

Discourses on Isopublic Podcasts

Transcript and End Notes

Series: Survival of the Fittest... Getting It Right

Episode: 1.3 First Principles

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Transcript

Welcome to *Discourses on Isopublic*.

My name is Dean Adair—creator of isopublic, nation of political equals and the “rule yourself and no else” society.

♪ *Intro music*

This is Episode 1.3 titled, “Survival of the Fittest’ ... Getting It Right”

Few turns of phrase seem to unsettle people more than “survival of the fittest.” That to be “unfit” implies one *should* suffer and die as judged by nature. We’ve been conditioned to associate with it evil images of the “master race,” state policies of eugenics and forced sterilization, the strong preying on the weak, a sense of righteous callousness towards the poor and sick, social Darwinism, laissez-faire capitalism making for a lord-of-the-flies and dog-eat-dog society—“red in tooth and claw.” But these sentiments are completely wrong as I hope to show in this episode. And getting survival of the fittest right is important to appreciating the political model of isopublic, and even just to have a sounder awareness of the human condition and prospects for *Homo sapiens*.

The intended meaning of the phrase has been stripped away and twisted into a caricature by charlatans to attack freedom and capitalism. The negative sentiments we associate with social Darwinism and survival of the fittest can be traced back to the end of the 19th century as people began to consider human society through a misapplication of Darwin’s theory of natural selection, which unfortunately still goes on today. But it wasn’t until the book *Social Darwinism in American Thought* by Richard Hofstadter published in 1944 did the term “social Darwinism” become embedded in the public consciousness and, with it, survival of the fittest as rhetorical bludgeons. Hofstadter was a professor of History at Columbia University and an avowed Marxist. He’s been quoted as saying, “I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it.”¹ His book amounts to little more than socialist propaganda in a tweed wrapper. But we live with its confused legacy still today. As Hofstadter wrote in *Social Darwinism*, “The principle of competition, the survival of the fittest, is the law of plants and brutes and brutish men, but it is not the highest law of civilization.”² And here we have on display the biased sentiment of a socialist intellectual. He either failed to understand the true meaning of the phrase or allowed his Marxist leanings to blind him to it.

Since this *Discourses* episode is focused on survival of the fittest, I don’t want to get distracted by the term “social Darwinism.” That nonsensical term deserves its own future episode.

The phrase “survival of the fittest” was coined by 19th century English evolutionary philosopher and classical liberal thinker, Herbert Spencer, first appearing in print in his *Principles of Biology* published in 1864, five years after Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. After that, the phrase took on a life of its own having been coopted by propogandists like Hofstadter. My purpose with this episode is to equip you with the



true meaning of the phrase. And after that, open your mind to its full implications as Spencer intended. But before I do, I need to create the context that prompted Spencer to write it in the first place.

The backstory to survival of the fittest begins with the 18th century French naturalist, John-Baptiste Lamarck, who proposed the first modern theory of biological evolution in his treatise *Zoological Philosophy* published in 1809, fifty years before Darwin's *Origin*. Lamarck's theory is called "use-inheritance" which he formulated as follows—

"First Law: In every animal which has not passed the limit of its development, a more frequent and continuous use of any organ gradually strengthens, develops and enlarges that organ, and gives it a power proportional to the length of time it has been so used; while the permanent disuse of any organ imperceptibly weakens and deteriorates it, and progressively diminishes its functional capacity, until it finally disappears.

Second Law: All the acquisitions or losses wrought by nature on individuals, through the influence of the environment in which their race has long been placed, and hence through the influence of the predominant use or permanent disuse of any organ; all these are preserved by reproduction to the new individuals which arise, provided that the acquired modifications are common to both sexes, or at least to the individuals which produce the young."³

In other words, as a physical trait is exercised and strengthens, it's passed onto offspring and as it's disused, it disappears and not passed on. Lamarck used the giraffe's neck as an example. As he wrote, "It is interesting to observe the result of habit in the peculiar shape and size of the giraffe (Camelopardalis): this animal, the largest of the mammals, is known to live in the interior of Africa in places where the soil is nearly always arid and barren, so that it is obliged to browse on the leaves of trees and to make constant efforts to reach them. From this habit long maintained in all its race, it has resulted that the animal's fore-legs have become longer than its hind legs, and that its neck is lengthened to such a degree that the giraffe, without standing up on its hind legs, attains a height of six metres (nearly 20 feet)."⁴

Before Lamarck, the only widely held origin story for humankind in Western civilization was the story of Genesis. After Lamarck, at least in secular society, Lamarckian use-inheritance was accepted as the scientific explanation for the development of species including humans. It was in this intellectual environment that a young Herbert Spencer began to understand the nature of evolution as a process of progress over time. He accepted use-inheritance in the biological sense but came to see how it serves as a useful analogy for the evolution of human society, what he'd later refer to as the "social organism." He took Lamarck's theory and applied it to human culture which I call "cultural use-inheritance." This was a profound insight that basically everyone has conflated with the fiction known today as "social Darwinism" thanks to Hofstadter.

