

CHARLES DARWIN, SYMPATHISING ANIMAL

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Charles Darwin is popularly known as monolithic and aloof, a gruff face on a banknote, buffered by a great welter of Victorian facial hair and his famous biological algorithm. In fact, however, Darwin seems to have been an intensely sympathising animal, a friend to the household dogs and cats, to children and earthworms. Darwin entered with compassion into the adventures of ants, was moved by the fate of ourang-outans, and was stirred by what he saw as the desires of plants. His son William Darwin described his “most loveable trait” as “his wonderful sympathy with us all”: “a sympathy that I never saw approached. So spontaneous and simple and delightful.” William recalled that the “two subjects which moved my Father perhaps more deeply than any others were cruelty to animals & slavery – his detestation of both was intense, and his indignation was overwhelming in case of any levity or want of feeling on these matters”.

Sympathy was both a practice (indeed, a scientific practice) for Darwin *and* an object of analysis. In his theorising of human and animal emotion – in *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), and its companion volume, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) – sympathy is a recurring preoccupation, its presence in humans and other animals evidence of their shared ancestry. Darwin took the revolutionary step of understanding sympathy as an instinct, as part of our biological inheritance. This recognition of something akin to human sympathy in our nonhuman relations could only have come about through the operation of Darwin’s own sympathy: indeed, Darwin’s practice of sympathy could be understood as pivotal to his life’s work. His notebooks suggest that as early as the 1830s Darwin’s sympathetic apprehension of the affinities between himself and members of other species helped him to conquer the presumption of human exceptionalism that would otherwise have hampered the development of his key theories.

I will argue in this paper that Darwin’s figuring both of his sympathetic self and other sympathetic animals in *Descent* and *Expression* functioned as a palliative to two particular anxieties provoked in Darwin’s Victorian audience, and to some degree shared by Darwin himself. The first of these anxieties concerned a version of nature that was supposed to be, at best, indifferent to the suffering of its constituent beings, and, at worst, downright hostile; the second concerned the way biological inheritance seemed to be exerting a determining force over mind. This latter idea, expressed in Darwin’s theory of instinct, suggested a particular affront to the humanist faith in the power of the rational human mind to rise above, if not control, spiritless nonhuman matter.

Darwin’s “theory of evolution” is a composite of two theories: firstly, the theory of natural selection, the idea that advantageous characteristics produce a differential survival and reproduction rate, changing populations over time; secondly, and perhaps itself balancing natural selection, which is often construed as competitive, lethal, even heartless – nature red in tooth and claw – is Darwin’s theory of common descent, the idea that we and members of other species share common ancestors. As much as natural selection suggested to Victorian readers the idea of competition and struggle, the theory of common descent suggested affinity and commonness.

Descent and *Expression* stress this *other* Darwinism, the Darwinism of commonality and relationship. These books function as a corrective to the individualist tenor of natural selection as it was appropriated for social theory. Indeed, in them, Darwin produces (or remembers) a morally appealing alternative to individualism. His account of shared cognition and feeling – shared not just between individuals, but between species – allows him to connect himself with one of the nineteenth century’s most culturally approved conditions, sympathy. And it allowed him to recoup the idea of nature as sympathetic.

So far so good, but *Descent* and *Expression*, perhaps more than *Origin of Species*, also suggest that humans are shaped by instincts and are therefore not in possession of the free will, the independent individual mind, that was also among the most beloved of Victorian ideals. In these works, for the first time in public, Darwin would describe contemporary humans as heirs of their ancestors’ survival and successful reproduction. He would describe the characteristics of contemporary humans as remnants of ancestral (pre-human) traits, blindly preserved by natural selection. Darwin thus worked to destroy the humanist ideal of the autonomous individual. All the more crucial, then, that he create an alternative model of the self, one in which the self exists in relationship with other life and in which, if the humanist virtue of will must be replaced, then it has been replaced by the animal virtue of sympathy, which Darwin understands to exist in humans as a concomitant of their organic inheritance.

