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# SPENCERIAN INFLUENCE ON THE EARLY MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF ÁKOS PAULER REGARDING RACIAL AND GENDER INEQUALITY

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In this paper I argue that the early moral philosophy of Ákos Pauler was informed by eugenic and racial hygienic theories of his age. Perhaps one of the key social theorists of his time was the British philosopher Herbert Spencer who arguably had an influence on the moral theories of Pauler as well. Pauler became an influential theoretician in Hungary during the interwar period. His ideological commitments to Christianity and national values made him favorable to the authoritarian politics of the 1920s and 30s. His significance lasted until the end of the 1940s; during the Socialist period from 1948 to 1989 Pauler's heritage was played down because of the ideological divide between the two political eras. However, after the transition, the works of Pauler were re-discovered and my study contributes to this strand of research from an intersectional perspective. In this paper I will analyze how conceptualizations of race and gender structured their moral theories in which the responsibility of women was understood in terms of their reproductive contribution to their country's racial future. I claim that Pauler's early moral philosophy rests on racially informed principles that justify gender subordination.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** race, gender, eugenics, ethics, social inequality, Pauler, Spencer

## Introduction

In this paper I compare how conceptualizations of race and gender played a role in structuring the moral theory of the British social philosopher Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century and the early work of the Hungarian philosopher Ákos Pauler in the twentieth Century. Spencer was a very influential thinker of his age and his works were important for Hungarian progressive thinkers as well – Ákos Pauler was arguably one of them. Pauler became an influential theoretician in Hungary during the interwar period. His ideological commitments to Christianity and national values made him favorable to the authoritarian racially exclusionary politics of his time. Here I would only stress his anti-Semitism to maintain my claim, as he openly supported the numerus clausus law, which limited the number of Jewish Hungarian university students (Somos 1999). Mária Kovács claims that this law, which was enacted in 1921, was the first Jewish law of the Horthy-era and

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thus marks an exclusionary racial thinking embraced by the state (Kovács 2012). During the Socialist period from 1948 to 1989 Pauler's heritage was played down because of the ideological divide between the two political eras (Somos 1999). However, after the transition, the works of Pauler were re-discovered and scholars started to show interest in re-interpreting his work to better understand his role in the development of Hungarian philosophy (Somos 1999, Gángó 2011, Frenyó 2014, Somos 2016). My study contributes to this strand of analysis by looking at his moral philosophy from a perspective that allowed the critical appreciation of Spencer's ethics by shedding light on some of his problematic heritage.

More specifically, Spencer was critiqued for his arguments founded on Darwin's theory of evolution to justify racial and gender hierarchy (Paxton 1991, Gondermann 2007, Jeynes 2010). A contemporary school in feminist theorising argues that race, class, and gender are not separable identities but mutually structure our thinking and our social conduct (Crenshaw 1989, Hill Collins 1991, *Staunches* 2003, McCall 2005, Kóczé 2009). Thus when we look at an ethical problem such as the subordination of women it is necessary to understand how race, class, religion (and depending on the social context other identities, perhaps, as well) act as social forces that structure our life and realize qualitatively different experiences. This intersectional framework is useful not only to show how individual lives are marginalized and discriminated but to reveal how theoretical works are structured by the implicit racial and gender ideologies of the authors. Hence, in the case of Pauler I will show that his early moral philosophy rests on racially informed principles that justify gender subordination.

In order to accomplish this I will first analyze how evolutionism influenced their moral thinking, then from this stage I will look at how we can account for freedom in their ethical theory and the kind of freedom they embraced. A related question is how their conceptualizations of freedom gave foundations to good and bad conduct. These various stages prepare the groundwork for an analysis of how women were subordinated in their theories and how race as a concept influenced their views on the ethical duties and capabilities of women. I argue that the biologization of the interest of race was used to justify the subordination of women in their social philosophies.

### Evolutionism Influenced Ethics

The theory of evolution had a significant impact on Spencer's theorization of society in which moral and political issues were included. He explained how biological evolution divides humanity into superior and inferior races. In his analysis the primary contrasting point is the technological development and the structural complexity of European societies in comparison to the social structures of "savages"

(Spencer 1978a, pp. 48-49). Spencer argued for the division of “races” and tried to give a sound justification in his analysis of good conduct. In his view good conduct equated to those human actions or set of actions that help the evolution of the race. He claimed that evolution had a significant effect on conduct in general. According to him, ethical actions are guided by evolutionary conduct, which has assisted evolution, and so influenced the everyday practices of the individual (Spencer 1978a, pp. 50-51). His argument concerning the everyday practices of the individual is important, because I think Spencer understood possible and desirable ways of living as having this biological underpinning, which constrained and limited the ethically acceptable actions of the individual in order to promote the interest of the race.

