



THE REVOLT OF THE UNFIT

Posted on April 1, 2023 by Nicholas Murray Butler



Given the current anti-human ideas kicking about, it might be good to look back at how these ideas came about. In his inimical fashion, Nicholas Murray Butler (1862—1947) describes the problem before us. Butler was an American philosopher, educator and diplomat. This excerpt is from his book, *Why Should We Change Our Form of Government*, published in 1912, which should be widely read.



There are wars and rumors of wars in a portion of the territory occupied by the doctrine of organic evolution. All is not working smoothly and well and according to formula. It begins to appear that those men of science who, having derived the doctrine of organic evolution in its modern form from observations on earthworms, on climbing-plants, and on brightly colored birds, and who then straightway applied it blithely to man and his affairs, have made enemies of no small part of the human race.

It was all well enough to treat some earthworms, some climbing-plants, and some brightly colored birds as fit, and others as unfit, to survive; but when this distinction is extended over human beings and their economic, social, and political affairs, there is a general pricking-up of ears. The consciously fit look down on the resulting discussions with complacent scorn. The consciously unfit rage and roar loudly; while the unconsciously unfit bestir themselves mightily to overturn the whole theory upon which the distinction between fitness and unfitness rests. If any law of nature makes so absurd a distinction as that, then the offending and obnoxious law must be repealed, and that quickly.

The trouble appears to arise primarily from the fact that man does not like what may be termed his evolutionary poor relations. He is willing enough to read about earthworms and climbing-plants and brightly colored birds, but he does not want nature to be making leaps from any of these to him.

The earthworm, which, not being adapted to its surroundings, soon dies unhonored and unsung, passes peacefully out of life without either a coroner's inquest, an indictment for earthworm slaughter, a legislative proposal for the future protection of earthworms, or even a new society for the reform of the social and economic state of the earthworms that are left. Even the quasi-intelligent climbing-plant and the brightly colored bird, humanly vain, find an equally inconspicuous fate awaiting them. This is the

way nature operates when unimpeded or unchallenged by the powerful manifestations of human revolt or human revenge. Of course if man understood the place assigned to him in nature by the doctrine of organic evolution as well as the earthworm, the climbing-plant, and the brightly colored bird understand theirs, he, too, like them, would submit to nature's processes and decrees without a protest. As a matter of logic, no doubt he ought to; but after all these centuries, it is still a far cry from logic to life.

In fact, man, unless he is consciously and admittedly fit, revolts against the implication of the doctrine of evolution, and objects both to being considered unfit to survive and succeed, and to being forced to accept the only fate which nature offers to those who are unfit for survival and success. Indeed, he manifests with amazing pertinacity what Schopenhauer used to call "the will to live," and considerations and arguments based on adaptability to environment have no weight with him. So much the worse for environment, he cries; and straightway sets out to prove it.

On the other hand, those humans who are classed by the doctrine of evolution as fit, exhibit a most disconcerting satisfaction with things as they are. The fit make no conscious struggle for existence. They do not have to. Being fit, they survive ipso facto. Thus does the doctrine of evolution, like a playful kitten, merrily pursue its tail with rapturous delight. The fit survive; those survive who are fit. Nothing could be more simple.

Those who are not adapted to the conditions that surround them, however, rebel against the fate of the earthworm and the climbing-plant and the brightly colored bird, and engage in a conscious struggle for existence and for success in that existence despite their inappropriate environment. Statutes can be repealed or amended; why not laws of nature as well? Those human beings who are unfit have, it must be admitted, one great, though perhaps temporary, advantage over the laws of nature; for the laws of nature have not yet been granted suffrage, and the organized unfit can always lead a large majority to the polls. So soon as knowledge of this fact becomes common property, the laws of nature will have a bad quarter of an hour in more countries than one.

The revolt of the unfit primarily takes the form of attempts to lessen and to limit competition, which is instinctively felt, and with reason, to be part of the struggle for existence and for success. The inequalities which nature makes, and without which the process of evolution could not go on, the unfit propose to smooth away and to wipe out by that magic fiat of collective human will called legislation. The great struggle between the gods of Olympus and the Titans, which the ancient sculptors so loved

to picture, was child's play compared with the struggle between the laws of nature and the laws of man which the civilized world is apparently soon to be invited to witness. This struggle will bear a little examination, and it may be that the laws of nature, as the doctrine of evolution conceives and states them, will not have everything their own way.

Professor Huxley, whose orthodoxy as an evolutionist will hardly be questioned, made a suggestion of this kind in his Romanes lecture as long ago as 1893. He called attention then to the fact that there is a fallacy in the notion that because, on the whole, animals and plants have advanced in perfection of organization by means of the struggle for existence and the consequent survival of the fittest, therefore, men as social and ethical beings must depend upon the same process to help them to perfection. As Professor Huxley suggests, this fallacy doubtless has its origin in the ambiguity of the phrase "survival of the fittest." One jumps to the conclusion that fittest means best; whereas, of course, it has in it no moral element whatever. The doctrine of evolution uses the term fitness in a hard and stern sense. Nothing more is meant by it than a measure of adaptation to surrounding conditions. Into this conception of fitness there enters no element of beauty, no element of morality, no element of progress toward an ideal. Fitness is a cold fact ascertainable with almost mathematical certainty.

