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**Evolution Along the Road from Rationalism to Jedwabne**

The rationalist project of the Enlightenment painted a picture of the world as a place where all mysteries could be solved through reason and determined logical inquiry. As more and more information about the world came to light, it appeared that European society as a whole was moving towards a more civilized way of life in a culture guided by science and empirical investigation. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution seemed to provide further evidence that the speed at which society could progress and the degree to which it could improve was practically unlimited, bounded only by the efforts of the human race towards that end. If this is so, how then can such an incident as the Jedwabne pogrom, which runs so obviously counter to the ideals of progress and reason, follow so closely upon the heels of the Enlightenment? While it is possible that the massacre was a product of anti-Semitism brought on by pseudoscience and pushed by the reigning propagandists of the day, evidence suggests otherwise. As such, it is altogether reasonable to maintain that although the Enlightenment was a success, it was not yet enough of a success to overcome the tendency of certain people to bend to the will of evil at the time of the Jedwabne killings.

**I. Darwin and Evolution**

It is apparent after even the most casual survey of the literature surrounding the theory of evolution at the time of its inception that it had far-reaching implications beyond mere scientific application. In the course of his research, Darwin came to the conclusion that the purpose of evolution was “to sort out [the] proper structure & adapt it to change” (Herbert 24). This idea lent itself very well to the concept that progress was something like the purpose of life, as progress led to the improvement of a species, which in turn led to more and more improvement on and on, approaching an ideal state of total perfection and adaptability. As a population evolves, the problems that face early generations are solved through adaptation, allowing the generations that follow to focus on surmounting different obstacles to their continued success. At lower levels of evolutionary complexity, this is an unconscious move prompted by instinctual and reproductive selection based on purely environmental factors. However, as evolution progresses, the opportunities for a population to select consciously appear to grow in response.

In one of his notebooks, Darwin states that, “generation [serves] to adapt and alter the race to [a] *changing* world,” (Herbert 77). It is useful for the purpose of this argument to examine the process of adaptation from the perspective of a simple unconscious population and a complex conscious population. An ideal case of the former is the classic case of the peppered moths. The light gray form of the moth was the most common form of the moth present in England prior to the beginning of the industrial revolution. With the advent of the industrial revolution came a great amount of soot, which covered the trees where the peppered moths lived. At around this time, the dark gray form of the moth (which had previously been overwhelmingly outnumbered by the light gray form) began to appear in much greater numbers, because the number of light gray moths able to reproduce in the area had been drastically reduced by predation due to the fact that their camouflage was no longer effective in the sooty forests, whereas the dark moths had no such problem.

While there is undoubtedly a measure of unconscious adaptation that takes place within the human race, the fact that we are intelligent self-aware beings makes things a bit more complicated. The adage “necessity is the mother of invention” best describes humanity’s adaptive process. When there is a problem, threat, or inconvenience that confronts a large number of people, be it natural or otherwise, humans have a tendency to try and fix it. Darwin believed that “*Natural Selection*…selects exclusively for the good of each organic being,” (Herbert 87). There is no doubt that this was true in the case of the peppered moths, but is it also the case in cases like the Holocaust where people have attempted to “improve” the race by removing people with “undesirable” characteristics? In short, is there a difference between natural selection and selection prompted by conscious drive? Herbert paraphrases Darwin’s argument in Chapter V. of Darwin’s *On the Origin of* Species that, “nature exercise[s] a more powerful role than man in determining which individuals and species do survive” (Herbert 29), showing that Darwin believed such a difference to exist.

**II. The Enlightenment and WWII**

The rationalism of the 19th century served to give mankind the belief that it was in control of its own destiny. Scientific inquiry of all sorts was made for the purpose of not only understanding the world but also controlling it and making it a more desirable place to live. It is also apparent that it was the perceived responsibility of those in possession of knowledge to spread it to those without, as the more developed nations of the age sought to improve and civilize their less developed neighbors and their own unenlightened populations as well. In his *Recollections*, Alfred Russel Wallace writes, “[w]hy do some die and some live? …on the whole the best fitted live…in every generation the inferior [are] killed off and the superior…remain,”(Herbert 90). Such scientific evidence for the improvement of the human race through progressive adaptation to the challenges of continued existence, when coupled with the perceived idea that humanity was responsible for spreading the light of reason contributed to a misdirected belief that people could know what needed to be preserved in humanity and what needed to be removed. This is not to say that the theory of evolution directly caused the Holocaust or the massacre at Jedwabne, but rather that it and other intellectual developments created a state of affairs unlike any that had come before where such atrocities could be rationalized.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment represented the first concerted effort to truly define the mechanics of the world. Their discoveries, whether scientific, philosophical, or political, unwittingly provided new avenues for highlighting the differences between groups of people which, being based on “fact,” were seen as being more credible assertions than those that had come before. Following the Enlightenment, the number of lines that people could divide along increased enormously. One’s politics, social class, and nationality became almost as important as one’s religion, birth, gender, or local allegiance had been previously. In *Neighbors*, Gross writes of the times leading up to and including the war, “[e]very conceivable cleavage in society was eventually exploited…city was set against the countryside, workers against peasants…young against old…and ethnic groups against each other,” (Gross xv-xvi).

