

Viewpoint: Darwin's 'Descent of Man' is both deeply disturbing and more relevant than ever

Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* is full of unexpected delights — such as the trio of hard drinking, chain-smoking koalas that appear within its first few pages to illustrate our affinity to animals.

Yet Darwin's great treatise on human origins is also, in parts, deeply disturbing.

Published a century and a half ago — as of February, 2021 — many of the opinions expressed in this seminal text (koalas aside) are still pertinent today. Indeed, despite (or rather, because of) the recent revolution in our understanding of genetics, the *Descent* is more relevant than ever.

Darwin's wider musings on mankind have had an immense and lasting influence on our beliefs about human nature and behavior, not just scientifically, but socially and politically as well. And while the more reprehensible later applications of evolutionary theory to human society were [not truly Darwinian](#) at all, many troubling arguments about race, class, eugenics and the like can nonetheless be discerned within his *Descent of Man*.

[https://www.scribbr.com/essay/darwin-s-intellectual-legacy-is-part-of-the-dna-of-modern-genetics-1234567890/](#) Darwin's intellectual legacy is part of the 'DNA' of modern genetics, within which still lurk — like malignant metaphorical retroviruses liable to [revival](#) and [resurgence](#) — many of the [odious](#) beliefs that [plagued](#) its past.

What follows, therefore, are a few brief illustrative examples of problematic passages in the *Descent of Man*. The point is not — as is common with many of Darwin's detractors — to simply cherry-pick quotes to make Darwin look bad (although, unfortunately, this is easy to do); rather it is to highlight how Darwin himself struggled with the social implications of his theory — and this despite the many decades he had to dwell on these questions. Indeed, the rapid, recent explosion in our knowledge of genetics has not made the situation clearer, but rather more confused.

But let's begin with the contrast of some of the more captivating aspects of the *Descent* — those which provide a glimpse of Darwin as an actual human being. (The on-going fascination with Darwin — and the impetus for the seemingly inexhaustible [Darwin Industry](#) — is not just due to his ideas and his genius, but also because he was a fascinating individual.)

Within the first few pages of Chapter 1, for example, Darwin notes that “[m]any kinds of monkeys have a strong taste for tea, coffee, and spirituous liquors: they will also, as I have seen, smoke tobacco with pleasure”. Not content with this as a single amusing anecdote of animals' addictive affinities to mankind, he proceeds to discuss the three koalas mentioned above — ones that “acquired a strong taste for rum, and for smoking tobacco” — and an American Ateles monkey that, “after getting drunk on brandy, would never touch it again, and thus was wiser than many men”. He also delights in describing the consequences for a group of African baboons of over-indulgence in “strong beer”:

On the following morning they were very cross and dismal; they held their aching heads with both hands, and wore a most pitiful expression: when beer or wine was offered them, they turned away with disgust ...

Similar endearing animal anecdotes pepper the rest of the text, culminating — after chapter upon chapter of detailed argument and speculation on the evolutionary origins of mankind (plus an extended interlude of the theory of sexual selection) — with the rousing conclusion that we should “not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in [our] veins”.

“For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper; or from that old baboon, who, descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs—as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.”

Darwin clearly liked animals better than people. Less facetiously, it is lurid passages such as these that make modern readers uncomfortable. Admittedly, this particular quotation does come straight after another glimpse of Darwin as an actual person; already in his sixties when he wrote these words, he evokes the memories of his 20-something self, aboard the *Beagle*, “on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore”:

The astonishment which I felt will never be forgotten by me ... for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled, and distrustful.

Given a modern appreciation of the manifold horrors of colonialism, it is a thorny question how we should deal with descriptions that clearly reflect the prejudices of their author. Does such obvious subjective opinion, for example, undermine the purportedly objective arguments that accompany it?

In this instance at least we can perhaps make allowances; after all, the first encounter between Darwin — a wealthy young man from what was then the most technologically-advanced nation in the world — and the Stone Age inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego must indeed have been “astonishing”. Moreover, unlike his cousin [Francis Galton](#) (who both coined and promoted the concept of eugenics), Darwin was not an explicit racist. (His loathing of slavery, for instance, comes across particularly strongly in the *Journal of the Voyage of the Beagle*.) Yet Darwin was also a product of a time when it seemed patently obvious that the English (and possibly the Scots) were the first among the “civilized” races. Further, the *Descent* also reflects the [prevailing concept](#) of a human hierarchy, descending from Europeans through the various “barbarous”, “savage” or “lower races” to mankind’s closest living relatives amongst the “anthropomorphous apes”.

In a [now-notorious](#) passage, Darwin ranks the native inhabitants of Africa and Australia as just above the

gorilla in the natural scale. At the same time, he callously concludes that “the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world”.

[screenshot amazing voyage around the world charles darwin aboard h m s beagle](#)

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The HMS Beagle

Nor was Darwin's chauvinism confined simply to other races — the lower classes of his own society were equally a target for his blatant prejudice. Indeed, as he remarks, at least “[w]ith savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health”.

“We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. ... Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man.”

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And it is perhaps here that Darwin's legacy — even if distorted and exaggerated by the likes of Galton — is most [worrying](#) in the modern age of embryonic screening, genetic manipulation and, potentially, genetically-enhanced ‘designer babies’. Today we are increasingly able to use genetic techniques to eliminate deleterious genes — such as those for [Huntington's disease](#) — from future generations. But

where is the line between an obviously harmful trait and an undesirable one? Is termination of fetuses with [Down syndrome](#) actually eugenics? Or what about those screened as having [autism](#)?

In Darwin's pre-genetic age, these were questions that could not yet be asked, let alone answered. Of more relevance, however, was Darwin's personal concern, having married his first cousin, Emma Wedgewood, with the possible inherited ill-effects of [inbreeding](#) on his own children. But even here, as he confidently asserts in the *Descent*, science would eventually come up with an answer:

When the principles of breeding and inheritance are better understood, we shall not hear ignorant members of our legislature rejecting with scorn a plan for ascertaining whether or not consanguineous marriages are injurious to man.

Yet while science can certainly inform our moral (or, in this case, legal) decisions, it cannot decide them — facts do not determine values. Darwin half-heartedly acknowledges this when he concedes we ought not “check our sympathy [for the “weak”], even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature”.

In the concluding paragraph to the *Descent of Man*, he goes on to claim, “we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it”. And while many of Darwin's own hopes and fears appear inextricably tangled with his subjective version of the “truth”, it is his final closing description of humankind's “noble qualities” and “exalted powers” that perhaps shows the way beyond these ethical dilemmas: the “sympathy which feels for the most debased”, the “benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature”, and our “godlike intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system”.

Modern genetics now allows us to penetrate into the very “constitution” of life itself. Informed by the history of what Darwin and his followers got right and what they got wrong, surely we can extend our sympathy, our benevolence and our godlike intellect to confront the moral demons that this new exalted power has conjured in our path.

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