EVOLUTIONISM

Evolutionism refers to the notion that basic life forms increase in complexity over time due to environmental adaptation. While commonly attributed to Charles Darwin, the notion that life forms varied over time had long been posited before his *Origin of the Species*. Jean Baptiste Lamarck’s organic evolution, for instance, had posited that life forms could directly pass on traits to their progeny after environmental exposure. Though discredited today, Lamarck’s claim held widespread currency even after Mendelian genetics falsified it. After Darwin, numerous thinkers took his basic premise of natural selection and used it sociologically to explain human behavior, arguing for a genetic teleology. Darwin’s cousin, Sir Francis Galton, founded the field of eugenics, which argued that evolutionary sexual selection, applied to human breeding, could produce improved characteristics in later offspring. Correspondingly, the genetically unfit—the inept, indolent or physically handicapped—would be prevented from further breeding. Though often attributed to Darwin, the phrase “survival of the fittest” was actually coined in 1864 by Herbert Spencer (Darwin borrowed it in 1869). Spencer then used evolutionism’s tenets to convey a broad philosophy of human behavior and institutional progress. Today, the term serves as the theoretical basis for many fields, both cultural and scientific.

Bibliography: Larson, Edward J. *Evolutionism: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory*. New York: Modern Library, 2004.

Derek La Shot

University of Oklahoma