It doesn't matter whether you believe Lamarck's thesis on evolution has merit or not with respect to biology, though modern epigenetics might suggest it does. What is important is that it serves as a useful theory for cultural evolution. By restating Lamarck's laws to reflect human society, we can produce something like the following—

First Law: With experience, do individuals gain knowledge—with useful knowledge strengthened with use and unuseful knowledge forgotten with disuse.

Second Law: Useful knowledge so acquired and used over time is preserved through those who possess that knowledge teaching those who don't, who then in turn repeat the process.

What I call "do, learn, teach" which is a shorthand term I use for evolutionary utilitarianism.

Spencer's observation was that human society evolves on an individual basis via a process of use, i.e. experience, and inheritance, i.e. learning, with the resulting knowledge transmitted across society and down through subsequent generations. He used Lamarckian use-inheritance in the context of human society as cultural use-inheritance to describe what makes civilization and human progress possible. For instance, it was once widely believed that the Sun revolves around the Earth, but once Galileo discovered the Earth revolves around the Sun and that knowledge was widely disseminated, the heliocentric model of our solar system became dominant and the geocentric model was abandoned.

Unfortunately, Spencer didn't write this understanding so explicitly in his works. That even though his treatise on radical individualism, *Social Statics*, is largely based on this thinking, there's no mention of it. Not until his *Autobiography*, published the year after he died in 1904, does he make it clear—

“In ...'Letters on the Proper Sphere of Government'—published in 1842, and republished as a pamphlet in 1843, the only point of community with the general doctrine of evolution is a belief in the modifiability of human nature through adaptation to conditions (which I held as a corollary from the theory of Lamarck) and a consequent belief in human progression. In the second and more important one, 'Social Statics,' published in 1850, the same general ideas are to be seen, worked out more elaborately in their ethical and political consequences.”

When I read that, it all came into focus for me, it was a revelation. The true underlying philosophy that informed Spencer's thinking with respect to the nature of human progress was Lamarckian use-inheritance as applied to human society, i.e. cultural use-inheritance. A thesis that's been willfully misunderstood, ignored, or subverted by academics and political ne'er-do-wells. I imagine that had the world understood and accepted Spencer and rejected Marx, much of the horrors of the 20th century wouldn't have occurred.

On the question of biological development, until Darwin's *Origin* was published in 1859, Spencer was a pure Lamarckian. When *Origin* was published, it had a tectonic impact on our understanding of biological evolution overturning Lamarck's use-inheritance practically overnight. Lamarck was forgotten and Darwin all but deified which is literally represented by their respective treatment upon their deaths.

From Wikipedia, “Lamarck gradually turned blind; he died in Paris on 18 December 1829. When he died, his family was so poor, they had to apply to the Academie for financial assistance. Lamarck was buried in a common grave of the Montparnasse cemetery for just five years, according to the grant obtained from relatives. Later, the body was dug up along with other remains and was lost. Lamarck's books and the contents of his home were sold at auction, and his body was buried in a temporary lime pit.”⁵

By contrast, after Darwin's death, from Wikipedia, “[Darwin] had expected to be buried in St Mary's churchyard at Downe, but at the request of Darwin's colleagues, after public and parliamentary petitioning, William Spottiswoode (President of the Royal Society) arranged for Darwin to be honoured by burial in Westminster Abbey, close to John Herschel and Isaac Newton. The funeral was held on Wednesday 26 April and was attended by thousands of people, including family, friends, scientists, philosophers and dignitaries.”⁶ Of course, Darwin deserved the recognition, but Lamarck deserved much better than he got.

