

Book Review:

Darwin and His Sacred Cause

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The year 2009 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his *Origin of Species*. Similarly and more significantly, this year also offers a good occasion to reconsider the birth of the Darwin community and Darwin industry, and hence the origin of Darwinology¹. In this review, I will examine two major research achievements of Darwinology from the co-authors Adrian Desmond and James Moore. One is *Darwin* published in 1991 (the Chinese translation is due in September 2009) and the other *Darwin's Sacred Cause* which is brand-new.

If you have already accepted the Chinese official image of Darwin as 'pure and detached scientist' or 'brave atheist', then Desmond and Moore will definitely shake you up. They take us on a revealing journey into Darwin and his theories.

The 800-page biography *Darwin* replants the great man in his own social and cultural soil. No matter what responses the book stirs - admiration or abhorrence - it has changed 'Darwin' from a portrait on the wall to an animated figure among us. His flat, coarse and polarized image has become rich and multi-dimensional. The old man's face on *Darwin's* cover actually creates a kind of sympathy, inappropriate maybe. Although persons with great insight often suffer mental conflicts and tortures, in Darwin's case, those conflicts and tortures were chronic and occasionally unbearable, just like his bodily afflictions.

In Edinburgh, a lively metropolis built on an extinct volcano, young Darwin followed his father's wish that he should study medicine and unexpectedly encountered the passion of radicals. Edinburgh was a refuge for Nonconformists, religious outsiders, even atheists. You could easily find proponents of the latest phrenology and transmutation theory, sympathizers with the French Revolution. Radical medical students, scalpels in hand, dissected dead flesh and bone and found no dwelling place for the soul. During one raucous meeting of the student Plinian Society, Darwin heard the president, William Browne, refute a book by the physiologist Charles Bell, which taught that the Creator endowed the human face with unique muscles, allowing man to express unique emotions that reflected his moral nature. On another occasion, after Darwin modestly announced two discoveries about marine invertebrates, Browne provoked a fight about

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¹Thanks to Xinjian XU for creating 'Darwinology' during our discussion. It basically means an emerging knowledge system, a new group of disciplines and a challenging discourse, which is different from Darwinism, Darwin industry and Darwin studies. There will be further definition, explanation and currency of this new term in our future articles and research projects, separately or cooperatively.

materialism, insisting that mind is only the product of the brain's action. The issues were stark and sensitive: if there is no eternal soul, how can there be punishments or rewards in an after-life? How is the power of God manifest? What is the church's foundation? How to uphold morality and social order? Heated debates over these issues in a context where Lamarckian evolution was sometimes embraced showed Darwin the turbulent and dangerous side of intellectual life.

Darwin gave up medicine and went to Cambridge to prepare for the Church of England. In ancient Cambridge, built on soggy fenland, the social order was maintained by priests and proctors. However, even in this godly university town, Darwin experienced religious dissent. Robert Taylor, a Cambridge graduate, changed his position from evangelism to anticlericalism. He claimed that Jesus Christ had never existed and that the Christian religion was in no way beneficial to mankind. At last he was driven out of Cambridge, but Darwin never forgot the man then notorious as the Devil's Chaplain. Surrounding towns and villages, where Darwin might spend his life as an Anglican priest, also saw disturbances. The property of landowners and parsons was destroyed by angry agricultural laborers, exposing Darwin to the threat of revolution.

Desmond and Moore portray Darwin against a changing social backdrop, a traditional Anglican order plunging into turmoil. In 1831, when Darwin visited his brother in London, the debate over the Reform Bill was electric. It was a bill put forward by the Whigs to extend the middle-class vote and redistribute parliamentary seats. Although it didn't directly represent lower-class interests, artisans and workers were mobilized, leading to massive protest and riots. However, the storm didn't carry Darwin off. He went instead aboard HMS *Beagle*. In his mental baggage were many conflicting beliefs and opinions.

