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Survival of the Kindest

by Paul Ekman

Psychologist Paul Ekman reveals Charles Darwin's real view of compassion—and it's not what you might think. His belief that altruism is a vital part of human and even animal life is being confirmed by modern science.

In 1871, eleven years before his death, Charles Darwin published what has been called his "greatest unread book," The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex. His little-known discussion of sympathy in this book reveals a facet of Darwin's thinking that is contrary to the competitive, ruthless, and selfish view of human nature that has been mistakenly attributed to the Darwinian perspective.

In the fourth chapter, entitled "Comparison of the Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals," 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 to occur within the family group, he wrote that the highest moral achievement is concern for the welfare of all living beings, both human and nonhuman.

It should be no surprise, given Charles Darwin's commitment to the continuity of species, that he claimed that concern for the welfare of others is not a uniquely human characteristic. Darwin tells the following story: "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." This incident is consistent with F.B.M. de Waal's 2004 study, "On the Possibility of Animal Empathy."

The likelihood of such actions, Darwin said, is greatest when the helper is related to the person needing help. "It is evident in the first place," he wrote in The Descent of Man, "that with mankind the instinctive impulses have different degrees of strength; a savage will risk his own life to save that of a member of the same community, but will be wholly indifferent about a stranger; a young and timid mother urged by the maternal instinct will, without a moment's hesitation, run the greatest danger for her own infant…"

Darwin recognized, however, that exceptional people will help total strangers in distress, not just kin or loved ones. "Nevertheless many a civilized man who never before risked his life for another, but full of courage and sympathy, has disregarded the instinct of self-preservation and plunged at once into a torrent to save a drowning man, though a stranger. In this case man is impelled by the same instinctive motive, which made the heroic little American monkey, formerly described, save his keeper by attacking the great and dreadful baboon." Darwin's line of thinking has been borne out by K.R. Munroe's 1996 study of exceptional individuals who rescue strangers at risk of their own life, The

Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of A Common Humanity.

Darwin did not consider why compassion toward strangers, even at the risk of one's life, is present in only some people. Is there a genetic predisposition for such concerns, or does it result solely from upbringing, or from some mix of nature and nurture? Nor did Darwin write about whether it is possible to cultivate such stranger-compassion in those who do not have it.

Today these questions are the focus of theory (see P. Gilbert, ed., Compassion, Routledge, 2005) and empirical investigation (D. Mobbs, et. al., "A Key Role for Similarity in Vicarious Reward," Science, 2009). In "Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review," in Psychological Bulletin, Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas analyze the psychological literature on empathy, altruism, and compassion, integrating new evidence that they believe suggests compassion should be considered an emotion. In a forthcoming paper, "Compassion and Altruism: A Reformulation and Research Agenda," Erika Rosenberg and I consider what we call familial compassion to be an emotion, albeit with a restricted target, but argue that it is not useful to classify other forms of compassion as emotions.

Darwin did offer an explanation of the origin of compassion: "We are," he wrote, "impelled to relieve the sufferings of another, in order that our own painful feelings may be at the same time relieved…" However, as Buddhist scholar B. Alan Wallace points out, not all people respond to suffering in this way. He notes that a person might, for instance, reflect, "How fortunate I am that I'm not that other person." Many years ago in my own research I found that about a third of the people who witnessed a film of a person suffering showed suffering on their own faces, but that an equal number manifested disgust at the sight of suffering. These proportions were the same among Japanese in Tokyo and Americans in California, indicating that the reactions were not affected by culture.

Darwin also described how natural selection favored the evolution of compassion, regardless of what originally motivated such behavior: "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."

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, and later in this chapter Darwin wrote more realistically about the extent of compassion.

Darwin concluded the discussion of the origin and nature of compassion and altruism by describing what he considered the highest moral virtue. He wrote: "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. [If they appear different] experience 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 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."

During discussions I held with the Dalai Lama about emotions and compassion, on which our book Emotional Awareness was based, I read this last Darwin quote to him. The Dalai Lama's translator, Thupten Jinpa, exclaimed, "Did he use that phrase 'all sentient beings'?" Jinpa was surprised because this phrase is the exact English translation of the Buddhist description of the all-encompassing compassion of a bodhisattva.

Charles Darwin was rare among thinkers of his time in taking this view, and only in the latter part of the twentieth century did such a concern for compassion toward nonhuman beings become more popular. Darwin was far ahead of his time.

This remarkable similarity between the Buddhist view of virtue and Darwin's raises the tantalizing possibility that Darwin might have derived his views from Buddhist writings. Darwin did know at

least something about Buddhism by the time he wrote The Descent of Man. J.D. Hooker, Darwin's closest friend, spent many years in the Himalayas. Leading Darwin scholar Janet Browne told me, "Darwin might easily have discussed such matters with J.D. Hooker after Hooker's travels in Sikkim and elsewhere in India," and Alison Pearne, coeditor of Evolution: The Selected Letters of Charles Darwin, notes that Hooker mentioned Buddhism in his letters to Darwin from India. Nonetheless, the nub of Darwin's ideas on morality and compassion appear in his 1838 notebooks, two years after his return from the voyage of the Beagle, when Darwin was twenty-nine. This was five years before he met Hooker.

Randal Keynes, Darwin's great-great-grandson, described Darwin's thinking about these issues in the notebooks as follows: "His comments were carelessly worded, but he was in no doubt about his underlying aim. [Darwin wrote:] 'Might not our sense of right and wrong stem from reflection with our growing mental powers on our actions as they were bound up with our instinctive feeling of love and concern for others? If any animal with social instincts developed the power of reflection, it must have a conscience."

Darwin noted in his M notebook: "Without regarding the origin…the individual forgets itself, & aids & defends & acts for others at its own expense." Darwin was also interested at this early point in his life in the origins of morality: "What has produced the greatest good (or rather what is necessary for good at all) is the (instinctive) moral senses… In Judging of the rule of happiness we must look far forward (& to the general action)—certainly because it is the result of what has generally been best for our good far back… society could not go on except for the moral sense."

Darwin noted his debt to David Hume. In 1838 Darwin read Hume's Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals and thought it important for developing a theory divorced from divine instruction. As Randal Keynes remarks in Darwin, His Daughter & Human Evolution:

David Hume had put sympathy at the center of his thinking about the natural sources of moral principles. He saw it as a natural feeling rather than an attitude based on reasoning from some abstract notion. "There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for humankind; some particle of the dove kneaded in our frame, along with the element of the wolf and the serpent." Charles now developed this idea and speculated how our moral sense might also grow naturally from that feeling. [Darwin wrote:] "Looking at Man, as a Naturalist would at any other mammiferous animal, it may be concluded that he has parental, conjugal and social instincts… these instincts consist of a feeling of love or benevolence to the object in question… such active sympathy that the individual forgets itself, and aids and defends and acts for others at his own expense."

In concluding the introduction to their edition of Descent of Man, James Moore and Adrian 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…Frances Cobbe [a feminist theorist and pioneer animal rights activist] excused readers who could picture 'the author as a man who has…unconsciously attributed his own abnormally generous and placable nature to the rest of his species, and then theorized as if the world were made of Darwins.'"

Darwin's thinking about compassion, altruism, and morality certainly reveals a different picture of this great thinker's concerns than the one portrayed by those who focus on the catchphrase "the survival of the fittest" (in fact a quote from Spencer, not Darwin). Those unacquainted with his writings, and 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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