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Spencer and Kropotkin: Two Takes on Evolutionary Sources of Social Norms

1. Introduction

The concept of evolution has provided inspiration for natural and social sciences for over two centuries. It has been elucidated, developed, detailed, and finally applied in new areas of science. It was a stimulus for establishing sociobiology, ethology, and evolutionary psychology – branches dealing with animal and human behaviours and their motivations.¹ It is an oversimplification to perceive Charles Darwin as the father of the concept of evolution. Philosophers and scientists before him noticed variation within species and changes in human social life and attempted to understand and explain the forces driving these processes. Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin (Charles' grandfather), who dealt with natural sciences, and Henri de Saint-Simon or August Comte, who explored social grounds, are just a handful of examples of thinkers who undertook such tasks. Theories explaining social evolution and those devoted to changes and variation among non-human organisms were developing simultaneously, very often independently.²

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¹ A. Wiłkomirska, *Ewolucjonizm i neowolucjonizm* [Eng. *Evolutionism and Neoevolutionism*] [in:] *Nauki społeczne wobec zmiany – alternatywa scalania (inspiracje dla współczesnej pedagogiki)* [Eng. *Social Sciences and Change – an Alternative for Unification (Inspirations for Modern Pedagogy)*], eds. K. Marzec-Holka, A. Radziejewicz-Winnicki, A. Wiłkomirska, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2018, pp. 27 ff.

² *Ibidem*, p. 23.

Almost as long as theories of evolution were developed, they were used to explain the origins of social norms, both moral and legal ones. Darwin tried to do so in his famous book *The Descent of Man* (1871). The basics of the concept of biological evolution were outlined in this work, but even more so in Darwin's previous book, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which promised a more scientific than speculative approach to explaining social norms' origins. Aside from rational or emotional grounds for morals, Darwin's theory appeared to provide new foundations for norms. Morality could be naturalized.³

Herbert Spencer and Peter Kropotkin developed an evolutionary approach to social norms in the nineteenth century. Their lives overlapped and although their views were contradictory in many dimensions, they had not entered into direct polemics.⁴ Both Spencer and Kropotkin are considered representatives of trends that can be labelled as individualist Darwinism and collectivist Darwinism, respectively. Social Darwinism, however, is far from being a straightforward concept; it is rather an ambiguous term,⁵ which, in a broader sense, can be applied to Kropotkin⁶ but usually is identified with Spencer or William Graham Sumner. Despite being an apparent proponent of the concept of the struggle for existence in animal life ("animal world is on about the same level as a gladiator's show") and portraying early stages of mankind's development in such manner, Thomas Huxley should not be perceived as a social Darwinist in the narrow sense, since he believed that moral and legal norms should "civilize" contemporary societies.

Considering that the figure of Darwin links Spencer (at least as he is generally perceived – as a social Darwinist) and Kropotkin, the article first presents Darwin's views on the origins of social norms. It provides the reader with a deeper insight into sources of Spencer's and Kropotkin's views. Sections devoted to Spencer's and Kropotkin's thoughts are divided into two parts, the first presenting their respective approaches to evolution and the second outlining their respective political and social views.

The general problem I address in the article is whether there is a necessary link between the vision of human nature presented by a philosopher and his or her views on

³ A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka* [Eng. *Truly Darwinian Ethics*], "Lectiones et Acroases Philosophicae" 2010, vol. 3: *Ewolucja, filozofia, religia*, p. 47.

⁴ Kropotkin's views studied in the article constituted an answer to Thomas Huxley's stance expressed in the essay *The Struggle For Existence in Human Society* (1888), in which Huxley – often called "Darwin's bulldog" – advocated the view that early societies were based on competition and rivalry among individuals; P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna jako czynnik rozwoju* [Eng. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*], transl. J. Hempel, Wydawnictwo Księgarni Społecznej „Książka”, Warszawa 1921, pp. 25, 73; A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism in International Relations: The Challenge of Kropotkin's Biological Ontology*, "Global Discourse" 2010, vol. 1, issue 2, p. 111; R. Nicolosi, *The Darwinian Rhetoric of Science in Petr Kropotkin's Mutual Aid. A Factor of Evolution (1902)*, "Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte" 2020, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 142, 147.

⁵ M. Ruse, *Social Darwinism: The Two Sources*, "Albion", March 1980, vol. 12, issue 1, p. 23.

⁶ L. Dubel, *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych do schyłku XX wieku* [Eng. *History of Political and Legal Doctrines*], Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2012, p. 378.

social and political order. In other words, the issues under discussion are whether anthropological optimism or pessimism entails specific social and political solutions and, conversely, whether we can predict a philosopher's views on human nature relying on his or her political views. The thesis I put forward is that the comparison between Kropotkin's and Spencer's stances results in questioning the traditional position that anthropological optimists support political solutions based on a high level of personal and political liberty, and, in contrast, that anthropological pessimists favour the state's greater role in social life. Based on the study of Spencer and Kropotkin no such a pattern can be recognized.