The ocean kept Darwin away from his homeland, but the two authors show us how he kept in touch through correspondence. The passage of the Reform Bill, the rise of political economy, and debates about stamp duty and the Corn Laws didn't escape his notice; and news from home about his rising reputation as a naturalist made him feel secure. When Darwin returned in 1836, he found himself a new star in the firmament of geology, though he needed experts to identify and classify his extensive collections. It is noteworthy that Darwin declined the help offered by Dr Robert Grant, who had been his Lamarckian mentor in Edinburgh. Now an outspoken radical professor at University College, he and Darwin had parted ways. Slighting him was one of the most meaningful choices Darwin would ever make.

The story about how Darwin became an evolutionist and how he arrived at the theory of natural selection is well known, but what has not been stressed enough is why he concealed his theory and how his resulting double life tortured him. All the potential subversiveness of evolutionism stayed bottled up in Darwin's mind. In his covert research notebooks, minds, morals and even belief in God are the result of the brain's organization, as indeed Grant believed; but Darwin sat looking on, burying his radical ideas, when the conservative leaders of Geological Society attacked Grant in 1838. The contradiction was acute: Darwin, respectable, ambitious, harbouring an unspeakable secret. And he fell ill. The Athenaeum club opened its doors, the Royal Society elected him a Fellow, and London society offered warm invitations, yet all of these couldn't make him stay in the seething metropolis. In the autumn of 1842, Darwin and his growing family moved to the village of Down in Kent, 16 miles from the city and, he said, 'at the extreme verge

of the world'. At Down House he had the road lowered, a perimeter wall built and a mirror installed outside his study window so he could spy visitors coming to the front door.

'A troubled man' is precisely how Desmond and Moore describe Darwin. Unlike previous biographers, they aim to 'pose the awkward questions, to probe interests and motivations, to portray the scientific expert as a product of his time; to depict a man grappling with immensities in a society undergoing reform' (p.xx). After reading their book, the image of Darwin as 'naïve scientist' is too simple, and 'brave atheist' seems a deliberate distortion.

Confiding his belief in transmutation to a friend, Darwin said was 'like confessing a murder'. Indeed, 'evolution by natural selection' might murder God, but it could also murder Darwin's respectability, and thus deprive him of a rich Victorian gentleman's greatest possession. So why devise this 'dangerous idea' in the first place? Why did he adhere to it so doggedly, so persistently? Why did the troubled man torment himself for twenty years before publishing the *Origin of Species*? The question remained unanswered in *Darwin*, which is why Desmond and Moore resumed their collaboration – to provide the answer in time for Darwin's grand anniversary in 2009.

So I turn to *Darwin's Sacred Cause*. Like the biography, it is informative, novel-like, and instructive. Even the structure is familiar: Darwin-Wedgwood blood, Edinburgh, Cambridge, edges of empire on the *Beagle* voyage, at the 'centre' of the world again, and so on. To be frank, what else could the structure be? The main difference with *Darwin* is that the new book is not a biography - it stops in 1871 with the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Even so, the books are all of-a-piece, bound together by that unanswered question: Why did he tackle evolution? The subtitle of *Darwin's Sacred Cause* suggests the answer - *Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins*. Desmond and Moore argue that a core commitment drove Darwin's whole evolutionary project, a moral passion fired by the British anti-slavery movement. It is 'Darwin's core project, the nucleus of his most inflammatory research. No one has appreciated the source of that moral fire that fuelled his strange, out-of-character obsession with human origins. Understand that and Darwin can be radically reassessed' (p.xix).

That is interesting! From the beginning, Darwin had a strict moral education. He grew up in a family with a strong tradition of abolitionism running back to both grandfathers. When he was a medical student in Edinburgh, he learnt how to stuff birds from a free 'blackamoor' from Guyana. This first intimate experience of another race taught Darwin that Anglo-Saxons were not the only pleasant and intelligent human beings. Edinburgh posed big questions to dwell on, questions about mind and brain, phrenology, racial hierarchy and transmutation. And Cambridge was an anti-slavery stronghold; here, by precept and example, Darwin's reverend professors strengthened his belief in human 'brotherhood'. Enslavement of black people was as abhorrent to this young liberal Whig preparing for the Church as to the Tory grandees such as Wilberforce who helped bring in emancipation in 1833.

