

LECTURE / DISCUSSION / DEBATE  
THE IMPACT OF DARWINIAN THEORIES ON THE  
TRADITIONS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

**Terms and concepts to know:**

Evolution	Fact vs. Mechanism Evolution
Natural Selection	“Survival of the Fittest”
Mendel / Genes / DNA	Progressive (“Tree-Shaped”)
Nonprogressive (“Bush-Shaped”)	Theist / Atheist Debate
Standard Social Science Model	Causal / Functional Explanation
Skinner / Behaviorism	Tinbergen / Ethology
Wilson / Sociobiology	Lorenz / Human Aggression
Chomsky / Cognitive Psychology	

**Study and discussion questions:**

1. Is science, in your view, a better methodology to discover the “truth” about human nature? Should secular, scientific, claims to a prescription of what is wrong with us be considered as controversial (and thus subject to rejection) as religious and philosophical prescriptions?
2. Examine the four empirical generalizations associated with Darwin’s concept of natural selection. Can you find contemporary examples of natural selection at work?
3. Examine the progressive / nonprogressive and theist / atheist matrix. Where would you locate yourself at the present time? What evidence or experience might contribute to your movement elsewhere in this matrix?
4. Discuss Durkheim’s position on *causal* vs. *functional* explanations in sociology. Do you agree with his suggestion that “social unity” and control of society’s “values and beliefs” is the real origin of the idea of God or the sacred?
5. Debate Skinner’s position that all animal behavior can be explained in terms of *environmental* variables. Can you think of some examples of human behavior that are innate and not subject to environmental influences?
6. Stevenson notes that in the debate involving “nature vs. nurture” Wilson’s later work in sociobiology suggested that “genes hold culture on a leash.” What do you think this means and how true do you think it is?
7. Ernst Mayr credits Darwin as having the most profound impact on modern thought. How did Darwin’s ideas conflict with the prevailing ideas of his time, and how have these ideas shaped political thought in our own time? (in your opinion).

**Readings:**

Stevenson. *Twelve Theories on Human Nature*, Chapter 12.

**Video:**

*Human Zoos: America’s Forgotten History of Scientific Racism.*