Darwin’s thesis in the companion volumes of *Descent of Man* and *Expression*, that humans and other animals exhibit variants of the same attribute, with this pointing to their common ancestry, culminates in *Expression* with an account of the most intimate, personal feelings and the ways human bodies make or manifest them. The expression of these feelings, Darwin proposes, is a consequence of our psychological inheritance from distant ancestors. Darwin begins *Expression* by outlining three principles governing the expression of emotions and sensations: the “principle of serviceable associated habits” (under which head, Darwin explains actions that originate by serving to relieve or gratify certain sensations, but which come to be summoned automatically whenever “the same state of mind is induced” even though “they may not then be of the least use”); “the principle of antithesis” (the “strong and involuntary tendency” under certain states of mind to perform “movements of a directly opposite nature” to those performed under any “opposite state of mind” that gave rise to serviceable associated habits); and the “principle of actions due to the constitution of the nervous system, independently from the first of the will, and independently to a certain extent of habit” (34). In articulating each of these principles, Darwin foregrounds automation, involuntariness, a body acting independently of the will. The majority of the expressions of emotion are “innate or inherited”, Darwin writes, and do not “depend on the will of the individual” (349). Many of them are rudiments of actions that served ancestors well, were therefore transmitted (Darwin is vague about the mechanisms for transmitting habitual action), and exist in varied forms in the species descended from those ancestors. The erection of the goose-flesh on humans, for instance, serves no purpose, and is involuntary, but did serve a purpose (so Darwin surmises) in hairier ancestors, who made themselves appear bigger and thus more daunting to their antagonists. The volume is littered with examples of involuntary, instinctive actions, or outright cases of the individual’s inability to exert control over the body. An infant’s screams for comfort, a hungry man’s inability to check his salivation in the presence of food, blushing, the way, “if we eagerly wish an object to move in any direction, we can hardly avoid moving our bodies in the same direction, although we may be perfectly aware that this can have no influence” (66-67), frowning and weeping under the influence of melancholy thoughts – all these

actions are instinctive, involuntary, sometimes in direct contradiction of what we suppose to be “our” will. Even love, Darwin writes, provokes through “inherited habit” a desire “to touch the beloved person” (213). Halfway through *Expression*, Darwin confesses to having felt “much difficulty about the proper application of the terms, will, consciousness, and intention” (352); this, in a volume that shows how volitional, serviceable expressions of emotion become habitual, heritable, and involuntary.

The milieu in which Darwin wrote had inherited from both Protestantism and secular philosophy the principle that the will is essential to the integrity of the self. Psychological autonomy informs major Enlightenment understandings of personhood. John Reed sketches an eighteenth-century reconceptualisation of the self, as “both more assertive and more vulnerable, more bound to the world of matter (through Locke’s philosophy, for example) and more determined to assert its superiority over mere matter” (7). As the Scottish moral philosophers (Hugh Blair and Adam Smith, for key examples) and their German counterparts (Kant, Schiller, Goethe) implied, the capacity for self-control and personal responsibility were ideals pivotal to Europe’s emerging liberal, democratic politics. Ability to control one’s feelings had been likewise fundamental to Protestant accounts of spiritual free will.

Darwin was both a liberal and an individualist, and well-acquainted with the Protestant philosophy of free will, as well as with the ideals of personal responsibility. He certainly seems to have been committed to the idea of will as a personal character attribute, the attribute implied by the expression “strength of will”. In the autobiography that he addressed to his descendants, Darwin espouses deliberate hard work in quest of a desired end. We could see his anxiety about the threat posed by psychological inheritance to the ideal of self-reliance in his hedging response to his cousin Francis Galton’s claims of the inheritance of genius. Darwin wrote to Galton, “I have always maintained that, excepting fools, men did not differ much in intellect, only in zeal and hard work; and I still think [this] is an eminently important difference” (Darwin and Seward 41). That “the struggle for life” features in the extended title of the *Origin* suggests Darwin’s concern to preserve the ideals of effort, strength of will, striving, in the thick of a theory that spells biological determinism.