Pauler agrees that the biological characteristics of the individual are the basic elements of moral actions within the social structure, however he argued that they are still insufficient if the anthropological characteristics of the race<sup>2</sup> were not preferable. Only good anthropological qualities of a race could support evolution and this allows the evolution of a high moral level. Pauler further claimed that not all human cultures were capable of creating a high cultural level, which in his view accounted for the moral differences between cultures. He tried to support his argument from an imperialist position that civilization spreads across the globe via European expansion which is the *right* direction regarding the evolution of humanity. When he discussed the relation of ethics and biology Pauler argued that biology has an effect on ethics only from the perspective of the complexity of life-forms (Pauler 1907). He claimed that complex life forms such as a human life have the potential for complex moral actions. He was convinced that only biologically evolved life-forms are capable of acting according to a complex ethical system. And biological evolution has an effect on the complexity of ethics only in terms of the capabilities of humans. In his view life as such has no value, and this is the reason, he argued, humans have to sacrifice their lives in order to fulfil their social duties. He did not want to position himself as an ethical naturalist, thus he advanced an argument against the evolutionary idea of the battle of the races, or between individuals, which was a Spencerian idea. Pauler claimed this biological presupposition cannot serve as a universal principle of ethics for humanity entirely (Pauler 1907, pp. 46-49). Despite this tension between Spencer’s understanding and his own, Pauler subordinated the value of individual action to the interest of the race. He was thinking in an anthropological racial frame (see for example Pauler 1907, p. 137) as did most of his contemporaries in Hungary (see Lafferton 2007, p. 730). Pauler created an ethical system that he intended to serve as grounds for the existence of universal values but he did not take into account that his system would marginalize individuals and communities should these individuals and groups fail to internalize the right values and act according to these ideals in the interest of the race.

Pauler defined biological evolution as one among the basic empirical presuppositions of morals. In this analysis (Pauler 1907, pp. 91-96) he claimed that

the biological structure of the individual has an effect on his/her morality. In his examples, he listed and compared *healthy* individuals with individuals who were considered by him and his contemporaries to be ‘degenerates’. He continued by explaining that the healthy individual has more capacity for moral actions than the “degenerate” individual. Based on these examples he argued that if a healthy person becomes ill, and suffers from this health problem for some time, this will affect him/her morally. In this case he relied on superficial stereotypes and tried to come up with a generally acceptable argument against the moral capacities of alcoholics and other “degenerates.” He managed to conclude that the degeneration of the individual has an effect on the level of his/her morality and from this standpoint he claimed that the laws of inheritance imply that these “degenerate” individuals pass on their moral capacities to their children. In summary, what was set out by him in this part of his argument is that more evolved biological life corresponds to a more evolved morality (Pauler 1907, p. 96). Along these lines Pauler basically fragments society with biological terms and deems certain lives to be incapable of a high level of morality. In my view, this is important, because he links moral capabilities with eugenic ideas and problematized individual health issues as if these were transgenerational social problems.

### The Concept of Freedom in their Ethical Positions

Both Spencer and Pauler could be interpreted as philosophers influenced by Kant either directly or indirectly. Because for Kant the right of the individual to freedom is primary, however this individual freedom is limited by obligations towards society. In relation to free will and morals, Spencer’s account of free will is very similar to that of Kant. The major difference in their reasoning is in the emphasis on the priority of individual freedom and the obligations of the individual to society; but both agreed on the importance of freedom in relation to ethical theory and the ethical actions of the individual. Spencer claimed that in his ethics the freedom and free actions of the individual are primary and the limitations on individual freedom by others are of only secondary importance (Spencer 1978b, pp. 451-453). I fundamentally believe that Spencer presented a very sympathetic account of individual freedom, but this ‘universal’ freedom implied only male freedom; in his detailed analysis women did not have an equal right to free actions: their freedom always depended on men.