And although Darwin eclipsed Lamarck, which Spencer accepted, he refused to completely abandon Lamarck's theory of use-inheritance as a factor in biological evolution. Spencer rejected such binary “black and white” thinking that causes many to reduce every issue to a simple “yes or no,” “right or wrong” false dichotomy. Why should Lamarck now be so completely wrong and Darwin completely right? For Spencer, Lamarck could still be right by degree. As he wrote in *Principles of Biology*, “But now, though it seems to me that we are thus supplied with a key to phenomena which are multitudinous and

varied beyond all conception; it also seems to me that there is a moiety of the phenomena which this key will not unlock. Mr. Darwin himself recognizes use and disuse of parts, as causes of modifications in organisms; and does this, indeed, to a greater extent than do some who accept his general conclusion. But I conceive that he does not recognize them to a sufficient extent. While he conclusively shows that the inheritance of changes of structure, caused by changes of function, is utterly insufficient to explain a great mass — probably the greater mass — of morphological phenomena; I think he leaves unconsidered a mass of morphological phenomena that are explicable as results of functionally-acquired modifications, transmitted and increased, and which are not explicable as results of natural selection.”⁷

Here Spencer defended the Lamarckian view while at the same time accepting natural selection as the more dominant factor. Spencer imagined that perhaps there could be more than one cause of biological development. For Spencer then, the question of "what *is* the cause of evolution?" is better phrased as "what *are* its causes?"

With the backstory out of the way, and hopefully your mind receptive to the truth, I’ll give you the actual meaning of survival of the fittest as Spencer intended it. A careful reading of his *Principles of Biology* gives us a clue as to what will follow in his subsequent works.

“By natural selection or survival of the fittest—by the preservation in successive generations of those whose moving equilibria happen to be least at variance with the requirements, there is eventually produced a changed equilibrium completely in harmony with the requirements. And thus, it results that those universal laws of the redistribution of matter and motion, which are conformed to by evolution in general, are conformed to by organic evolution.”⁸

That last bit matters most—that “... those universal laws of the redistribution of matter and motion, which are conformed to by evolution in general, are conformed to by organic evolution.” Conformed to in general including organic evolution meaning that Spencer considered that survival of the fittest applies to *all* systems in nature, organic *and* inorganic.

That survival of the fittest is a universal axiom of nature. That through the ever-occurring conflict in nature with each system tending to a resting state, i.e. a state of moving equilibrium, and in so doing interrupting other systems doing the same, that they either adapt to conditions disruptive to their equilibrium or cease to continue—a kind of conservation of being in a Newtonian sense. This universal principle applies to all systems in nature, e.g. animal species, ecosystems, climate, businesses, the human body, nations, civilizations, solar systems, and galaxies.

The implication of survival of the fittest is that all natural systems existing today are in some way more fit than all systems in the past that have since ceased to exist, e.g. nature selected mammals as more fit than dinosaurs because mammals exist today and dinosaurs don’t. And if everything in nature is evolving into a more perfect nature, the question arises, “What is the Universe evolving into?” No one can or ever will likely have the answer but whatever it might be, survival of the fittest suggests a future state of ultimate equilibrium or harmony of the Universe with itself, maybe the Big Chill or the next Big Bang.

In light of Spencer’s intended meaning of the phrase, I’ll now relate how it’s misused in public discourse, primarily by those who intend to attack free-market capitalism, but also even by biologists. I’m taking these abuses straight from the Wikipedia article⁹ on survival of the fittest as of this recording. Be aware that the article is far less accurate than accurate, but it does offer most of all that’s wrong with people’s use of the phrase in one convenient location.

Abuse 1—"Herbert Spencer first used the phrase, after reading Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, in his *Principles of Biology* (1864), in which he drew parallels between his own economic theories and Darwin's biological ones..." This is wrong. The article gets the first-use reference right, but it's patently false that it had anything to do with Spencer's economics. If anything, Spencer's economic thinking derived from survival of the fittest not the other way around—but more precisely from his principle of equal freedom, which he derived from use-inheritance as applied to the human species, as in the equal freedom of each to exercise their human evolutionary advantages for the greatest well-being of the greatest number to make the human species its most fit in nature.

