable explanation for the problems in Hitler’s life and his atrocities.

Not only do most historians reject the suggestion that Hitler was mentally ill, but most historians today accept precisely the position that I staked out in this sound bite—that the atrocities Hitler perpetrated were driven by relentlessly following his ideology. Schloss quotes the biographer Joachim Fest (who does not think that Hitler was mentally ill) to support his claim that Hitler was an opportunist who had little interest in ideas. However, Schloss does not seem to know that historiography on Hitler and Nazism has changed a great deal in the decades since Fest wrote his excellent biography. Though there is still some debate on this point, most historians today acknowledge that Hitler was driven by ideology.

The best scholarly biography we have of Hitler is unquestionably that of Ian Kershaw, whose two-volume biography was greeted with almost universal acclaim by historians.⁶ Kershaw argues that Hitler pursued coherent ideological goals. This is a remarkable admission for Kershaw, because he leans toward structuralism, the view that impersonal forces are more important than individuals in shaping history. If even a structuralist has come to admit the crucial role of ideology in motivating Hitler’s actions, then it seems strange that Schloss dismisses my views as so obviously misguided.

In his essay Schloss proposes three main problems with the view that Darwinism was a necessary cause of Nazism. The first point he makes is a valid criticism of the film. In “Expelled” a quotation from Darwin’s *Descent of Man* is read that seems to support the idea that Darwin favored a eugenics program for breeding humans. Schloss correctly points out that immediately after the quoted section, Darwin specifically disavowed a compulsory breeding program, distancing himself somewhat from the views of his cousin, Francis Galton. However, Schloss also made an important omission: in that same passage Darwin still did endorse a form of eugenics, albeit a voluntary form. Schloss is right, however, that this is a far cry from Hitler’s views.

However, Darwin’s own views are not the end, but only the beginning of the eugenics story. All the early eugenicists claimed that Darwinism was the basis for their ideology. It is certainly fair for Schloss to argue that these Darwinists were confused and misapplied Darwinism to society (then he is arguing against them, not against me). However, the fact that most leading Darwinists in the early twentieth century—not only in Germany, but elsewhere as well—claimed that Darwinism supported eugenics ideology should make it clear that—whether the idea is valid or not—it was not just an idiotic idea among right-wing nuts embraced by a mentally ill Hitler.

The second problem that Schloss identifies is the film’s claim that Darwinism devalues or deprivileges human life. He then quotes from Richard Dawkins, who confesses that we as humans can act altruistically and “rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.” For Schloss, then, Dawkins is a prime example of a Darwinist who does not devalue human life. However, not so fast. In a 2001 article Dawkins made clear that he is convinced that Darwinism undermines the pro-life position, precisely because Darwinism shows that humans are not much different from animals. In this article he proposed that scientists should pursue genetically engineering an *Australopithecine* to demolish the illusion of “speciesism.” He also supported euthanasia for the terminally ill.⁷ Dawkins, then, is really a prime example of a Darwinist who uses Darwinism to devalue human life. And Dawkins is by no means alone. The attack on anthropocentrism—Haeckel’s term of derision for the view that humans are special and created in the image of God—has been and is still being carried on to a large degree in the name of Darwinism.

Schloss goes on to explain that the problem with Nazism was not devaluing human life, but the differential devaluing of human life, i.e., they only devalued certain groups of people (but still valued Aryans). This is a very odd argument for several reasons. Most thinkers who devalue some groups of humans do so because they first demote humanity from its position as sacred, created in the image of God. The Princeton bioethicist Peter Singer argues (explicitly relying on Darwinism to ground his views) for the propriety of killing mentally disabled children.⁸ According to Schloss’s logic, this apparently is not devaluing human life, because Singer enjoins us elsewhere to feed the poor. However, the whole reason Singer devalues one group of humanity is because he has denied humanity in toto its status as created in the image of God—he calls it “desanctifying human life.” Likewise, Hitler: he did not value human life per se, but only humans with certain qualities. I call this devaluing human life. It mystifies me that Schloss would argue that Hitler did not devalue human life, just because he did not kill everyone. Does the evolutionary biologist Eric Pianka (University of Texas) not devalue human life, either, just because his hope is “only” that 90% of humanity be extinguished?⁹

The second problem with Schloss's distinction between devaluing human life and differential devaluing of human life is that Darwinism contributed historically to both! Many—probably most—Darwinian biologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Darwin himself, argued that racial inequality was scientific. The “selective deprivileging” that Schloss rightly decries was done precisely in the name of Darwinism. Some individuals and races were “more fit” and biologically superior; other were “less fit” and biologically inferior. Selective devaluing was not exactly extraneous to Darwinian thinking.