In contrast to Kant, Pauler argued that the metaphysical problem of free will has no relevance to metaethical problems. He claimed that Kant’s mistake was that he confused freedom with autonomy and Pauler argued, that moral autonomy is fundamentally a concept which belongs to moral theory and not ontology. He tried to go beyond the Kantian principle of moral autonomy which implies the ethical value

of an act in its own right. While he analyzed this issue his aim was to disconnect the problem of free will from the sphere of ethics. He claimed that Kant was not right in connecting the question of freedom to morality. In his analysis Pauler pointed out that a moral action is good if it has a value in itself. In his theory moral values are universal therefore, he argued, they have no connection with existence (Pauler 1907, p. 124). In my view it is problematic that Pauler's idealist ethics excludes freedom from ethical judgments because this theoretical approach precisely denies the possibility of the individual's ability to critically distance himself/herself from an act, and using reason is able to judge from another perspective. Pauler did not separate ethical questions according to gender in relation to freedom; This could be interpreted as him intending to prove through pure logical analysis that moral ideals as described are the principles that every individual must internalize in order to act in accordance with the highest good for the benefit of society. But this interpretation must be tempered in view of Pauler's exclusionary political values. From this perspective it is rather the case that he constructed a moral theory from a middle-class, Christian perspective imbued with a strong nationalist bias only ostensibly universal. In trying to avoid relativism and consciously trying to create a theory of universal ethics, he rejected the possibility of plural value systems.

### The Basis of Good and Bad Conduct

In his analysis of good and bad conduct Spencer described what we generally perceive as good or bad. This approach maintained that, value judgments were always made in relation to the act of the individual and its end. This means that the relation of an action to its end provides the basis for a judgment as to its value. He claimed that we can distinguish between this good and bad conduct according to their state of evolution. That conduct which is relatively more evolved could be regarded as relatively good conduct, and that which is less evolved is bad conduct (Spencer 1978a, p. 61). Spencer connects goodness to actions in three basic ways: those acts are good, which (1) are good for the individual who acts, (2) good for the individual's offspring, (3) and goodness is associated with acts that further the pleasurable living of others (Spencer 1978a, p. 79). Weinstein interprets Spencer's definition of a good act as referring to actions that "promote the greatest totality of life" in other words "greatest length and greatest breadth of life for all members of society" (Weinstein 1998, p. 143). According to Weinstein length of life relates to the importance of self-preservation. He interprets Spencer's breadth of life as being the quality of life which refers to a pleasurable life that should be realized through good conduct, which ultimately promotes the reproduction of the race.

When discussing the value of life, Spencer presented optimistic and pessimistic views of how individuals can experience their lives (Spencer 1978a, p. 63). He

claimed that if living causes more pain than pleasure then life is not worth living and in opposition to this standpoint, if the dominant experience in someone's life is pleasure, then life is valuable for the individual. This seems to be a relativist perspective, but Spencer managed to find a common point between the optimistic and pessimistic views of life, which is the point when the good and bad experiences diverge according to the senses of the individual. He stated that everyone agrees to judge life worth living or not if the conscious feeling of the individual rises above or declines under the level of indifference into a pleasurable or painful feeling.

Spencer related good and bad conduct to life by differentiating them into two groups of actions. Those acts which contribute to the pleasurable feeling of life are good conduct and those which make life unbearable are bad conduct. In relation to Christianity Spencer emphasized that the peoples of this religion believe that self-caused pleasure is not morally acceptable to their God. As a result Spencer argued that pleasure cannot serve as a central category in defining the semantic field of 'the good' (Spencer 1978a, p. 64) in these religions. Spencer refused to accept the Christian moral tradition and claimed that conduct which causes pleasure to oneself or others is good. His conclusion therefore was that "the good is universally the pleasurable" (Spencer 1978a, p. 66).

In Pauler's moral theory the central ethical categories are truth, good, and beauty; thus his view of good ethical actions were based on these categories. Using these notions as starting points he defined the concept of ethical value as something which must be unconditional or something which is in the process of becoming unconditional in nature. These ethical values become real only when empirical actions are realized, and these realized actions have value in relation to the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. Pauler explained the significance of these ideas in the following way: (1) truth is important because we can realize it using the human faculty of correct reasoning, (2) we can realize good by ethical actions and (3) the self-value of beauty is immediately available for human beings through perception (Pauler 1907, p. 129). He maintained that we can define good as the value by which we act while considering the relations of these central categories, although he noted that the analysis of beauty as an absolute value lies outside the frame of his work, he therefore omitted that from his investigation.

The following section will lay out the relation of the absolute ethical values of truth and goodness in his ethical theory. He claimed that the absolute value of truth can be proved simply through the logic of denial. If someone denies the truth value of something, the truth value is indicated in the act of denial; Pauler suggested, in other words, that the act of denying a truth has truth value in itself. There are two criteria that he set for the absolute value: (1) it must be a value in itself and (2) it must be realized unconditionally (Pauler 1907, p. 130). He concluded that the ethical value of truth defines the ethical value of goodness, which is to say that if truth has absolute value, then those human actions which are aimed

at realizing the truth are ethically good, and therefore good as an absolute ethical value, because the act corresponds with its truth value (Pauler 1907, p. 131). This in his view proved the absolute value of truth which serves as a foundation on which to realize good ethical actions.