2. The descent of morals: Charles Darwin on evolution as a source of social norms

Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* introduced some basic concepts of biological evolution. However, like his contemporaries, Darwin was not aware of genetics' principles and had no specific knowledge of the reasons underlying variations between generations of plants and animals. Differences between organisms belonging to natural populations were apparent, but the question of why they appeared remained open for Darwin.⁷ He considered natural adaptations impressive and explained their conservation over generations with natural selection, which relied on the struggle for existence. Another concept introduced by Darwin was 'sexual selection'. The mechanism whereby adjustments were conserved was simple – all beneficial adjustments granted the organism bearing them an advantage in the struggle against other organisms and conditions of the environment. As a result, even weak adaptations had a greater chance to be spread, inherited by the next generation, and preserved.⁸ From Darwin's perspective, each organic element of nature faces constant struggle, rivalry, and competition. In his view, the competition among organisms belonging to the same species is the most intense.⁹ Natural selection fosters changes that benefit the species bearing it, no other species. The results of sexual selection might be, however, perceived as a kind of exemption from this principle: a peacock's tail can be deemed as not beneficial in confrontation with predators or environmental conditions. Nevertheless, it is necessary when fighting for access to females. Darwin advocated the view that sexual selection, in principle, amplified the results of natural selection.¹⁰

⁷ D. Freeman, *The Evolutionary Theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer*, "Current Anthropology" 1974, vol. 15, no. 3, p. 213.

⁸ K. Darwin, *O powstawaniu gatunków* [Eng. *On the Origin of Species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*], transl. Sz. Dickstein, J. Nusbaum-Hilarowicz, Vis-à-vis Etiuda, Kraków 2022, pp. 88, 109.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 115, 117, 165.

What should be stressed is that Darwin was aware of the metaphorical meaning of the term 'struggle for existence' – plants do not literally fight for water; plants are dependent on water but not active in any struggle to obtain access to it.¹¹ Other concepts mentioned in *On the Origin of Species* also have more metaphoric than specific meanings: natural selection, the economy of nature, and the branching tree of life.¹²

It was Thomas Malthus who introduced the crucial concept underlying Darwin's ideas. Darwinian concept of the struggle for existence was convincing only when shortages of resources in growing populations were considered. It was Malthus' key concept.¹³ Malthus inspired Darwin and Spencer;¹⁴ Kropotkin referred to his views but remained sceptical.

Darwin's second influential book, *The Descent of Man*, deals not only with the titular issue but also, in significant part, with the problem of the origins of social norms. Following Aristotle, Darwin considered man an animal and, like Aristotle, stressed man's social inclinations. He argued that in the case of social animals, natural selection fosters social inclinations, which gives the group an advantage over other, less social groups. According to Darwin, the intellectual forces of higher animals developed mainly for the benefit of the group, in contrast to other adaptations, such as horns or claws, that served primarily individuals and indirectly the group interest.¹⁵ Darwin enumerates attributes that are common to animals and humans. Among them, he places reason and feelings (even higher feelings, especially in the case of primates).¹⁶ He believes that the spiritual advantages of humans compared to animals are of a degree not of their quality.¹⁷ Darwin ponders on parental and filial affection when searching for sources of the social instincts of animals and man. He claims that social inclinations develop when tangible benefits follow, and organisms feel pleasure from satisfying social inclinations. The feeling of pleasure linked with following the social instinct is portrayed as the development of parental and filial affection or commitment.¹⁸ Other ingredients Darwin considers necessary for developing morals, apart from social instincts, is the intellectual faculty of speech, the power to carry on long trains of thought, and the power of abstraction, or of forming general concepts.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that some steps required to develop morals are viewed in the biological dimension, governed by natural selection. Still, others can be perceived as a result of so-called cultural evolution.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 90; A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, p. 111; R. Nicolosi, *The Darwinian Rhetoric...*, p. 141.

¹² R. Nicolosi, *The Darwinian Rhetoric...*, p. 143.

¹³ D. Freeman, *The Evolutionary Theories...*, p. 212.

¹⁴ M. Ruse, *Social Darwinism...*, p. 24.

¹⁵ K. Darwin, *O pochodzeniu człowieka* [Eng. *The Descent of Man*], transl. M. Ilecki, Vis-à-vis Etiuda, Kraków 2024, pp. 76–77.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 81–101.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 108–109.