Abuse 2—"While the phrase 'survival of the fittest' is often used to mean 'natural selection', it is avoided by modern biologists, because the phrase can be misleading. For example, survival is only one aspect of selection, and not always the most important. Another problem is that the word 'fit' is frequently confused with a state of physical fitness. In the evolutionary meaning 'fitness' is the rate of reproductive output among a class of genetic variants." This is wrong. It was Darwin himself by the 5th edition of *Origin* who chose to use survival of the fittest as another way of expressing natural selection, so unless there's a biologist who wishes to claim greater authority than Darwin, be my guest. And Spencer had nothing to do with this. In fact, Spencer continued to refer to Darwin's theory as natural selection. The reason Darwin chose survival of the fittest as another term for natural selection, at the recommendation of Alfred Russel Wallace not Spencer, was because to Wallace "natural selection" personifies nature. Darwin agreed, but because natural selection was in such wide use by then, there'd be no way to put the jinni back in the bottle. His hope that by including both terms, people would over time choose survival of the fittest.¹⁰

But if anything, it was Darwin who misrepresented Spencer by doing so. As I've noted, for Spencer survival of the fittest was a universal axiom that applies to all systems in nature, organic and inorganic. Natural selection applies to organisms and, thus, is subordinate to survival of the fittest. And not to use the phrase because it can be confused with "physical fitness" is just dumb.

Abuse 3—"The phrase can also be interpreted to express a theory or hypothesis: that 'fit' as opposed to 'unfit' individuals or species, in some sense of 'fit', will survive some test. Nevertheless, when extended to individuals it is a conceptual mistake..." This is obviously wrong. If we take two individuals, one healthy and one with terminal cancer, who is more fit?

Abuse 4—"Interpretations of the phrase as expressing a theory are in danger of being tautological, meaning roughly 'those with a propensity to survive have a propensity to survive'; to have content the theory must use a concept of fitness that is independent of that of survival." This is gibberish. The term 'natural selection' doesn't convey anything either without definition. If anything, it's worse and, as I've noted, was a source of consternation for Darwin. "Natural selection" suggests a divine hand selecting which species evolves and which doesn't, a higher will of nature. The theory is the theory and the label just the label. Yet survival of the fittest isn't a theory per se but an axiomatic truth. What's to prove? Why did the dinosaurs go extinct? Because the species weren't fit in nature. Mammals survived; thus, mammals were more fit than dinosaurs, all things considered over time. Were the dinosaurs victims of natural selection or a cataclysmic event? With respect to survival of the fittest, it doesn't matter. All that matters is that they went extinct and, thus, were unfit to continue.

Abuse 5—"It has been claimed that 'the survival of the fittest' theory in biology was interpreted by late 19th century capitalists as 'an ethical precept that sanctioned cut-throat economic competition' and led to the advent of the theory of 'social Darwinism' which was used to justify laissez-faire economics, war and racism. However, these ideas predate and commonly contradict Darwin's ideas, and indeed their proponents rarely invoked Darwin in support. The term 'social Darwinism' referring to capitalist

ideologies was introduced as a term of abuse by Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* published in 1944." Which as I've shown, has nothing to do with Spencer's intended meaning of the phrase. Spencer was a vocal opponent of imperialism, colonialism, racism, state-sponsored eugenics, etc. Spencer even co-founded an activist group that protested English imperialism called the Anti-Aggression League.¹¹ And with respect to "cut-throat economic competition" what does that even mean? Laissez-faire capitalism doesn't involve cutting anyone's throat. Let's dispense with the hyperbolic fallacies. Spencer believed that equal freedom makes humans most fit in nature, and that laissez-faire capitalism is the most effective economic system consistent with that principle.

Abuse 6—"Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin viewed the concept of 'survival of the fittest' as supporting co-operation rather than competition. In his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* he set out his analysis leading to the conclusion that the fittest was not necessarily the best at competing individually, but often the community made up of those best at working together." Kropotkin got it right that cooperation makes human society more fit in nature, but also wrong. He didn't understand the concept of peaceful, cooperative competition which is what laissez-faire capitalism is based upon, i.e. a spirit of voluntary competition to produce the greatest value for others. Think of any competitive sport. Players peacefully cooperate knowing that only one team can win. The result for the fans is to watch the athletes vie to be the best thus bringing out the best in the sport. And nobody gets their throat cut or eaten in the process...

It should be well-understood by most people today that the idea of people laboring to produce the goods a society requires won't be when the laboring doesn't result in personal reward. No other economic system can produce such desirable results than laissez-faire capitalism. Certainly not socialism, which is predicated on "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" which inevitably must descend into brutal tyranny as those who can produce have no incentive to labor other than not being stood-up in front of a firing squad.