This shift in focus became more and more apparent over the years until the matter came to a head. The nationalist conflicts and political infighting that preceded WWII demonstrated the presence of many unresolved issues with the clear cut and often conflicting discoveries of the Enlightenment. The war represented a way to sort out what nation, what political ideology, what people, and what ultimate goal was the best. The conflict itself was perhaps inevitable, but the form that it took was not. Instead of using the example of the Enlightenment as a guide for the proper way to go about trying to confront the problems that faced humanity in a manner both rational and considered, the totalitarians twisted its message and used its words to sow hatred and disunion. This attitude presented itself most notably in the actions of the Nazis, of Stalin’s followers, but it is also apparent in the actions of everyday people living under them, among these the people of Jedwabne, Poland.

**III. Jedwabne**

“On a summer day in 1941 in Nazi-occupied Poland, half of the town of Jedwabne brutally murdered the other half: 1600 men, women, and children-all but seven of the town’s Jews,” (Gross, jacket notes). What is to be thought of this slaughter of innocents? It was not merely a product of state-sponsored anti-Semitism. That much is clear. The proactive role that the Polish population of the town took in the incident as well as the lack of sufficient evidence for the alleged collaboration of Polish Jews with the Soviet occupiers cited as one of the primary motivations for the massacre suggests that the anti-Semitism behind the incident was one that existed independent of the Nazis and the Soviets. Gross makes it clear in his examination that “German police detachments and various functionaries who implemented the ‘final solution’ did not compel the local population to participate directly in the murder of Jews,” (Gross 87). If it was the case that records of mass-collaboration between Jedwabne Jews and the Soviet forces existed, or that there was evidence of a concerted propaganda campaign targeted on the area, or even if some small neighborhood quarrel over land had occurred in the days or weeks prior to the slaughter, it could be argued that there was some external reason to blame for what occurred, but no such evidence exists.

Were the incident the only one of its kind, it could be written off as a fluke, but it is not. Many incidents of Polish anti-Semitism before, during, and after the war “were not derived from some mythical ‘Judeo-commune’ or anger over the Soviet-assisted Communist takeover of Poland by the Jews,” (Gross 100), they came from somewhere else. Gross analyzes the postwar continuation in Poland observing that, “[the Jews and Jewish empathizers] were not hated or feared as crypto-communists but rather as embarrassing witnesses to crimes that had been committed,” (Gross 101); if it was the case that the Nazis alone were to blame for what had happened, Polish anti-Semitism should have stopped at the end of the war, but it did not.

The question at hand is how such incidents could occur if the Enlightenment had been a success, and how if society had progressed in the footsteps of the Enlightenment it could have managed to not evolve to a point where such things could not happen. The answer is not altogether clear. Perhaps it is the case that despite the best efforts of theorists and philosophers, even in conjunction with the most well-intentioned actions of people all throughout the world, there remains evil that cannot be excised or explained by reasoned inquiry. Maybe society had to make such terrible mistakes as part of the process of growth and change in order to avoid making them again. It is one thing to know that mass murder is wrong. It is quite another to be confronted with mass murder and have to see *why* and *how* it is wrong.

**IV. Conclusion**

The Enlightenment was a success insofar as it gave the people of the world the power to determine their own destiny through the application of knowledge. Socialism, Communism, Nationalism, and Imperialism are only ideas, and on their own, ideas cannot hurt anyone. It is in the way in which they are implemented that gives them connotations of right and wrong, of good and evil. The lessons learned about the dark side of humanity during the early 20th century are unpleasant in the extreme, but through the experience of knowing just how low humanity can sink, it has been made clear that doing so again must be prevented. In that way both the Enlightenment and the concept of evolution apply.

The Enlightenment thinkers believed that knowledge was the best tool for humanity to realize its full potential. Such depravity as the massacre at Jedwabne gave humanity the knowledge that it is capable of great evil and the opportunity to change in order to do all that can be done to prevent it. Darwin believed that change is progress, and that progress is the purpose of life. If it learns from its mistakes and continues to refine itself through trial and error in the pursuit of knowledge, it is to be hoped that one day humanity will “sort out the proper structure;” as Darwin suggested.