The Beagle voyage exposed Darwin to human diversity as never before. He met Hottentots in Africa, 'savages' in Tierra del Fuego, and Australian aborigines. How to explain this racial diversity? Darwin disagreed with pluralists who argued for the separate creation or formation of

each human race, which made slavery easier to justify. Instead, in keeping with his education, he saw all the races originating from a common ancestor, all nations making up single humankind. It took him only a few months after the Beagle voyage to extend common ancestry to the whole world of organic beings, and this was the starting point of his evolutionary project. Human genealogy was not just a metaphor, but the prototype explanation of the diversity of life on earth. Desmond and Moore stress the point again and again: that 'in the beginning' for Darwin there was the solid moral and emotional drive supplied by his family and Cambridge teachers, Christian abolitionism.

However, Darwin's moral foundation seemed not strong or effective enough when faced with either Malthusian competition and struggle or Victorian imperial-economic expansion. The *Origin of Species* may have said almost nothing about the origin of man, but it had essential implications for racial problems. You can tell this from the way in which the book was immediately discussed and from the publications it inspired. Darwin argued for common descent, yet according to his theory, the 'elimination' of aborigines was an inevitable result of evolution. No wonder both abolitionists and racialists could draw support from the *Origin*. Darwin himself wrote paradoxically on the races. The young Darwin believed in the full humanity of aborigines; the old Darwin believed in the certainty of their extinction, though slavery remained - as he said in *Descent of Man* - a 'great sin'. Perhaps Darwin's moral indignation at slavery (and indeed at cruelty to any creature) was only an attitude indicative of Victorian gentility.

The Descent of Man is the crux. For Darwin, it was an application to mankind of the general conclusions made in *Origin of Species*. Actually, it was an indispensable part of the 'big book' he had been writing in the 1850s, which was to have included 'man'. In *Descent of Man* he argued that humans had descended from some pre-existing primate and that sexual selection played an important role in the development of racial diversity. Desmond and Moore rightly think that this book is essential to understanding why Darwin came to evolution and that sexual selection vindicated his commitment to human brotherhood. But they focus on the controversy between monogenists and polygenists about human racial origins. It is a pity that they don't put enough emphasis on another thread in the book. Sexual selection explained the different external physical features of the human races, but with respect to 'mental powers' and the 'moral sense', Darwin held that there was no essential distinction among various races. This kind of agreement can be extended even to other social animals (social instincts in those cases). Darwin stressed the importance of moral qualities in the formation of so-called manhood. Not just individual selfishness, but love, sympathy and mutual aid had been acquired and strengthened through natural selection, for these were greatly beneficial to the species.

Here we can see that the moral anchor of humanity is fixed deeply in nature, for otherwise it would be merely contingent. More importantly, at the end of *Descent*, Darwin insisted that there are other agencies more important than the struggle for existence for producing man's distinctive moral qualities. The inherited effects of 'habit, the reasoning powers, instruction and religion' also play an important part; finally it is those moral qualities AND the ways in which we gain them through our free and active choices that cause the human races to separate from their common stock. Unless we grasp Darwin's carefully reasoned and clearly articulated hope for man's 'still higher destiny in the distant future', achieved through conscious moral evolution, our understanding of his evolutionary theory will be incomplete. Realizing this hope, we could

counter man's fate prescribed by the effects of natural selection and hence resolve Darwin's paradox above. That is the conclusion of the moral journey of Darwin which Desmond and Moore missed.

To conclude, in *Darwin's Sacred Cause*, Desmond and Moore develop their new image of Darwin and open another field for Darwinology. Like the biography, their new book portrays a complex man embedded in a complex fabric woven of numerous social and cultural threads. A major pattern in that fabric is the abolitionist movement for British-colonial slave emancipation in the 1830s and for Southern slave emancipation in the 1860s during the American Civil War. Against this powerful backdrop, Desmond and Moore's Darwin remains quite distinct, 'a man more sympathetic than creationists find acceptable, more morally committed than scientists would allow' (p.xviii). Darwin now appears as a humanitarian, a philanthropist, even a moralist. Thus *Darwin's Sacred Cause* has become an inescapable reference-point for those who wish to understand Darwin and evolution comprehensively, for all who care earnestly about mankind's future as much as the *status quo*.

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