In order to realize the truth, Pauler encompassed three attitudes in his argument which have to guide our actions. These attitudes are love, respect, and faith. He claimed we must love truth in order to realize it in our ethical behaviour. We cannot realize absolute truth if we do not act as those who love truth, and we have to acknowledge love for this reason as an ethical value. He added to this argument that we can realize absolute truth if we have the right energy to pursue our actions (Pauler 1907, p. 132). Pauler used attitudes such as love, faith, respect, and right energy which themselves are loaded with ethical values. He tried to integrate these attitudes into each other: to respect truth is only possible if the individual in this system acknowledges the ethical value of the act of right respect.

Ethical behaviour is equivalent to the behaviour which realizes the truth, thus Pauler maintained, truth and goodness are absolute values because they are different ideals of the same behaviour and this ethical behaviour gains value because it corresponds to the unconditional truth. One cannot realize truth without ethics, because the realization of truth itself is an ethical act, therefore, he claimed, it is not possible to establish a strict hierarchy between the values of truth and goodness. However he noted that the realization of truth has a necessary presupposition, which is the realization of ethical value as such (Pauler 1907, pp. 133-134). In his view this way of reasoning proves from a moral theoretical perspective that only good morals can give real value to human life, because this is the basic ground which enables individuals to use their reasoning capacities properly.

Pauler analyzed the concept of the highest good because of its centrality in moral theory. This is a theoretical point which needs further clarification in order to understand how he thought that morally wrong actions can be judged in relation to the ideal of the good. He described this concept that defines the right mode of moral judgments which serve as the basis for human actions. In his words in sum: “the highest good is the right and true morality” (Pauler 1907, p. 141). The purpose of human life is the realization of the highest good, which means humans have to live in order to realize the ethical ideals in their actions. He claimed this is the right way of life because these ends are not the results of a power which forces the individual to act according to the ideals of absolute ethical values but individuals themselves choose to live according to these moral principles (Pauler 1907, p. 158).

Pauler’s discussion is problematic from the perspective of freedom. Firstly and most importantly, he claimed individuals choose these ideals, which I think implies that they have the ability to distance themselves from wrong ethical ideals. In other words, these individuals can – at least on a theoretical level – critically judge what is wrong and act according to the ideals of the highest good. But in contrast to this

standpoint, Pauler explicitly excluded freedom from the sphere of ethics. However if, according to him, humans do not have the ability to choose their values because of the lack of freedom, only those live a valuable life whose acts correspond to his ethical system. These lead to the following problem: in Pauler's system there are valuable and invaluable lives which are not worth living. This ethical system creates a hierarchy of lifestyles which, though not explicitly but implicitly support a hierarchization of lives corresponding to the eugenic ideology of his time.

### **Ethical Indications of Gender Subordination**

Spencer commenced his chapter on 'The Rights of Women' by discussing that equal freedom is a birthright for every individual. He argued that for the same reason those who have disabilities must have the same rights as those who are seemingly healthy. However, he eventually concluded that the overall situation of women is not that bad compared to the uncivilized cultures of savages, where subjection of the opposite sex sometimes takes extreme forms (Spencer 1978b, pp. 181-182). In comparison to these societies, he argued that the subjection of women in Europe is much less extreme, moreover, he viewed it to be reasonable and necessary for the interest of further social progress. He tried to support his argument by invoking the social practice that women do not serve in the army and navy, and therefore do not share the same burden as men, which according to him justifies the denial of equal political rights to women (Spencer 1978b, p. 183). Thus by denying equal freedom for women he placed them under the authority of men; by subjecting women to men denied everyone's individuality inasmuch as making a distinction between political rights based on sex. Moreover, Spencer supported his argument by claiming that it is the interest of race in order to achieve a socio-political condition where political authority will have no importance (Francis 2007, pp. 74-75).