He mentions that human behaviour is affected by the condemnation from other humans, which, considering our social inclinations, leads to preserving certain attitudes (group selection).²⁰ Darwin discusses attitudes perceived as virtues and argues that even those that at first glance look individual, have deeper social meaning. He reaches for anthropological knowledge concerning primitive peoples. While treating the feeling of pleasure as the basis of preservation of social inclinations, he argues with his contemporary utilitarian philosophers, and claims that the greatest happiness principle is a sanction of our behaviour, not its motivation.²¹

In summary, Darwin derives morality from social instincts, including empathy and altruism. He emphasizes the importance of group selection. What should be stressed is that Darwin does not consider friendly actions motivated by the expectation of mutual action as altruistic. For Darwin, what nowadays is labelled as reciprocal altruism is egoistic and cannot be regarded as moral.²² Andrés Luco describes the Darwinian view on the sources of moral sense in four points: (1) animals acquire social instincts; (2) animals gain the ability to remember their past actions, e.g., when they experienced a conflict between their social instincts and their instincts of self-preservation; (3) the advent of language; (4) the emergence of extended benevolence.²³ Luco's stance seems to be a perfected version of Robert Richards' 4-point scheme, which was criticized for not understanding the Darwinian viewpoint.²⁴ Interestingly, when considering physical differences between individuals, the author of *The Descent of Man* tends to follow Lamarckian logic – he assumes that descendants inherit characteristics acquired over the lifetime of their parents.²⁵ This shows how greatly interconnected early evolutionists were.

Darwin's naturalistic approach and his contribution to research on sources of morals undermine earlier metaphysical attempts to ground morals and teleology in the natural and social sciences; however, his stance does not undermine morals, as his contemporary opponents wanted to prove.²⁶

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 138–140. The sharp distinction between biological and cultural evolution is nowadays questioned; see: A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, p. 31.

²¹ K. Darwin, *O pochodzeniu człowieka...*, p. 155.

²² A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, pp. 17 ff.

²³ A. Luco, *The Cultural Evolution of Extended Benevolence* [in:] *Empirically Engaged Evolutionary Ethics. Synthese Library*, eds. J. De Smedt, H. De Cruz, Springer, Cham 2021, pp. 154–156.

²⁴ A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, pp. 32–33.

²⁵ M. Ruse, *Social Darwinism...*, p. 34.

²⁶ K. Darwin, *O pochodzeniu człowieka...*, p. 124; A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, p. 29; D. Freeman, *The Evolutionary Theories...*, p. 215.

3. Spencer's "survival of the fittest"

3.1. Evolution and social norms

In subsequent editions of both *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Darwin refers to Spencer and calls him "a great philosopher".²⁷ In the former work, Darwin ponders the meaning of the concept of an organization's progress. He assumes that evolution (however, he does not use this term) necessarily leads to perfecting each organism's fitness to conditions in which it functions. This process results in gradual progress in the organization. The term remains, however, unclear for Darwin.²⁸ The same issue was a matter of study for Spencer, who saw this kind of progress as a fundamental concept of his thought.

For Spencer, evolution means moving from simple, lower phenomena to more complex ones. Another criterion he applies is the degree of differentiation. Evolution means moving from homogenous forms to heterogeneous forms of various phenomena. From Spencer's viewpoint, evolution encompasses three phases or groups of phenomena: nonorganic, organic, and supraorganic. This means that the principle of evolution (or progress) governs not only the natural world of plants and animals but also the nonorganic world.²⁹ Exploring the issue of the organization's progress, Darwin suggests that Spencer's view on transition from single-celled to multicellular organisms necessarily includes differentiation in functions – homogenous phenomena transform into heterogeneous ones.³⁰ It shows that Spencer's idea of evolution includes structural and functional changes.³¹ The supraorganic level of changes might refer to changes in society.

²⁷ K. Darwin, *O pochodzeniu człowieka...*, p. 161.

²⁸ K. Darwin, *O powstawaniu gatunków...*, p. 157.

²⁹ A. Wiłkomirska, *Ewolucjonizm i neoewolucjonizm...*, pp. 24–25; H. Elliot, *Herbert Spencer*, Constable & Company Ltd., London 1917, pp. 233 ff; O. Górecki, *Ewolucja podstaw moralnych uzasadniających ograniczony charakter państwa w doktrynie Herberta Spencera* [Eng. *The Evolution of Moral Foundations Justifying the Limited Character of the State in Herbert Spencer's Thought*] [in:] *Moralność i władza jako kategorie myśli politycznej* [Eng. *Morality and Power as Categories of Political Thought*], eds. J. Justyński, A. Madeja, Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2011, p. 276; O. Górecki, *Homo Sapiens Liber – wolność jednostki w doktrynie polityczno-prawnej Herberta Spencera* [Eng. *Homo Sapiens Liber – Individual's Liberty in the Legal-Political Doctrine of Herbert Spencer*] [in:] *Wolność człowieka i jej granice. Antologia pojęcia w doktrynach polityczno-prawnych. Od Cato's Letters do klasyków anarchizmu* [Eng. *Man's Liberty and its Limits. The Anthology of the Concept in Legal-Political Doctrines. From Cato's Letters to Anarchist Classics*], ed. O. Górecki, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2019, p. 487.

³⁰ K. Darwin, *O powstawaniu gatunków...*, p. 161. According to Spencer, similar phenomena can be seen in social life: in the most primitive societies, religious, military, and political roles are embodied by one person; the social functions of – nowadays – separate normative systems such as religion, morality, and politics are inseparable; see: H. Spencer, *Zasady socjologii* [Eng. *The Principles of Sociology*] [in:] *Klasyczne teorie socjologiczne. Wybór tekstów* [Eng. *Classical Theories of Sociology. Selection of the Sources*], ed. P. Śpiewak, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2006, pp. 170–177; K. Kaczmarek, *Herbert Spencer a problem socjologii religii* [Eng. *Herbert Spencer and the Problem of Sociology of Religion*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2007, pp. 187–190.