It is true, as Schloss argues, that the racism contained in most Darwinian ideology in the late nineteenth century did not originate with Darwinism. However, Darwin and other Darwinists integrated racism into their vision of human evolution and provided scientific justification for racism in an age that trusted the authority of science. More than that, they radicalized racism. Adrian Desmond and James Moore admit in their biography of Darwin, “‘Social Darwinism’ is often taken to be something extraneous, an ugly concretion added to the pure Darwinian corpus after the event, tarnishing Darwin’s image. But his notebooks make plain that competition, free trade, imperialism, racial extermination, and sexual inequality were written into the equation from the start—‘Darwinism’ was always intended to explain human society.”¹⁰

This brings us to the third problem Schloss identifies: he claims that many prominent racial theorists did not embrace Darwinism. He then discusses two racial theorists important in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe: Count Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Schloss is correct to argue that both of these men rejected Darwinism. He is also correct to claim that both men influenced Hitler in some way. However, while criticizing “Expelled” for making a one-sided presentation of its case, Schloss commits the same transgression. First of all, there were many racial thinkers who influenced Hitler’s thought in the early twentieth century. Some of the leading ones who most likely influenced him (either directly or indirectly) are Ernst Haeckel, Ludwig Schemann, Ludwig Woltmann, Otto Ammon, Georges Vacher de Lapouge, Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, Julius Friedrich Lehmann, Willibald Hentschel, Theodor Fritsch, Alfred Ploetz, Fritz Lenz, Eugen Fischer, and Hans F. K. Günther. These—and the vast majority of influential racial thinkers in early twentieth-century Germany—were all committed Darwinists who saw racial inequality and the racial struggle for existence as the driving force in history (just as Hitler did). Schloss is focusing on the exceptions, rather than the rule.

Even the exceptions he brings up are far more equivocal than he lets on. While quoting extensively from Chamberlain and establishing with excruciating detail that Chamberlain rejected Darwinism, Schloss ignores what I wrote about Chamberlain in *From Darwin to Hitler*. I conceded there that Chamberlain rejected biological evolution. However, I also explained that Chamberlain forthrightly appropriated some aspects of Darwinism. In his memoirs Chamberlain confessed that as a young man studying zoology under the famous Darwinist Karl Vogt, he embraced Darwinian theory enthusiastically.¹¹ Though he abandoned Darwinism later, because of its materialistic implications, he explicitly argued in his most famous book, *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, that Darwin had hit upon two ideas central to racial theory: the struggle for existence, and selection through breeding.¹² So, the claim that Chamberlain was uninfluenced by Darwin is, in fact, historically mistaken.

Concerning Gobineau, it is certainly true that Gobineau wrote before Darwin, and as far as I know, he never adopted Darwinism. However, almost every major racial thinker promoting Gobineau's theory in early twentieth-century Germany not only embraced Darwinism, but integrated Darwinism into their racial theories. The founder of the Gobineau Society and translator of Gobineau into German—i.e., the one who did the most to bring Gobineau's ideas to the attention of the German public—was Schemann, who acknowledged that social Darwinists and eugenicists were among the most important intellectual influences on him.¹³ Haeckel highly recommended Gobineau, too, as did other Darwinian biologists, such as the anthropologist Eugen Fischer and the geneticist Fritz Lenz.¹⁴ By the early twentieth century, when Hitler would have imbibed Gobineau, the French racist's views were usually interpreted through Darwinian lenses in German discourse.