Spencer maintained that the most important characteristic of women is to be beautiful (Paxton 1991, Francis 2007). His logic was simple; he reduced the value of women to reproduction. Women were important only to reproduce the race therefore their most important quality was to be physically attractive. Only in this way could women become valuable members of a community, which implies that women had very limited individual agency, since they were always defined and valued through their relation to men/or to the social position of their husbands (Francis 2007). Francis' argument explains why Spencer supported the institution of marriage in his ethics – without any suggestion for reform – and understood its significance as a necessity in the maintenance of the race (Spencer 1978a). Spencer analyzed the tension between individual life and social responsibility which demanded sacrifice from parents for the general good of the race. Spencer stated



that it is impossible to resolve this tension between individual and social life but argued that individuals have to subordinate their personal good to the progeny of the race. In his account of marriage, Spencer analyzed the most conventional economic and social aspects which have an impact on the marriages of young individuals. He listed various examples, such as social status, social relations, and various other driving forces in marriage. He did not exclude love marriages, but wanted to emphasize other factors than physical and psychological attraction. Spencer underscored that these factors are superficial and most of the time, the literature does not place emphasis on the vital characteristics of the parties who intended to marry each other. However, he noted this as the most important factor since the vitality of the parents defines the biological characteristics of their children, which is in the interest of race maintenance. He argued that ethics should drive the habits of individuals and ethical principles should control physiological instincts in order to serve the healthy reproduction of the race (Spencer 1978a, p. 572). This line of thought has been adopted by many Hungarian thinkers who supported eugenics, these naturalists made suggestions as to how to implement these eugenic principles into the practical realization of eugenic ideals (see for example Apáthy 1914). In contrast to Spencer, Pauler did not provide detailed suggestions for the healthy reproduction of the race, he did however fundamentally advocate similar ethical principles, which subjected individual life to the reproduction of the race.

In his chapter on the value of life Pauler placed biological life in the service of the realization of the right ethical ideals. He stated that we must take care of our lives and we have to develop ourselves but only in order to realize the right ethical ideals, which are in his case defined by his Platonic Christian approach to ethics. In his ethical system life as such has value only insofar as individual actions correspond to the right ethical ideals (Pauler 1907, pp. 229-230). The consequence of this standpoint, he claimed, is that our moral duty is to preserve our lives but at the same time we have to sacrifice ourselves to fulfil our social duties. I think the danger of his argument lies in – the perhaps unintended consequence of – his aim: to establish a theoretical ground from which certain ways of life can be judged as worthless.

In the discussion about the value of life, Pauler analyzed the physiological needs of the human body (Pauler 1907, p. 230). His moral theory refuses any kind of *lecherous* way of life. According to his ethical principles humans have to use their body properly: the way that corresponds to the social duty assigned to those bodies. Individuals must keep their bodies healthy – they have to refrain from alcohol or from those sexual pleasures which are not the result of conscious reproductive action – in order to subject their sexuality to the interest of their race. These physiological actions are constrained by his normative ethical principles. “Normalizing the individuals’ instinctual lives is especially important regarding

sexual life, because the danger of hedonism haunts here the most” (Pauler 1907, p. 301). The argument supporting his standpoint rests on the presupposition that life is not an end in itself therefore those pleasures which are gained through the fulfillment of bodily sexual needs are ethically wrong and humans should refrain from practicing them. He stated that sexual acts are only acceptable if the ends of these actions are reproduction, otherwise sexual desires are ethically unacceptable. The most important value of sexuality lies in its end which is the preservation of the race. This means that Pauler subordinated sexuality and every other physiological need to the interest of the race. Individual behaviour is only valuable if it corresponds to transgenerational responsibility dictated by racial interest. He labeled any kind of contraception ethically wrong because it contradicts the biological function of sexuality, as he understood it. For the same reason he claimed any kind of sexual perversity has to be considered morally wrong which distances sexual acts from their right value and original function. Thus Pauler, similarly to Spencer, considered only heterosexuality valuable, and only those sexual acts that aimed at contributing to the reproduction of the race. The social values of women thus were similarly subordinated to racial interest as in the work of Spencer. However Pauler reached this similar position that rested on the biologization of gender by basing it on a Christian Platonic approach.

### Conclusion

In this paper I argued that Pauler’s early moral theory was influenced by evolutionism and his conceptualization of race supported the subjection of women in a social hierarchy. Critical works regarding Spencer’s thinking gave a more nuanced perspective of his social values and how these affected a worldview that was positively received by eugenic theorists during the early 1900s. Eugenic ideas appeared in Hungary in the first decade of the twentieth century and Hungarian eugenic thinking was greatly influenced by the anthropological conceptualization of race. Thus the analysis of Pauler’s work from a critical perspective that places emphasis on the conceptualization of race and gender contribute to a more nuanced understanding on how philosophy influenced the developments of eugenics in the interwar period.

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## Notes

- 1 I benefited from the suggestions of Andrea Pető, Colin Swatridge, and an anonymous reviewer. I would like to express my gratitude for their feedback.
- 2 At the turn of the century, the dominant understanding of the race concept in Hungary was the anthropological one, and within this anthropological understanding, biological qualities played an important role in clarifying the boundaries of the Hungarian race (Lafferton, 2007).