³¹ A. Wiłkomirska, *Ewolucjonizm i neoewolucjonizm...*, p. 25.

Spencer, considered one of the first sociologists, explores the issue of work differentiation in societies and predates Marx in studying class differentiation.³² Laws of progress and differentiation in the supraorganic dimension are applied to such unexpected matters as “music, dancing, poetry, etc., and all manifestations of the human mind.”³³

Spencer identifies changes with progress and sees the latter as inevitable.³⁴ This distinguishes his stance from Darwin’s. Darwin builds his concept on selection, which works like a “trial and error” method, whereas Spencer believes in progress, which is evident to him.³⁵ Spencer’s approach is deterministic – biological analogies are considered the fundamental concept of his analysis of society.³⁶ However, considering that laws of progress relate not only to organic phenomena, some scholars claim that his explanations are cosmic, not biological.³⁷

Spencer was much more Lamarckian than Darwin. He believed in “the inheritance of functionally-produced modifications” and defended this stance even after August Weismann’s discoveries, which finally questioned the Lamarckian concept.³⁸ As mentioned above, what linked Spencer and Darwin was that their thought was anchored in Thomas Malthus’s views.

It should be stressed that Spencer had developed his evolutionary stance before Darwin published the first edition of *On the Origin of Species*. Nevertheless, despite being a Lamarckian, Spencer is considered a social Darwinist.

There is no one commonly accepted definition of social Darwinism. Still, authors using this term usually refer to the following traits: (1) biological determinism in relation to society, including identification of society with a biological organism; (2) the concepts of the struggle for existence and of natural selection, which might be represented by Spencerian “survival of the fittest” theme.³⁹ Normative implications of such a stance encompass approval for free-market economy and limited role of the state. It seems evident that social Darwinism has little in common with a genuinely Darwinian

³² K. Kaczmarek, *Herberta Spencera teoria zróżnicowania społecznego* [Eng. *Herbert Spencer’s Theory of Social Diversity*], “Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny” 2003, vol. LXV, issue 3, pp. 201 ff.

³³ H. Elliot, *Herbert Spencer...*, p. 243.

³⁴ W. Kubik, *Socjologia Herberta Spencera* [Eng. *Sociology of Herbert Spencer*], “Przegląd Socjologiczny” 1977, vol. 29, p. 347.

³⁵ M. Ruse, *Social Darwinism...*, p. 34; D. Freeman, *The Evolutionary Theories...*, p. 219.

³⁶ D.M. Hossain, S. Mustari, *A Critical Analysis of Herbert Spencer’s Theory of Evolution*, “Postmodern Openings” 2012, vol. 3, issue 2, pp. 57–59.

³⁷ W. Kubik, *Socjologia Herberta Spencera...*, p. 345.

³⁸ T.C. Leonard, *Origins of the myth of social Darwinism: The ambiguous legacy of Richard Hofstadter’s Social Darwinism in American Thought*, “Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization” 2009, vol. 71, pp. 40–41; D. Freeman, *The Evolutionary Theories...*, p. 216.

³⁹ A. Sylwestrzak, *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych* [Eng. *History of Political and Legal Doctrines*], Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2015, p. 271; H. Olszewski, *Socjalizm i nacjonalizm* [Eng. *Socialism and Nationalism*] [in:] H. Olszewski, M. Zmierczak, *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych* [Eng. *History of Political and Legal Doctrines*], Ars boni et auqui, Poznań 1994, pp. 274–275; W. Kubik, *Socjologia Herberta Spencera...*, p. 342; D.M. Hossain, S. Mustari, *A Critical Analysis...*, pp. 56 ff.

approach to social relations.⁴⁰ Darwin tended to see society as a much more cooperative undertaking based on such values as empathy or altruism. The above remarks provoke the question of why Spencer is associated with Darwin's thought. Spencer developed his evolutionary ideas independently of Darwin; he was much more Lamarckian than Darwinian, and his conception of social ties diverged sharply from Darwin's view. Thomas C. Leonard argues that Richard Hofstadter was the author responsible for associating Spencer and his American disciple – Sumner, with social Darwinism. Before the publication of Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), the term "social Darwinism" was not popular among scholars; Hofstadter was the first author to apply the term "social Darwinism" to Sumner.⁴¹