None of what I have said so far proves that Darwinism is implicitly racist, though it does demonstrate that Schloss's attempts to distance Darwinism *historically* from Nazi racism fail. It is not as big a leap as Schloss thinks from Darwin's claim in *The Descent of Man* that "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races" to Hitler's view of history as a racial struggle for existence.¹⁵ Schloss would surely argue that Darwin's racist views were misguided, and that may well be (then he is arguing against Darwin, not against me). But why wouldn't Darwin's own views about the racial struggle for existence—embraced by the majority of Darwinists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—be called Darwinism? And why would it be historically inaccurate to claim that this aspect of Darwinian theory influenced Hitler and the atrocities that he committed?

Many scholars acknowledge that social Darwinism was an integral component of Hitler's ideology. Kershaw, for instance, remarks that Hitler's two main aims rested on "a 'world-view' that saw racial struggle and the survival of the fittest as the key determinants in human history."¹⁶ Many serious studies about Hitler and Nazism note the importance of social Darwinism in Hitler's ideology, policies, and atrocities. Not all scholars agree in what way Darwinism and social Darwinism are linked, but it should be clear that social Darwinism is a form of Darwinism, even if now most Darwinists think it is a misapplication of Darwinism.

Repeatedly and persistently in his essay, Schloss reminds us that Hitler used Christianity to justify his anti-Semitism. He argues that Hitler was misusing Christianity in precisely the same way that he was misusing Darwinism. I agree with Schloss that Hitler's use of Christian rhetoric is lamentable, and I also concede that Darwinism could be misused in similar ways.

However, in this case, the comparison is misleading, because Christianity and Darwinism played entirely different roles in Hitler's ideology. This is reflected in the historiography on Hitler's worldview: most historians see social Darwinism as a prominent influence on Hitler, while hardly any think that Hitler took seriously any Christian convictions.¹⁷ Most historians interpret Hitler as anti-Christian. In fact, in the two volumes that have already been released of his three-volume study on the Nazi period, Richard J. Evans (historian at the University of Cambridge) argues forcefully that for Hitler social Darwinism trumped Christian ethics.¹⁸

In private, Hitler often criticized Christianity, especially its ethic of compassion (because he thought it violated the laws of nature, especially the Darwinian struggle for existence). However, conversely, Hitler often expressed support for evolution, including human evolution, in private conversations. In my forthcoming book I will give abundant evidence to demonstrate that Hitler sincerely embraced human evolution. Here two examples will have to suffice. In an extended conversation about evolution on October 24, 1941, Hitler lambasted Christianity, claiming that evolutionary science showed the poverty of the church's dogmas. He then stated, "There have been humans at the rank at least of a baboon in any case for 300,000 years at least. The ape is distinguished from the lowest human less than such a human is from a thinker like, for example, Schopenhauer."¹⁹ Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary, also reported that Hitler often spoke about the church and human evolution in his dinner monologues, criticizing the former and basing his ideology on the latter.²⁰ Hector Avalos, whom Schloss quotes to the effect that Hitler was a creationist, simply does not know what he is talking about.²¹

Another way that we know that Christianity did not play the kind of role that Darwinism did in Hitler's ideology is because of the context of his religious statements. Most of Hitler's positive statements about Christianity and Jesus were public statements early in Hitler's career, when he was responding to the Bavarian People's Party, a Catholic political party. Hitler wanted to steal their thunder by posing as a Christian in a political milieu where this would score points. Hitler's embrace of social Darwinism, on the other hand, did little or nothing to win him mass support.

Hitler and his regime treated Darwinism and Christianity differently once they came to power, too. Hitler's regime continually badgered and persecuted the churches in various and sundry ways. However, prominent Darwinists were promoted and given prestigious positions at universities. Darwinism was given a prominent place in the biology curriculum under the Nazi regime. Crucifixes were removed from schools. Schloss's claim that the Nazis used Darwinism the same way they used Christianity is simply unsupportable.

In conclusion, I find it odd that Schloss claims at the outset of his essay that the historical question is not really interesting, but then proceeds to spend most of his time trying to undermine the historical claims that I and others make in "Expelled." Instead of focusing on history, he says, he wants to focus on a more important philosophical question: "did right understanding of such ideas reasonably lead to Nazi racism?" I certainly agree with Schloss that this is an important question, but I cannot see anywhere in his essay that Schloss has offered an answer.

