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Darwin's Compassionate View of Human Nature

Paul Ekman, PhD

DARWIN'S LITTLE KNOWN DISCUSSION OF SYMPATHY reveals a facet of his thinking unknown to many, which is contrary to the competitive, ruthless, and selfish view of human nature that has been mistakenly attributed to a Darwinian perspective. In 1871, 11 years before his death, Darwin's greatest unread book, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*,¹ was published. In the fourth chapter, Darwin explained the origin of what he called sympathy (which today would be termed empathy, altruism, or compassion), describing how humans and other animals come to the aid of others in distress. While he acknowledged that such actions were most likely within the family group, he wrote that the highest moral achievement is concern for the welfare of all living beings, human and nonhuman.

It should be no surprise, given Darwin's commitment to the continuity of species, that he would claim that concern for the welfare of others is not a uniquely human characteristic. He wrote:

Several years ago a keeper at the Zoological Gardens showed me some deep and scarcely healed wounds on the nape of his own neck, inflicted on him whilst kneeling on the floor, by a fierce baboon. The little American monkey who was a warm friend of this keeper, lived in the same compartment, and was dreadfully afraid of the great baboon. Nevertheless, as soon as he saw his friend in peril, he rushed to the rescue, and by screams and bites so distracted the baboon that the man was able to escape, after . . . running great risk of his life.^{2(p126)}

According to Darwin, the likelihood of such actions is greatest when the helper is related to the person needing help. Even those he described as "savages" would put their own lives in jeopardy for a member of their community. He postulated a "maternal instinct" to explain why a mother will not hesitate to rescue her own infant from danger, even when that means exposing herself to that same threat.

Darwin recognized, however, that some individuals help total strangers in distress, not only relatives, loved ones, or members of the same community. Without specifying whether it was a majority or simply a frequent occurrence, Darwin wrote that "many a civilized man" would act courageously to rescue a stranger, even if doing so incurred a risk to their own lives.^{2(p139)} He attributed such heroism to the same motive that ". . . led the

heroic little American monkey, formerly described, to save his keeper by attacking the great and dreadful baboon,"^{2(p139)} thus implying that heroism toward strangers is not limited to civilized men. Darwin's line of thinking has been borne out by Monroe's contemporary study³ of exceptional individuals who rescue others at risk of their own life.

Darwin did not consider why compassion toward strangers, even at the risk of one's life, is present in only some individuals. Is there a genetic predisposition for such concerns, or does it result solely from upbringing or from some mix of nature and nurture? Also, Darwin did not write about whether it is possible to cultivate such compassion for strangers in those who do not have it. Today, these are the focus of theory⁴ and empirical investigation.⁵

Darwin did, however, offer an explanation of the origin of compassion. When pain or distress is witnessed involuntarily, the witness experiences that person's distress. By this line of reasoning, the witness acts to reduce the other person's misery to reduce, thereby, the witness' own empathetically based misery. Darwin did not consider why such empathetic responses do not occur in all individuals.

Whatever its origin, Darwin proposed that natural selection would favor the occurrence of compassion:

. . . In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.^{2(p130)}

However, contrary to Darwin's expectation, there are no countries today or in the known past in which compassion and altruism toward strangers are shown by the majority of the population.

Later in this same chapter,² Darwin was more realistic. Reason, he said, should make it obvious that individuals should not only be compassionate to strangers in his or her own nation but extend that concern to all peoples, of all nations, and of all races.

. . . [E]xperience unfortunately shews [sic] us how long it is before we look at them as our fellow creatures. Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is humanity to the lower animals, seems

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to be one of the latest moral acquisitions. . . . This virtue [concern for lower animals], one of the noblest with which man is endowed, seems to arise incidentally from our sympathies becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they extend to all sentient beings.^{2(p147)}

During a series of discussions, I read this last Darwin quote to the Dalai Lama about emotions and compassion. The Dalai Lama's translator exclaimed, "Did he use that phrase 'all sentient beings'?"⁶ The translator was surprised because this phrase is the exact English translation of the Tibetan and Sanskrit description of the highest extension of compassion by a bodhisattva (a Buddhist saint). A concern for the welfare of all living beings is not found in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), which focus upon a concern for all human beings. A concern for other animals exists in only a limited fashion in Hinduism. Among the world's major religions, embracing with compassion all living beings is unique to Buddhism.

The remarkable similarity between Darwin's and the Buddhist view of the highest moral virtue (all sentient beings), and the origins of compassion (both attribute it to reducing one's own empathetic distress, and both note it is strongest in a mother's feelings toward her infant) raises the possibility that Darwin might have derived his views from Buddhist writings. However, the origin of Darwin's ideas on morality and compassion appear in his 1838 notebooks, 2 years after his return from the voyage of the *Beagle*, when Darwin was 29 years old, 5 years before he was to learn about Buddhism from his close friend J. D. Hooker.

In concluding the introduction to their edition of *Descent of Man*,² Moore and Desmond wrote that some of Darwin's contemporaries who studied this book emphasized the ". . . humane aspects of Darwin's Victorian values: duty, selflessness and compassion."^{2(p1vii)} Darwin's thinking about compassion, altruism, and morality certainly reveals a different picture of this great thinker's concerns from that often portrayed by those unacquainted with his writings who focus on the catchphrase "the survival of the fittest" (a quote from Spencer⁷ not Darwin). Even some scientists are unaware of Darwin's commitment to the unity of mankind, his abolitionist convictions, and his intense interest in moral principles and human and animal welfare.

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