The sense of will implied in “strength of will” is different from the sense of will implied in “free will”, as opposed to determinism (“I have had much difficulty about the proper application of the terms” – no wonder). There is no real contradiction between Darwin’s advocacy of striving and effort and his account of the limits of human self-control. Still, there is something remarkable in laissez-faire, hard-working Darwin acknowledging the problems his theories raise for human psychological autonomy. In writing *Expression*, Darwin explicitly and persistently attributes how humans act and what they are able to do in certain circumstances to the determining effects of their ancestry and inheritance. This is of course consistent with the fact that he has already, in the Instinct chapter of *The Origin*, flagged the influence of psychological inheritance on the actions of ants, bees, and cuckoos: given that he understands humans and other animals as relations with shared ancestors, it makes sense that the principle of instinct should apply also to his own species. *The Descent of Man* and *Expression* together, however, intone the ramifications of Darwin’s theory for human selves in a way that the *Origin* only hints at.

Darwin forces into nineteenth-century consciousness a threatening version of the self, not by essentialising the individual (there were already flourishing essentialist accounts of self in the Christian idea of the soul and the Romantic insistence on a hard nugget of transcendent selfhood), but by rewriting human inner life as a party to biological, organic

processes, processes which jeopardised the humanist fantasy of a body-transcending will. Indeed, Sigmund Freud would describe this version of Darwinism as the source of one of the “narcissistic wounds” inflicted on the human sense of self by the modern age (34-39). *Expression* materialises emotion. The detail with which Darwin observes the physiognomy of expressions of emotion (“lacrymal [sic] glands ... excited into action” (155)) suggests as much, as of course does the book’s thesis, that the expressions of the emotions are largely inherited, vestiges of ancestral biology.

But what does this ancestral biology look like? In *Descent of Man*, Darwin tells a story of Abyssinian baboons full of primate courage. A six-month-old baboon is threatened by fierce dogs. The youngster, “loudly calling for aid, climbed on a block of rock and was surrounded”, whereupon “one of the largest males, a true hero, came down again from the mountain, slowly went to the young one, coaxed him, and triumphantly led him away—the dogs being too much astonished to make an attack.¹ This “true hero” is animated in Darwin’s account with bravery and compassion, and he possesses the psychological insight to see that the frightened young baboon on the rock will need to be coaxed, rather than merely ordered, to follow. The author of *Descent of Man* seems enchanted by such stories: “I cannot resist giving another scene”, he adds, before describing a troop of monkeys who rushed to rescue one of their young from an eagle (76). “It is certain that associated animals have a feeling of love for each other” (76), the passage concludes. Darwin uses these anecdotes as the basis for an account of how love becomes an evolutionary advantage among social animals, and how sympathy thus arises as an instinct shared between humans and their close relatives. If his species has to have a baboon for its grandfather, if psychological inheritance has to have a deterministic role, then there is enormous consolation to be had in seeing the pre-human ancestor as already humane.

In writing those volumes, Darwin shifts his focus from the selfishness often associated with natural selection and instead labours the human inheritance of sympathy. The young Darwin had been versed by his siblings and by contemporary literature in the discourses of sensibility, affection, and benignant nature. And, as Jim Endersby argues, for Darwin, sympathy was “a scientific skill, which he saw as partly innate and partly acquired, that he regarded as necessary to fully understand the living world; considered as a skill it relates to an older sense of sympathy that referred to grasping the ‘affinities’ between living things” (300). Darwin’s sympathy with the other-than-human enabled him to grasp *his* affinity with other living things. Against the valuing of sympathy as a scientific skill, however, was an emerging culture of scientific objectivity, and indeed the young Darwin was also trained in the emerging scientific discourses of affectless empiricism, of using the senses without registering their effects in the body. This combined with the Enlightenment vision of a nature riven with struggle and self-interest (the vision, in fact, of Thomas Robert Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principle of Population* Darwin read in 1838) to temper Darwin’s sympathising with a sympathetic nature.