Applying his evolutionary approach to the issue of society's development, Spencer describes two ideal types of society: militant and industrial ones. In a militant society, only one governing centre controls a wide range of life spheres. Cooperation between society's members is led by compulsion; the government can "overrule" an individual's will. These kinds of societies are based on conformism, obedience, and loyalty and are characterized by a lack of initiative and dependency on authority. Militant society has the goal of defending its territory and conquering other territories. In militant societies, the individual is subordinated to the society's interest and serves its interests, not the reverse. In contrast to militant society, the industrial type relies mainly on voluntary contracts concluded between individuals. Inclination to conquer other territories is replaced by the tendency to develop industry and market cooperation in peaceful conditions. By "industrial", Spencer does not mean societies relying on modern technology but also those existing in the pre-modern era that based their economy on trade and craftsmanship (he mentions ancient Phoenicia and cities belonging to the Hanseatic League). Spencer sees his contemporary age as a mixture of both types but predicts that the industrial type will prevail according to universal laws of progress.⁴²

Spencer discusses the sources of social norms and places them in the superorganic phase of evolution. In contrast to Darwin, who combined biological and cultural factors contributing to the origins of morals, Spencer, like other social Darwinists, trusts in cultural sources of morality.⁴³ At the same time, Spencer is accused of deriving social norms straight from biological evolution without reference to their biopsychological sources. Andrzej Elżanowski represents such a critical stance.⁴⁴ The contradiction between these two views is only ostensible. Culturally produced norms are designed to

⁴⁰ A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, p. 13.

⁴¹ T.C. Leonard, *Origins of the myth of social Darwinism...*, p. 40.

⁴² H. Spencer, *Zasady socjologii...*, pp. 170–175; L. Dubel, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 335; D.M. Hossain, S. Mustari, *A Critical Analysis...*, pp. 60–61; A. Wiłkomirska, *Ewolucjonizm i neoewolucjonizm...*, pp. 25–26; O. Górecki, *Ewolucja podstaw moralnych...*, pp. 276 ff.

⁴³ M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin i ewolucyjne źródła moralności* [Eng. *Peter Kropotkin and Evolutionary Sources of Morals*], "Etyka" 2019, vol. 58, no. 2, p. 29.

⁴⁴ A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, p. 15.

prevent the most severe results of hostility and competition between individuals struggling for their existence. Biologically grounded norms describe the state of struggle for existence. When discussing law, Spencer distinguishes two groups of norms: (1) norms reflecting the compatibility of interests between individuals, and (2) norms protecting the privileges and interests of the ruling class. He claims that norms from the first group emerged first but were limited by the second group of norms. In an industrial society, norms protecting the interests of individuals will prevail, among them the right to equal freedom. Spencer perceives freedom in a negative sense.⁴⁵

3.2. Normative implications

Both Spencer and Kropotkin treated evolutionary explanations as arguments supporting their political views. Spencer's stance in this field was already outlined in the subsection above. However, an essential remark concerning deriving normative implications from biological facts like evolution should precede further analysis of his stance. This kind of argumentation meets with the objection of the naturalistic fallacy, which, in brief, is the problem of deriving norms from facts, passing from "is" to "ought". David Hume was the first to notice this problem;⁴⁶ however, George E. Moore contributed to the issue a great deal. Considering the risk of the naturalistic fallacy, we should distinguish the evolutionary origins of morals and the evolutionary argumentation for the specific contents of moral principles.⁴⁷ The following remarks present Spencer's political and economic views, which are troubled by the problem of *non sequitur* if read in conjunction with his evolutionary approach.

Spencer appears to advocate limited government that does not interfere with matters such as the economy, religion (he argued against state religion), education (which should be a purely private undertaking), or even the issuance of money. According to Spencer, the state should not help people who experience poverty. In his eyes, they are the only ones responsible for their situation. Poverty results from personal decisions; personal suffering should not be a matter of interest for society; it is a natural phenomenon. The state should be liberal and ensure negative freedom (right to equal freedom); in such conditions, individuals should compete in their struggle for existence. One can expect personal liberties from the state, not positive actions supporting unskilled individuals.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ A. Sylwestrzak, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 273; O. Górecki, *Homo Sapiens Liber...*, pp. 477–479.

⁴⁶ D. Hume, *Traktat o naturze ludzkiej* [Eng. *A Treatise of Human Nature*], transl. C. Znamierowski, Wydawnictwo Aletheia, Warszawa 2023, p. 529.

⁴⁷ See: A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, p. 52.

⁴⁸ D.M. Hossain, S. Mustari, *A Critical Analysis...*, pp. 62, 65; L. Dubel, *Historia doktryn...*, pp. 332–333; H. Olaszewski, *Socjalizm i nacjonalizm...*, pp. 274–275; A. Sylwestrzak, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 273; O. Górecki, *Ewolucja podstaw moralnych...*, p. 279.

Such a stance distinguishes Spencer from Thomas Huxley (Darwin's "bulldog"), who – as Álvaro Girón says – refuses "the idea of Society as a mere continuation of Nature, the justification of laissez-faire as a projection of Nature's laws".⁴⁹ Spencer is a proponent of *laissez-faire* policy and, making concessions to some fundamental ethical norms, sees society as something like – again referring to Huxley – a "gladiators' show".⁵⁰

What should be stressed here is that Spencer consistently supported libertarian ideals during his whole life; however, he was not as consistent in justifying them. Olgierd Górecki observes that Spencer's early work delivers a contractarian justification for liberty. The next stage of Spencer's thought takes an eclectic form, linking utilitarian, deistic, contractarian arguments, and even arguments referring to human benevolence. It is the final and most developed stage of Spencer's thought in which he relates directly to the principle of universal evolution.⁵¹ This might provoke an objection that instead of searching for objective principles governing social life, Spencer focused on justifying his *a priori* assumptions.

