Reviewer's report

Title: Human Dignity in the Nazi Era: Implications for Contemporary Bioethics

Version: 1 Date: 14 November 2005

Reviewer: Richard Weikart

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General

In arguing that contemporary bioethics can learn some lessons from the Nazi era, O'Mathúna's essay makes some cogent points. He avoids drawing simple analogies from the Nazi period to today. Rather he argues that in examining some of the roots of Nazi ideology, we can see parallels with contemporary thought, and this he finds troubling. He identifies the roots of Nazi bioethical thought, correctly in my opinion, as social Darwinist ideology.

O'Mathúna’s claims about the social Darwinist roots of Nazi ideology, especially as that ideology impinged on bioethical issues, is only mildly controversial and is derived largely from secondary works, not the least of which is my own book, _From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany_ (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Many other historical works buttress this claim.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

none

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

On p. 13 O’Mathúna claims that Darwin initially adopted Lamarckism. This is misleading, as Darwin initially distanced his theory from Lamarckism, and only in later editions did he give more credence to Lamarckism as a source of variation.

On p. 14 he calls Weismann a medical researcher. More accurately Weismann was a biologist.

On p. 15 he claims that Weismann used the term “germ” like we use the term “embryo.” In fact, Weismann’s use of the term “germ” is more like our current use of the term “genome.” He was referring to hereditary material.

On p. 23 he wrongly claims that naturalistic evolution holds that ethics is a human invention. On the contrary, naturalistic evolutionists who embrace evolutionary ethics generally see ethics as originating in biological processes (usually as an instinct), not as a human invention.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
For O’Mathúna’s purposes, it is probably not necessary to engage all the literature on social Darwinism, but perhaps he should at least look at Mike Hawkins’ book, _Social Darwinism in European and American Thought_ (Cambridge University Press, 1997). Hawkins' work could help him articulate a clear definition of social Darwinism, which needs to be more explicit from the start of the essay.

O’Mathúna’s essay would also be stronger if he would explain in the introduction how other scholars view the connections between Nazis, the Holocaust, and current bioethical discussions. Quite a few essays have been written on the topic, incl. the following:


Ch. 6, “The Nazi Analogy and Contemporary Debates on Euthanasia of Burleigh,” in Michael Burleigh, Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

Discussing this literature is important, because it shows that O’Mathúna’s argument contributes to an on-going discussion. Many scholars reject the idea that Nazi analogies have relevance for contemporary debates. However, O’Mathúna provides a more nuanced way of drawing implications from the Nazi era for current bioethics debates. This is why his essay should be published.

Finally, when O’Mathúna discusses contemporary bioethicists, such as Singer, he does not make clear connections to social Darwinist ideology. He shows common attitudes, but the influence seems diffuse. Singer, however, in some of his writings admits that Darwinism informs his bioethical views, but O’Mathúna misses this opportunity to show more direct connections. In my essay, “Does Darwinism Devalue Human Life?” (available at www.csustan.edu/history/faculty/weikart/dardevalue.htm) I give some other contemporary examples, as well.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.