But in *Descent of Man* Darwin tenders an appealing reconciliation of sympathy and competition. The Abyssinian baboons marry affection with struggle, by struggling collectively. As a group, they are benefited in their struggle for survival by their self-sacrificing affection and sympathy for their young. With such instances of animal sympathy,

¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1871), 75-76. Hereafter references to *Descent of Man* (DM) will appear in parentheses.

Darwin can rework his materialist psychology, the theory of instinct, so that it produces a sympathetic human nature. He can palliate the affront of representing human minds that are brutish, stripped of will, and in the thrall of instincts, by taking the most putatively humane feelings and the most noble tendencies, and highlighting these as examples of animal instincts. In this, Darwin offers an alternative to the theory of Alfred Russel Wallace, who understands sympathy as raising humans above their ancestors' animality and exempting them from the processes of natural selection. A sick herbivore, Wallace had written in 1864, would inevitably fall victim to its predator, but amongst humans, "the sick are assisted" because humans "are social and sympathetic". Wallace suggests that sympathy exempts humans from much of the action of natural selection, because the weaker members of a society do not suffer the penalty that would afflict members of a non-human animal population (163). Once a human population has acquired sympathy: "[a]s an animal [Man] would remain almost stationary", but "his mind would become subject to those very influences from which his body had escaped; every slight variation in his mental and moral nature which would enable him better to guard against adverse circumstances, and combine for mutual comfort and protection, would be preserved and accumulated" (163-164). The quality of this moral nature may be judged by Wallace's applauding a future in which "the better and high specimens of our race would ... increase and spread, the lower and more brutal would give way and successively die out" (163). Darwin's own ideas about the action of sympathy on human populations were influenced by his cousin, Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics. Swayed by Galton, Darwin allows that sympathy permits "the weak members of civilised societies [to] propagate their kind" which "must be highly injurious to the race of man" (*Descent* 168). Darwin knew himself to be physically weak, and believed that in his cousin-marriage he had transmitted weakness to his offspring; and it may be this, in part, that halts him *en route* to full-blown Galtonian eugenicism. For Darwin continues in the *Descent*: we could not "check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature" (168-69). And "we must bear without complaining the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind" (169). These views differ from Wallace's in their theoretical import, in that Darwin does not disallow the ongoing work of natural selection on the human body. Importantly, too, Darwin explicitly describes sympathy arising in pre-human ancestors and in animals other than humans. He goes so far as to claim that "any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man" (*Descent* 71-72). Rather than embracing Wallace's model, in which sympathy sets humans above their prior animality and outside the action of natural selection on the body, Darwin uses sympathy (common to humans and other animals) to re-envision what an animal self might look like – not brutish, but kindly – and he sets about understanding the human self (a cipher for his own self) on these terms.

Darwin's bemoaning the "highly injurious" effects of allowing the weak to propagate their kind is evidence enough that he shared the individualist tendencies of the social Darwinists. Those tendencies, however, are patently trumped, at least in the 1871-2 texts, by Darwin's practice of sympathy, and indeed by his approval for sympathy, "the noblest part of our nature". In *Descent of Man* and *Expression*, proximity, rather than alterity, dominates the relationship between the human self and its human and animal others. Sympathy appears in two ways in these volumes. Firstly, as we have seen, Darwin theorises it, discussing its origins and its occurrence in animal-human behaviour. Secondly, he enacts it in the ways in which he engages with his subjects. Indeed, for *Expression* to come into being, Darwin must sympathise: before he can account for how an animal expresses her emotion, he needs to

know what emotion is being expressed; this requires of him an insight into the emotional life of an other (sometimes a radically other) being. Whether such insights are available or not, Darwin clearly thinks that they are, and most of us, in our dealings with human and animal others, suppose that we have some (limited) grasp of the other's inner life. The *experience* of insight into the other's emotional experience (as distinct from objective insight into the other's emotional experience) is the experience of sympathy. Darwin's representation of himself as able to intuit the feelings of others reifies his identity as a sympathising subject. Because the legitimacy of Darwin's knowing how the other feels proceeds from analogies in their mental-affective structure, Darwin also reifies himself as a relative of those whom he observes, and therefore as an animal self.

