



## A Darwinian Left (Darwinism Today series)

By Peter Singer



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Singer explains why the left originally rejected Darwinian thought and why these reasons are no longer viable. He discusses how twentieth-century thinking has transformed our understanding of Darwinian evolution, showing that it is compatible with cooperation as well as competition, and that the left can draw on this modern understanding to foster cooperation for socially desirable ends. A Darwinian left, says Singer, would still be on the side of the weak, poor, and oppressed, but it would have a better understanding of what social and economic changes would really work to benefit them. It would also work toward a higher moral status for nonhuman animals and a less anthropocentric view of our dominance over nature.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Amazon.com Review

Philosophers don't have to be arcane and out of touch. Princeton's Peter Singer gives 21st-century liberals and radicals something to think about with the slim but powerful volume of *Darwinism Today* titled *A Darwinian Left*. Long noted for holding controversial bioethical beliefs related to animal rights, abortion, and euthanasia, Singer tends to quickly polarize his readers. This time, he chooses to antagonize those most sympathetic with his positions, arguing that the political left should re-evaluate its dependence on Marxism and its shunning of Darwinism. His writing is lucid and pulls no punches in examining the consequences of 20th-century answers to poverty; fans of the welfare state are in for some discomfort.

But Singer sees making a few liberals squirm as crucial to stealing Darwinism from the right and combining the noble desire to help the helpless with a realistic view of human nature and evolution. He builds a compelling line of thought, peppered with examples, that shows how our competitive "survival of the fittest" conception of evolution falls far short of modern scientific thinking. Instead, Singer suggests we incorporate a Darwinian ethic of cooperation into our political thought and reflect carefully on the consequences of our remedies for the evils of the world. --*Rob Lightner*

### From Scientific American

Any intrusion of ideology into science is an invitation to wishful thinking. In his powerfully argued *A Darwinian Left*, Peter Singer takes the opposite tack: How can science make ideology realistic rather than a pipe dream? Ideologies claim to be realistic, and by selectively picking what fits and ignoring whatever doesn't fit they commonly give themselves a veneer of intellectual respectability. Social Darwinism (always a misnomer) used to provide such a veneer for the socioeconomic Right, which has more recently adopted competitive efficiency for maximal growth in our too finite world. In either case, might makes Right. To Singer, and to me, the core of the Left is a set of values, most notably that worth is intrinsic and doesn't depend on success or power. Traditionally, various factual beliefs have been accreted to these values, such as the homogeneity of human nature and its perfectibility by social change. Because they are matters of fact, they can be empirically investigated. Indeed, on strong current evidence both these beliefs appear to be false. Singer devotes a substantial part of his 70-page book to setting the background for such revisions. The gist of his subsequent argument goes something like this: It is quixotic to try to eliminate features that are pretty much universal among cultures, such as self-interest, a system of social rank, or even sexual jealousy. Among such quasi-invariants, though, is a readiness to form cooperative relationships and to recognize reciprocal obligations. Although the relative importance of cooperation and competition varies appreciably among cultures, it is by using cooperation as a focus that we may have our best chance for a real foundation for social change. With cooperation, Singer argues, always comes the problem of cheaters, who take but don't give. Less inequality can probably reduce their number but not remove the problem: self-interest is powerful. To harness self-interest so that it promotes cooperation, it is probably necessary to make cheating unprofitable. Thus, we have jails and other sanctions (although Singer fails to make these explicit) for when cheaters aren't personally accessible. For cooperation is valued by more than the Left. So what does all this have to do with the processes of biological evolution? I confess to being somewhat mystified, apart from its help with the cleansing of factual beliefs. A sophisticated treatment of cooperation, and its problems, exists in sociology. That treatment is more readily adapted than what we see in evolution. In the natural world, cooperation can in fact come from diverse evolutionary processes. A species of bacterium may produce a waste product that inhibits its expansion if not removed. A second bacterium uses this waste as its own food, thereby benefiting both. Or when times get tough, some amoebae gather together and produce a stalked fruiting body from which spores have a chance to reach some fresh amoeba-size pasture. Or an alga and a