4. Kropotkin's "mutual aid"

4.1. Evolutionary origins of social norms

Peter Kropotkin was a Russian aristocrat, geographer, and philosopher. He was imprisoned a few times during his life because of his anarchist activity or purported links with revolutionary movements. He spent a significant part of his life as an emigrant, living in France, Switzerland, and, most of all, England. Before he died in Russia, he witnessed the unfolding of the communist revolution of 1917.⁵²

Kropotkin is mainly known as an anarchist philosopher and natural scientist because of his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902). The views expressed in the book allow us to label him a Russian evolutionist; it presents the main assumptions characteristic of this vein of thought.⁵³ Before its publication as a book, *Mutual Aid* was released chapter by chapter as a series of articles in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*. The articles aimed to challenge Thomas Huxley's views expressed in *The Struggle For Existence in Human Society* (1888).⁵⁴ Kropotkin was not the first Russian author to attempt to adopt the Darwinian concept of evolution and to highlight the significance of

⁴⁹ Á. Girón, *Kropotkin between Lamarck and Darwin: The impossible synthesis*, "Asclepio: Archivo iberoamericano de historia de la medicina y antropología médica" 2003, vol. 55, no. 1, p. 195.

⁵⁰ See: W. Kubik, *Socjologia Herberta Spencera...*, pp. 341–342.

⁵¹ O. Górecki, *Ewolucja podstaw moralnych...*, pp. 267–275; *idem*, *Homo Sapiens Liber...*, pp. 479–490.

⁵² J. Hempel, *Przedmowa* [Eng. *Foreword*] [in:] P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna...*, pp. 3–5; L. Dubel, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 378; A. Sylwestrzak, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 243; A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, p. 111; Á. Girón, *Kropotkin...*, p. 190.

⁵³ See: M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Á. Girón, *Kropotkin...*, p. 197.

cooperation among organisms. The “anarchist prince” – as he was nicknamed – referred to Karl F. Kessler, who, like Darwin, treated parental attachment as a source of sociality among organisms but, in contrast to Darwin, considered mutual aid within a species to be a much more important factor of evolution than competition.⁵⁵

Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution is written clearly, simply, and convincingly. Using examples to support his thesis, Kropotkin moves from the most primitive organisms to the most complex ones. When discussing humans, he applies distinctions which were popular among his contemporaries: between savages, barbarians, and civilized people. In his analysis of civilized people, he distinguishes between the Middle Ages and the contemporary age. Kropotkin comments on counterexamples to his thesis, for instance, brutal practices of savage people that – in the eyes of proponents of the struggle for existence view – undermine the thesis about mutual aid as an important factor.⁵⁶ Kropotkin’s reasoning is composed with great erudition; however, it has been objected to as theoretically weak. Some authors have claimed that, despite being indebted to Darwin, Kropotkin’s stance appears to be Lamarckian.⁵⁷

In principle, Kropotkin’s reasoning follows Darwin’s; however, the “anarchist prince” stresses different issues than the author of *The Descent of Man*. With some exceptions, he does not question the crucial mechanisms of evolution described by Darwin: natural selection or the struggle for existence. Yet, unlike Darwin, Kropotkin claims that in the process of natural selection, mutual aid and cooperation play a much more critical role than competition. He exemplifies his thesis by showing non-competitive behaviours among animals in raising offspring, defending themselves against enemies, hunting, and collecting food. He claims that mutual aid and support are more frequent and beneficial in animal life than rivalry and competition, contributing to species development. Such behaviours become the source of certain attitudes and, finally, virtues: sociality, solidarity, and empathy. What should be underlined, such an optimistic view on cooperative behaviours, attitudes, and virtues, concerns animals belonging to the same species.⁵⁸ In this respect Kropotkin diverges from Darwin, who argued that the struggle for existence between individuals of the same species is the most severe.⁵⁹ The view on the prevailing character of competition, not cooperation, among organisms of the same species opened the door for social Darwinism, which Kropotkin rejected.⁶⁰

It is often claimed that Kropotkin rejected Malthusianism as an ingredient of the theory of evolution. This view, however, is inaccurate. He did not question the assumption of the ‘geometrical’ (exponential) growth of populations. Still, he only moved the factor that he believed to limit this development from inter-species competition to the effects

⁵⁵ P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna...*, pp. 17, 27; R. Nicolosi, *The Darwinian Rhetoric...*, pp. 146, 147.

⁵⁶ P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna...*, pp. 89 ff.

⁵⁷ R. Nicolosi, *The Darwinian Rhetoric...*, p. 148; Á. Girón, *Kropotkin...*, pp. 201–204.