We now begin to catch sight of the real significance of this struggle between the laws of nature and the laws of man. From one point of view the struggle is hopeless from the start; from another it is full of promise. If it be true that man really proposes to halt the laws of nature by his legislation, then the struggle is hopeless. It is only a question of time when the laws of nature will have their way. If, on the other hand, the struggle between the laws of nature and the laws of man is in reality a mock struggle, and the supposed combat merely an exhibition of evolutionary boxing, then we may find a clew to what is really going on.

It might be worth while, for example, to follow up the suggestion that in looking back over the whole series of products of organic evolution, the real successes and permanences of life are to be found among those species that have been able to institute something like what we call a social system. Wherever an individual insists upon treating himself as an end in himself, and all other individuals as his actual or potential competitors or enemies, then the fate of the earthworm, the climbing-plant, and the brightly colored bird is sure to be his; for he has brought himself under the jurisdiction of one of nature's laws, and sooner or later he must succumb to that law of nature, and in the struggle for existence his place will be marked out for him by it with unerring precision. If, however, he has developed so far as to have risen to the lofty height of human sympathy, and thereby has learned to transcend his individuality

and to make himself a member of a larger whole, he may then save himself from the extinction which follows inevitably upon proved unfitness in the individual struggle for existence.

So soon as the individual has something to give, there will be those who have something to give to him, and he elevates himself above this relentless law with its inexorable punishments for the unfit. At that point, when individuals begin to give each to the other, then their mutual co-operation and interdependence build human society, and participation in that society changes the whole character of the human struggle. Nevertheless, large numbers of human beings carry with them into social and political relations the traditions and instincts of the old individualistic struggle for existence, with the laws of organic evolution pointing grimly to their several destinies. These are not able to realize that moral elements, and what we call progress toward an end or ideal, are not found under the operation of the law of natural selection, but have to be discovered elsewhere and added to it. Beauty, morality, progress have other lurking-places than in the struggle for existence, and they have for their sponsors other laws than that of natural selection. You will read the pages of Darwin and of Herbert Spencer in vain for any indication of how the Parthenon was produced, how the Sistine Madonna, how the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, how the Divine Comedy, or Hamlet or Faust. There are many mysteries left in the world, thank God, and these are some of them.

The escape of genius from the cloud-covered mountain-tops of the unknown into human society has not yet been accounted for. Even Rousseau made a mistake. When he was writing the *Contrat social* it is recorded that his attention was favorably attracted by the island of Corsica. He, being engaged in the process of finding out how to repeal the laws of man by the laws of nature, spoke of Corsica as the one country in Europe that seemed to him capable of legislation. This led him to add: "I have a presentiment that some day this little island will astonish Europe." It was not long before Corsica did astonish Europe, but not by any capacity for legislation. As some clever person has said, it let loose Napoleon. We know nothing more of the origin and advent of genius than that.

Perhaps we should comprehend these things better were it not for the persistence of the superstition that human beings habitually think. There is no more persistent superstition than this. Linnæus helped it on to an undeserved permanence when he devised the name *Homo sapiens* for the highest species of the order primates. That was the quintessence of complimentary nomenclature. Of course human beings as such do not think. A real thinker is one of the rarest things in nature. He comes only at long intervals in human history, and when he does come, he is often astonishingly unwelcome. Indeed, he is sometimes speedily sent the way of the unfit and unprotesting earthworm. Emerson understood this, as

he understood so many other of the deep things of life. For he wrote: "Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk."

The plain fact is that man is not ruled by thinking. When man thinks he thinks, he usually merely feels; and his instincts and feelings are powerful precisely in proportion as they are irrational. Reason reveals the other side, and a knowledge of the other side is fatal to the driving power of a prejudice. Prejudices have their important uses, but it is well to try not to mix them up with principles.

The underlying principle in the widespread and ominous revolt of the unfit is that moral considerations must outweigh the mere blind struggle for existence in human affairs.

It is to this fact that we must hold fast if we would understand the world of to-day, and still more the world of to-morrow. The purpose of the revolt of the unfit is to substitute interdependence on a higher plane for the struggle for existence on a lower one. Who dares attempt to picture what will happen if this revolt shall not succeed?

These are problems full of fascination. In one form or another they will persist as long as humanity itself. There is only one way of getting rid of them, and that is so charmingly and wittily pointed out by Robert Louis Stevenson in his fable, "The Four Reformers," that I wish to quote it:

"Four reformers met under a bramble-bush. They were all agreed the world must be changed. 'We must abolish property,' said one.

"'We must abolish marriage,' said the second.

"'We must abolish God,' said the third.

"'I wish we could abolish work,' said the fourth.

"'Do not let us get beyond practical politics,' said the first. 'The first thing is to reduce men to a common level.'

"The first thing,' said the second, 'is to give freedom to the sexes.'

"The first thing,' said the third, 'is to find out how to do it.'

"The first step,' said the first, 'is to abolish the Bible.'

"The first thing,' said the second, 'is to abolish the laws.'

"The first thing,' said the third, 'is to abolish mankind.'"

Featured: *Deucalion and Pyrrha*, by Peter Paul Rubens; painted in 1636.