fungus may form a lichen that can live where neither component can survive by itself. Or some fish are less likely to be found and eaten if they are in a school. Or a pack of wolves can overcome a caribou that would be dangerous to one alone. Or a beetle may eat pollen and transfer some to the next flower it visits. Or a subordinate female of a paper wasp that gets uppity and lays an egg of her own may have it eaten by the dominant female to enforce cooperation. Or a soil fungus that helps plants absorb nutrients and gains energy from them in return may transfer nutrients from a more successful plant to a weakling, thus imposing cooperation. Or a honeybee that stings usually then dies in the process, for the sake of its relatives. Various other causes of cooperation are found in nature, some less easy to visualize. Some of these processes apply in human societies, too. Family members tend to cooperate with one another more than with nonrelatives, drafted soldiers form an army unit by coercion, and so on. Singer quite ignores this background diversity and reasonably so. It isn't what our societies are built from, mostly. In the biological world, cooperation is almost always merely a mechanism of competition. The only class of exceptions I know is when cooperation permits use of resources that would otherwise go unused, as with a lichen on a bare rock. Every species and population expands until something stops it. If cooperation permits more expansion, then it is automatically selected for. Otherwise it isn't. As Singer points out, Karl Marx and others have noted that Darwin's theory has important resemblances to English society of the time, with such phenomena as competition, division of labor, and expansion of successful novelties. The theory has been maligned because of this resemblance, yet it has been magnificently vindicated and survives unchanged in its basic form. So we can turn the critique on its head: rather than the resemblance impugning what we know of evolution, it was probably important in locating the initial discovery in England at that time. Alfred Russel Wallace, co-discoverer of the theory of evolution by natural selection, was English, too, and both he and Darwin had their basic insight when reading *On Population*, by Englishman Thomas Malthus. Does the primacy of competition over cooperation in nature mean that the Right is right? Not at all. A study of evolution is useful in debunking factual beliefs of the Right as well as of the Left. In addition, we can exert our dominion over fish and fowl not literally but by transcending the automatic processes of the biological world. We don't need to use the natural world as a model for our actions, still less as a model for our values. We are superior only because of the brains that permit us to make general choices as well as specific ones. If we jointly prefer a cooperative approach to a competitive one, we have the ability to modify our society for the good of all. Thus, we can choose to transcend our heritage; is never justifies ought. It is a truism that we don't own the earth but borrow it from our children, a truism that embodies the spirit of cooperation and resonates deeply with the Left.

EXCERPT\_A DARWINIAN LEFT "A Darwinian left would not: • Deny the existence of a human nature, nor insist that human nature is inherently good, nor that it is infinitely malleable; • Expect to end all conflict and strife between human beings, whether by political revolution, social change, or better education; • Assume that all inequalities are due to discrimination, prejudice, oppression or social conditioning. Some will be, but this cannot be assumed in every case; A Darwinian left would: • Accept that there is such a thing as human nature, and seek to find out more about it, so that policies can be grounded on the best available evidence of what human beings are like; • Reject any inference from what is "natural" to what is "right"; • Expect that, under different social and economic systems, many people will act competitively in order to enhance their own status, gain a position of power, and/or advance their interests and those of their kin; • Expect that, regardless of the social and economic system in which they live, most people will respond positively to genuine opportunities to enter into mutually beneficial forms of cooperation; • Promote structures that foster cooperation rather than competition, and attempt to channel competition into socially desirable ends; • Recognise that the way in which we exploit nonhuman animals is a legacy of a pre-Darwinian past that exaggerated the gulf between humans and other animals, and therefore work towards a higher moral status for nonhuman animals, and a less anthropocentric view of our dominance over nature; • Stand by the traditional values of the left by being on the side of the weak, poor and oppressed, but think very carefully about what social and economic changes will really work to benefit them."

*LEIGH VAN VALEN is professor of ecology and evolution and of the conceptual foundations of science at*

*the University of Chicago.*

#### About the Author

**Peter Singer** is DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. He is the author of numerous books, including *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants* and *Individuals, Humans and Persons: Questions of Life and Death*, both coauthored with Helga Kuhse.

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