⁵⁸ M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*, pp. 31 ff; R. Nicolosi, *The Darwinian Rhetoric...*, pp. 148 ff.

⁵⁹ K. Darwin, *O powstawaniu gatunków...*, pp. 103–106; P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna...*, pp. 61, 62, 70.

⁶⁰ P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna...*, pp. 16, 17, 20, 25.

of natural catastrophes (which he observed while living in Siberia).⁶¹ Individuals of all species struggle mainly against external factors, not internally, within the species.⁶²

Kropotkin follows the Aristotelian stance, claiming that there is no contradiction between an individual and society. He believes humans are mild-mannered, social, and friendly beings. Like other anarchists, he assumes that humans are inherently good. The evolutionary approach leads Kropotkin to conclude that man is part of nature, which is close to the Darwinian view.⁶³

Based on these assumptions, Kropotkin's stance on the origins of social norms does not diverge much from Darwin's. He stresses the significance of social inclinations in humans and exemplifies them through a broad range of cooperative behaviours. He questions morality as a purely human feature, finding its examples in animals. Like for Darwin, for Kropotkin morality has biological, not strictly cultural, roots. However, culture, e.g., religion, can reinforce positive biological inclinations. For Kropotkin, it is language and strong social instincts that differentiate humans from animals. These traits enabled humans to develop culture. Morality originating from biological inclinations and enhanced by culture is conducive to social well-being.⁶⁴

Summarizing Kropotkin's stance: "first, organisms struggle against their environment and not necessarily against other individual organisms, second, species which engage in cooperation to overcome their ecology are successful, and third, egoism becomes detrimental when cooperation is so crucial to survival".⁶⁵ Kropotkin is criticized for founding morals on instincts based on mutual benefits derived by the individuals concerned, which reminds reciprocal altruism, condemned by Darwin as egoistic.⁶⁶ Maciej Drabiński mentions a few other objections challenging Kropotkin's stance. He anthropomorphizes animal behaviours too deeply; he does not value sufficiently human intellect, which can reject emotional or instinctive reactions; he is neo-Lamarckian in that he believes in the inheritance of acquired features.⁶⁷

4.2. Normative implications

As mentioned above, Kropotkin was an anarchist. He represented the communist school of this ideology. Like other anarchists, he distinguished the state from the society. Kropotkin argued against the state and other compulsory social organizations, predicting they would limit people's freedom and corrupt humans' positive natural

⁶¹ A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, pp. 113, 114.

⁶² M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*, pp. 27, 33.

⁶³ L. Dubel, *Historia doktryn...*, pp. 375–379; H. Olszewski, *Socjalizm i nacjonalizm...*, pp. 294–297.

⁶⁴ See: M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*; A. Elżanowski, *Prawdziwie Darwinowska etyka...*, p. 24.

⁶⁵ M. Glassman, *Mutual Aid Theory and Human Development: Sociability as Primary*, "Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour" 2000, vol. 30, no. 4, quoted in: A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, p. 114.

⁶⁶ A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, p. 115.

⁶⁷ M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*, p. 44.

inclinations. He was a convinced advocate of voluntary, spontaneous social associations in which everyone can act without any compulsion. It brings him close to the cooperative movement, which was gaining popularity over the nineteenth century. He argued against big industry, while idealizing medieval, feudal relations that, in his perspective, were based on free cooperation between rural communities and merchant cities. His view of a perfect society relied on the principles of sociality, solidarity, cooperation, and mutual aid – implemented in social life, like in nature.⁶⁸ What Kropotkin shared with Spencer's approach to law was that he, too, perceived establishing privileges beneficial only to a limited group of people as a significant step in the development of law. Consequently, he argued against such norms, being an egalitarian. As an anarchist, he rejected the law as a normative system inevitably linked with the state. Living in a stateless environment should bring out the best human characteristics.⁶⁹

What he proposed instead of law was ethics. Álvaro Girón summarizes this perspective by writing that: "Kropotkin's defence of an 'anarchist morality', different from bourgeois morality, was both a symptom of his own humanistic beliefs and a device destined to dissociate anarchy from fashionable amorality. Moreover, ethics was important from the theoretical point of view. Anarchy entails the suppression of any form of legal, political, and religious coercion. This implies that there is something both in human nature and the 'natural' interaction of small communities that makes unnecessary any regulation from outside".⁷⁰ Anarchy has ethical grounds – it provides individuals with the best conditions for their lives, but it also requires ethics to make their lives flourish. Evolution, ethics, and anarchy are tightly linked in Kropotkin's thought. According to the "anarchist prince", abandoning the state and normative systems based on it would not lead to common hostility and *bellum omnium contra omnes*, but would result in universal well-being.⁷¹ The most fundamental moral principle Kropotkin promotes and believes to stem from evolution is the Golden Rule: do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you.⁷²

5. Conclusions

There are as many similarities as there are differences between Spencer's and Kropotkin's views on the evolutionary origins of social norms. Both of them believe in the universality of principles governing biological life. This means that if we recognize the rules of animal life, we will be able to understand the principles of human behaviour. Both authors,

⁶⁸ L. Dubel, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 380; H. Olszewski, *Socjalizm i nacjonalizm...*, pp. 296–297; A. Sylwestrzak, *Historia doktryn...*, p. 243.

