

Social Darwinism: Reason or Rationalization?

The following activity asks you to evaluate the theory of Social Darwinism. Read the activity and think carefully about the questions it asks. Answer each question in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

Although economic interests spurred the rush of expansion, other factors caused it as well. Many people, including Teddy Roosevelt, believed in America's duty to "elevate uncivilized peoples." European powers claimed the same duty as they colonized Africa and Asia. Others pointed to the theoretical work of Charles Darwin to justify the cause of imperialism.

As a young man, Charles Darwin joined a British scientific expedition aboard the H.M.S. *Beagle*. As the *Beagle* journeyed around the world, Darwin collected specimens of plants and animals. He found fossils of extinct animals that resembled living animals, and he noticed many variations within the same species. After returning from his voyage, Darwin spent twenty years studying his specimens. In 1859 Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species by the Means of Natural Selection*, a book that explained his new theory.

In his theory of natural selection, Darwin made the following observations:

1. The resources of an environment are limited. Creatures produce more offspring than can possibly survive. Members of a species must compete for limited resources and for survival.
2. No two members of a species are exactly alike. Each organism contains an individual combination of inherited traits. Some traits are useful for survival; other traits are not.
3. Organisms that have useful traits reproduce in greater numbers. Their offspring inherit the traits. Organisms with unfavorable traits eventually die off. The fittest survive.
4. Nature selects different traits at different times. Varieties within a species gradually create a new species.

The publication of this theory started a sensational controversy. Many writers applied Darwin's theory to sociology. They developed a controversial theory called Social Darwinism. Many people, from Karl Marx to Captain Mahan to Adolf Hitler, employed Social Darwinism in their arguments. How can people with vastly different viewpoints use the same argument to defend their views?

Read the following basic argument for Social Darwinism. Does it adhere to the principles of Darwin's theory? Why or why not?

Answer →

Answer →

Within the human species, nations are locked in a struggle for survival. Everywhere, civilized nations are supplanting barbarous nations. Advanced civilization, obviously, has inherited valuable traits from its ancestors. Underdeveloped cultures, except in hostile climates, will soon die off. Therefore, natural order obligates powerful, civilized nations to appropriate the limited resources of the weak.

ANSWER → Josiah Strong, an influential American clergyman, wrote the following argument for expansion in 1897. Is it logical? How does it differ from the previous passage? Does it follow Darwin's line of reasoning?

The two great ideas of mankind are Christianity and civil liberty. The Anglo-Saxon civilization is the great representative of these two great ideas. Add to this the fact of his rapidly increasing strength in modern times, and we have a demonstration of his destiny.

There can be no doubt that North America is to be the great home of Anglo-Saxon power. It is not unlikely that before the close of the next century, this race will outnumber all other civilized races of the earth. But the widening waves of migration meet today on its Pacific coast. The unoccupied arable lands of the world are limited and will soon be taken.

The time is coming when the pressure of population will . . . force the final competition of races. The United States will assert itself, having developed aggressive traits necessary to impress its institutions upon mankind. Can anyone doubt that the result of this competition will be the survival of the fittest?