Now let's consider the implications of survival of the fittest properly understood by answering the question, "What political arrangement should humanity adopt to make *Homo sapiens* most fit in nature, i.e. to maximize our odds for continued existence?" For Spencer, it meant the principle of equal freedom applied to human society and humanity overall. The political means of accomplishing this I propose is, of course, isopublic which I intend to be an attainable, viable, and sustainable political arrangement that makes universal equal freedom manifest.

When considering survival of the fittest as applied to human society, we must start at the level of the species *Homo sapiens*, i.e. what political arrangement offers the best potential for humankind? Once settled, we can then drill down with respect to the consequent political institutions, law, and last, the individual. This, because you can't start with the individual without creating the sociopolitical context within which the individual is subject, as well as other individuals whose conduct will also impact him or her. And I limit this to political arrangement because that's what most influences society and what is most deliberately defined and implemented. In other words, there's no sense in considering aspects of society not subject to law and the law is an element of the political arrangement.

Thus, the starting point for considering the implication of survival of the fittest with respect to humans is to ask, "What makes *Homo sapiens* fit in nature?" In essence, this is the question Spencer answered given his understanding of cultural use-inheritance and which forms the basis of the moral philosophy he offhandedly called "rational utilitarianism" and I've relabeled as evolutionary utilitarianism. I contend, and I imagine Spencer would agree were he alive today, that what makes humans most fit in nature are the products of our knowledge, i.e. technology, that result from the exercise of our evolutionary advantages of tool-use, cognition, and language compounded across society and down

through subsequent generations. With that, the next consideration is to ask what political arrangement would maximize our evolutionary advantages? The logical premise being to arrange political society and the law accordingly such that each individual in society possesses the maximum freedom to exercise their evolutionary advantages which in turn produces the greatest well-being of the greatest number as multiplied across society and down through subsequent generations.

I'll end this episode with a quote from Spencer that captures what survival of the fittest meant to him with respect to human society. From his *Principles of Sociology*, "For it is clear that, other things equal, a society in which life, liberty, and property, are secure, and all interests justly regarded, must prosper more than one in which they are not; and, consequently, among competing industrial societies, there must be a gradual replacing of those in which personal rights are imperfectly maintained, by those in which they are perfectly maintained. So that by survival of the fittest must be produced a social type in which individual claims, considered as sacred, are trenched on by the State no further than is requisite to pay the cost of maintaining them, or rather, of arbitrating among them. For the aggressiveness of nature fostered by militancy having died out, the corporate function becomes that of deciding between those conflicting claims, the equitable adjustment of which is not obvious to the persons concerned."¹²

And it's with this general understanding that I've approached the model of isopublic. That of a society based upon the unalienable equal rights of selfdom, freedom, and property produces the most fit human society in nature, and should all of humanity be arranged under the political order of isopublic, the most fit human species in nature under the moral imperative of the greatest equal freedom for the greatest well-being of the greatest number, all things considered over time.

Here ends this episode of *Discourses on Isopublic*.

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This is Dean Adair signing off until next time.

♪ *Outro music*

End Notes

¹ “Richard Hofstadter.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 24 Nov. 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hofstadter#Political_views.

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³ Jean-Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck, On classification and evolution, Extracts from: *Philosophie zoologique, ou exposition des considérations relatives à l'histoire naturelle des animaux.* (Zoological Philosophy. An Exposition with Regard to the Natural History of Animals), J.B. Lamarck, 1809, Translated by Hugh Elliot (Macmillan, London 1914). Reprinted by University of Chicago Press, 1984. p. 113.

⁴ Ibid. p. 122.

⁵ “Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Dec. 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Baptiste_Lamarck#Biography.

⁶ “Charles Darwin.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 Dec. 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin#Death_and_funeral.

⁷ Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, (Williams and Norgate, 1898 ed.), p. 449.

⁸ Ibid. p. 557.

⁹ “Survival of the Fittest.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Nov. 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survival_of_the_fittest.

¹⁰ Correspondence between A. R. Wallace and Darwin over the terms “natural selection” and “survival of the fittest.”

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From Darwin to A. R. Wallace, 5 July 1866. Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 5145,” accessed on 14 December 2019, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-5145.xml>.

¹¹ Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography by Herbert Spencer. Illustrated in Two Volumes. Vol. 2* (New York: D. Appleton and Company 1904). 12/14/2019. https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2323#Spencer_1500-02_1342.



¹² Herbert Spencer, Political Institutions, being Part V of the Principles of Sociology (The Concluding Portion of Vol. II) (London: Williams and Norgate, 1882). 12/13/2019.
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