⁶⁹ A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, pp. 108, 125.

⁷⁰ Á. Girón, *Kropotkin...*, p. 196.

⁷¹ M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*, p. 41.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 36.

like Darwin, pay great attention to social animals. Spencer, however, goes even further in this reasoning. As a progressivist, he believes that the same rules govern biological and nonorganic phenomena, which results in the observation that he is a “cosmic” evolutionist, not a biological one. Spencer is a devout Lamarckian, which corresponds with the stance on the cultural origins of morality; Kropotkin, in contrast, shares the Darwinian approach that allows him to search for the biological origins of social norms. Nevertheless, Spencer’s and Kropotkin’s diagnoses are deterministic and one-dimensional, which constitutes a severe limitation in their respective thoughts.

In their political analyses, Spencer and Kropotkin share a sceptical view of the state. Nevertheless, they differ in their argumentation in this regard. Spencer does not question the need for the state’s existence, although he advocates a minimal state. The state should provide a basic framework to enable free rivalry and competition. Tasks from the domain of substantive justice should be outside the scope of the state’s interests. The state’s interference in social life, especially in the form of welfare activity, is unjust because it burdens some individuals with the results of the failures of others. It is against negative freedom, which should be a fundamental principle of social life. In contrast, Kropotkin chooses to abandon the state. He argues that instead of fostering social well-being, the state restricts freedom and suppresses the natural social instincts of man. Statelessness will promote humans’ natural good; as a result, spontaneous, cooperative initiatives will emerge and a peaceful, flourishing society will form. Spencer appears to be a proponent of a capitalistic, industrial society, whereas Kropotkin pleads for communist property and the nonindustrial world of small workshops and rural activities.

The search for analogies to the social views of Spencer and Kropotkin would probably lead to figures of Hobbes, to whom Spencer’s approach harks back, and Rousseau, upon whose work Kropotkin’s stance was built.⁷³ In the twentieth century’s evolutionary studies, theories focusing on the social characteristics of humans and higher animals played a significant role. Authors such as William Donald Hamilton, who proposed the idea of kin selection, and Robert Trivers, who explained the origins of altruism, influenced not only natural sciences but also humanities and social sciences.⁷⁴ Frans de Waal, a famous primatologist, links Kropotkin’s views with those present in Trivers’ work.⁷⁵ On the other hand, neoliberal ideals close to Spencer’s views are systematically enforced all over the world as a panacea for economic and social problems.

The abovementioned observations allow us to conclude that despite the shared scepticism toward the state and law, which, at least at a superficial level, links Spencer and Kropotkin, they follow different visions of human nature. Kropotkin can be

⁷³ Kropotkin criticizes the thoughts of Hobbes and Rousseau as speculative, which shows his strong belief in the scientific character of his own work; P. Kropotkin, *Pomoc wzajemna...*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ M. Drabiński, *Piotr Kropotkin...*, pp. 43–44; A. Goodwin, *Evolution and Anarchism...*, pp. 115–116.

⁷⁵ F. de Waal, *Małpy i filozofowie. Skąd pochodzi moralność?* [Eng. *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*], transl. B. Brożek, M. Furman, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków 2020, p. 35.

considered an anthropological optimist, whereas Spencer, with his “survival of the fittest” concept, is much more pessimistic in the regard. He accepts that humans have the capacity to cooperate, but still, in his view, it is more correct to describe people as competitive than cooperative agents. Consequently, it is difficult to confirm the thesis that thinkers who believe in the good of humans tend to support solutions limiting the state’s role, while those who mistrust the inherent human good are inclined to call for the state’s greater role.

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Abstract

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Spencer and Kropotkin: Two Takes on Evolutionary Sources of Social Norms

The article aims to present and discuss two different views on the evolutionary sources of social norms. The views under study were delivered by famous nineteenth-century philosophers, Herbert Spencer and Peter Kropotkin. The former is usually linked with so-called social Darwinism, and the considerations in the article show why this label can be misleading. The latter represents so-called Russian evolutionism, whose distinctive trait is stressing animals' cooperative behaviours rather than their competition. In the article, I assert that Charles Darwin's thoughts should be considered a reference point for any discussion concerning the evolutionary sources of morality. Thus, a brief presentation of Darwin's views precedes considerations devoted to Spencer and Kropotkin. The analysis in the article shows crucial similarities and differences between Spencer and Kropotkin in terms of their views on evolution and their social views. Spencer appears as a Lamarckian advocate of a minimal state, who sees competition and rivalry as natural to society. Kropotkin subscribes to the Darwinian approach and, being a fierce critic of the state, believes that abandoning it will reveal humans' natural goodness.

Keywords: origins of morality, evolutionary approach, survival of the fittest, mutual aid, social Darwinism, Lamarckism