Schloss never examines Darwin's own ideas about racism, nor does he discuss the ideas of any other Darwinists in the pre-Nazi period about racism. Nor does he say anything about why he and other modern Darwinists reject racism. So, I am left wondering: why does Schloss never really answer the question he says is most important, but keeps attacking the historical question, which he says is not so important?

While I still think the historical question is vitally important (of course I would—I'm a historian), I am not sure I would agree with Schloss that the most important question was whether a right understanding of Darwinism leads to Nazi racism. This is not really such a burning issue, because we can be thankful that almost all Darwinists today reject racism. Rather,

it seems to me that we should examine two other issues in the historical causal nexus between Darwinism and Nazism that are still burning issues: 1) What are the implications of Darwinism for ethics and morality? 2) What does Darwinism tell us about the value of human life and the significance of death?

Many Darwinists today still assure us that morality is relative, based on the supposedly evolutionary origins of ethics. In a seminar two bright students once told me point-blank that based on their understanding of the Darwinian origins of morality, they do not think that Hitler was evil. Some prominent bioethicists today assure us that Darwinism has desanctified human life. I think it would be good to remind them about where such ideas led in the past. Perhaps Schloss thinks that is coming too close to the consequentialist fallacy that he warns against in the opening paragraph of his section on Nazism. Certainly raising the specter of Nazism does nothing to prove that Darwinism is wrong. However, the evil of Nazism should give us pause to reconsider and examine carefully the ideas, including the Darwinian ones, that led to that moral catastrophe.

¹ Jeff Schloss, "The Expelled Controversy: Overcoming or Raising Walls of Division?," at <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/resources/Schloss200805.pdf>

² www.csustan.edu/history/faculty/weikart

³ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 9.

⁴ *Ibid*, 232.

⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

⁶ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1998-2000).

⁷ Richard Dawkins, "The Word Made Flesh," *The Guardian* (December 27, 2001); see also my discussion of this in "Does Darwinism Devalue Human Life?" available at www.csustan.edu/history/faculty/weikart.

⁸ For the Darwinian connection to his bioethics, see Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York, 2000), 77-78, 220-21.

⁹ I recognize that the case over Pianka is controversial, because Pianka later denied witnesses' reports about his statements (including one on a website by a student admirer of his, which confirmed the report of his critics). However, as the controversy broke, I downloaded comments from student evaluations that Pianka posted to his own website that claimed that Pianka had made the same claims in his classes. Pianka clearly lied to cover himself.

¹⁰ Adrian Desmond and James Moore. *Darwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), xxi.

¹¹ Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Lebenswege meines Denkens* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1919), 82-83.

¹² Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1899), 1:278, 2:717.

¹³ Ludwig Schemann, *Lebensfahrten eines Deutschen* (Leipzig: Erich Matthes, 1925), 295-97; Ludwig Schemann, *Die Rasse in den Geisteswissenschaften: Studien zur Geschichte des Rassengedankens*, vol. 3: *Die Rassenfragen im Schrifttum der Neuzeit*, 2nd ed. (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1943), xi, xvi, 229-41, 249-56.

¹⁴ Ernst Haeckel, *Die Lebenswunder: Gemeinverständliche Studien über Biologische Philosophie*

(Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1904), 450; Eugen Fischer to Ludwig Schemann, January 16, 1910, in Ludwig Schemann papers, IV B 1/2, University of Freiburg Library Archives; Fritz Lenz to Ludwig Schemann, December 1, 1919, in Ludwig Schemann papers, IV B 1/2.

¹⁵ Darwin, *Descent*, 1: 201.

¹⁶ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2:xli.

¹⁷ One notable exception is Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 259, 515.

¹⁹ *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier*, ed. Henry Picker (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1989), 73-75.

²⁰ Traudl Junge, *Bis zur letzten Stunde: Hitlers Sekretärin erzählt ihr Leben* (Munich: Claassen Verlag, 2002), 122.

²¹ I am close to completing a book manuscript on *Hitler's Ethic* that—among other things—will provide decisive evidence that Hitler believed in biological evolution, including human evolution from animal ancestors.