To interpret animal (and indeed human-animal) experience through the rubric of *emotion*, rather than behaviour, runs against the materialist trajectory of late nineteenth-century psychology. George Henry Lewes, for one instance, had recently enjoined his fellow scientists to be "on our guard against the tendency to attribute psychological motives to the actions of animals" (368). Flouting Lewes' injunction, Darwin not only allowed for internal mental states in both humans and other animals, he assumed that in most cases he was able to intuit these states in others, including in individuals of other species. Analogies exist, *Expression* endeavours to show, between human emotional lives and the emotional lives of humanity's evolutionary cousins, not just dogs, cats and orang-outans, but snakes, birds, hippopotamuses, and cows. Unembarrassed about writing of a dog who *feels the emotion of love*, Darwin puts into practice a method of sympathetic observation (deriving from analogy between the self and the observed other) and he assumes that he and his evolutionary cousin experience an affective spectrum in common (an assumption prerequisite to sympathy).

In his treatment of the animal relation, David Hume is especially useful to Darwin. He begins "Of the Reason of Animals" with a bluntness that perhaps informs Darwin's own unembarrassment about committing what his peers – George Henry Lewes, for example – would call anthropomorphic thinking. "Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth," Hume writes, "is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endowd with thought and reason as well as men" (I.III, §xvi). Hume proceeds by arguing that where we can see animals' "external actions" resembling ours, we may judge their "internal actions" to resemble ours too, "and the same principle of reasoning, carryd one step farther, will make us conclude that since our internal actions resemble each other, the causes, from which they are derivd, must also be resembling." Hume's claim that material analogy between species points to psychological analogy, and that "evident truths" about the psychological lives of animals can be discerned simply by looking, are central assumptions for Darwin in *Expression of the Emotions*.

They are also central assumptions that are related to the practice of sympathy. I want to suggest that Darwin's own sympathetic practices – learnt through his saturation in Romantic affective culture – were foundational to his formulation of a theory of shared relationship between himself and "nature". To the extent that such speculations are provable, they are "proven" in *Expression* and *The Descent of Man*, where Darwin deploys his sympathetic method of observing the animal (and human) other in order to cement himself, and his species, firmly in the organic world.

Neither Darwin nor Hume entertains any anxieties about the inscrutability of another's consciousness. Hume writes in *Treatise of Human Nature* that "to sympathize with others" is "to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or

even contrary to our own" (2. 1. ix). He brooks no qualms about the authenticity of the communication, and argues that the feeling of sympathy derives from the closeness of the relationship between sympathiser and sympathised: we gauge likeness of feeling in those who really are our kin (but our kin now include snakes and baboons). Darwin's *Expression* assumes the truth of Hume's claim that sympathy provides reliable knowledge of the other's internal states and derives from a concrete relationship between the sympathiser and sympathised.

The apparent contradiction, Darwin's apparent slippage between individualism and advocacy of interdependent relationship, comprise the two versions of Darwinism with which this paper begins. Sympathy and individualism do not always constitute a binary in Victorian culture; in fact, sympathy sometimes operates *with* individualism. Wordsworth's representation of his own solitary and unparalleled feeling for others is an obvious example. Despite such cases, however, there is an anti-individualist mode of sympathetic imagining that conceives of the self not as a self-contained free agent, but as constituted by relationship. Whatever the individualist timbre of "struggle for survival", Darwin's theory of inheritance, and particularly of psychological inheritance or instinct, damages, perhaps irreparably, the idea of the self-contained free agent. Darwin does not tender sympathy as the opposite to this kind of free agency, but as a reassuring alternative to it. It collectivises individualism. His representation of the mutual advantage to be found in fellow-feeling, even across species, offers an antidote to the more abhorrent aspects of "social Darwinism" and socio-evolutionary theory more generally, and the idea of a nature that is governed by struggle and competition.

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