

Private Affair:

A look at Darwin's ideas on gender through examination of his correspondence

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Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection became one of the central tenets of modern biology. His lesser known theory of sexual selection, however, has been equally important in its impact on social and scientific thought. But while his work in natural history was based on painstaking observation of nature, Darwin's theory of sexual selection in humans was an odd mix of physical fact—women have smaller heads than men—yoked to unexamined beliefs and attitudes—women are more skilled in intuition and imitation. Darwin himself may have been aware of some of the tensions in his arguments regarding sex and society. Although his public work suggests that he viewed women as inherently physically and intellectually inferior, a review of some of his private correspondence reveals he was far less sure of his opinions on the topic than his publications implied, and may in fact have seen women's "inferiority" as determined more by social factors than biological ones.

Darwin's theory claims that sexual selection rides on female choice. Since the females of a species choose the most attractive and capable males, and males have developed certain unique characteristics to advance themselves in the selection process, the males are more physically and mentally developed than females:

"With social animals, the young males have to pass through many a contest before they win a female, and the older males have to retain their females by renewed battles. They have, also, in the case of mankind, to defend their females... to avoid enemies or to attack them with success, to capture wild animals, and to fashion weapons, requires the aid of the higher mental faculties, namely, observation, reason, invention, or imagination."¹

Here, Darwin attributes what he calls males' "higher mental faculties" to sexual selection. Men's

¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, <http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-descent-of-man/index.html> (accessed March 4, 2014), 564.

role in sexual competition and protection of their partners makes them intellectually superior, more “reason[able]” and “invent[ive].” Darwin also highlights women’s physical inferiority, stating that men are more “courageous, pugnacious and energetic” with an “absolutely larger brain.”²

However, examination of Darwin’s personal communications reveal that while he may have been a firm believer in male intellectual superiority, he did not view female inferiority as immutable. In an 1882 letter to amateur female scientist Caroline Kennard, who challenged Darwin’s claims of the intellectual inferiority of women, Darwin responds:

“I certainly think that women [...] are inferior intellectually. [...] On the other hand there is some reason to believe that aboriginally (& to the present day in the case of Savages) men & women were equal in this respect, & this would greatly favour their recovering this equality. But to do this, as I believe, women must become as regular ‘bread-winners’ as are men; & we may suspect that the early education of our children, not to mention the happiness of our homes, would in this case greatly suffer.”³

This reveals a more cautious approach to explaining gender inequalities on Darwin’s part. While he maintains his view that women “are inferior intellectually,” instead of steadfastly claiming that women are today intellectually unequal due to evolution, Darwin suggests that “there is some reason to believe that aboriginally” men and women were “equal” intellectually. By conceding that he believes it possible for women to “recover” intellectual equality—and by explicitly linking this possibility to the forge of worldly experience, he contradicts his own claims about women’s inherent biological inferiority. Darwin does attempt to maintain the argument for gender role separation, claiming that to reach intellectual equality he believes women must become “as regular ‘bread-winners’” as are men, which would, in his opinion, harm

² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 557

³ Darwin, Charles. “Letter 13607 – Darwin, C.R. to Kennard, C.A., 9 Jan 1882.” The Darwin

³Correspondence Project Database. <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-13607>>

home life. But this claim is not made on the grounds of innate capabilities but the negative impact he believes it would have on the family.

There is one quote in *The Descent of Man* that may reveal a similar mode of thinking by Darwin. In it, Darwin postulates that “In order that woman should reach the same standard as man, she ought, when nearly adult, to be trained to energy and perseverance, and to have her reason and imagination exercised to the highest point; and then she would probably transmit these qualities chiefly to her adult daughters.”⁴ In this quote, Darwin would appear to believe that training to “energy and perseverance” can improve women’s intellectual capabilities, despite the forces of sexual selection. But he tempers this claim, qualifying that “all women [...] could not be thus raised, unless during many generations those who excelled in the above robust virtues were married, and produced offspring in larger numbers than other women.”⁵ It is unclear in this quotation whether he means that not every single woman currently possessed the characteristics to be trained to intellectual superiority, or that no women could yet be trained to the same standard as man because it would require “many generations” of women excelling in these virtues producing similarly disposed daughters. However, either interpretation would lead to the same conclusion: Darwin did believe that it was possible for women to attain intellectual equality with men.

In accordance with his concessions that women *may* be able to achieve male standards of intelligence, Darwin seems to have held the work of several female scientists in high regard. His correspondence with Mary Treat, a New Jersey naturalist, shows him praising her “admirable work” and even admitting that her “excellent observations” on *Utricularia* plants make it “pretty

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 565

⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 565

clear I am wrong about the head acting like a wedge.”⁶ That Darwin is willing to concede error to Treat based on her studies shows his respect for her intellect. In another letter, he praises her observations on butterflies, calling them “the best, as far as known to me, which have ever been made. They seem to me so important [...] you ought then to publish the result in some well-known scientific journal.” In this quote, he urges her to publish her work, showing his confidence in and approval of her methods. There were several other women that Darwin trusted and relied on for data collection, including Henrietta Huxley and Carolina Dodel-Port.⁷ It can be argued that none of these female scientists did work outside of the realm of observation, considered an acceptable pursuit for women at the time, particularly in botany. Darwin did not collaborate with women, for example, on theory-building. Perhaps he did see them unfit for the ardour of intellectual labor. However, regardless of whether he considered women fit only for some aspects of scientific work, he evidently respected their opinion—at least that of a few of them—on natural science.

Examining passages from the *Descent of Man* and Darwin’s private letters suggest that perhaps Darwin was simply unsure of his opinions on gender equality. He carefully marks the letter to Caroline Kennard in which he considers the possible aboriginal intellectual equality of men and women as “intended only for your private use.”⁸ He seems uneasy about making assertions around gender, emphasizing that the ideas he expresses in it are for private use only, potentially underdeveloped and unfit for publication. Darwin may have felt more comfortable expressing what were sincere but unconsidered opinions in personal letters, away from the judgment of a challenging scientific community. His specification that the letter is “private”

⁶ Darwin, Charles. “Letter 10523 – Darwin, C.R. to Treat, Mary., 1 June 1876. The Darwin

⁶Correspondence Project Database. <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-10523>>

⁷ Darwin, Charles. “Letter 6039 – Darwin, C.R. to Darwin, Emma., 22 March 1867. The Darwin

⁷Correspondence Project Database. <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-6039>>

⁸ Darwin, Charles. “Letter 13607 – Darwin, C.R. to Kennard, C.A., 9 Jan 1882.”

shows his reluctance to submit this work to the public eye. Perhaps he is unsure of his arguments, or perhaps he wishes to have the freedom to express his opinion without the scrutiny of his peers. Either way, this marking is telling. Darwin's private correspondence, protected from the maelstrom of popular and scientific debate, allows for more freedom of expression and thus more genuine expression of opinions.

Although Darwin's ideas on sexual selection and gender never gained the prominence of his ideas on natural selection in his time, they had a significant impact on issues of gender equality in the Victorian era. Today, his theory of sexual selection frames scientific inquiry on the evolution of sex roles, a matter also hotly debated in the public sphere. Reassessing Darwin's perspective on sex and gender may help clarify the truths and myths perpetuated by his work. The Darwin Correspondence project is an important resource that gives us insight into how Darwin thought. Personal letters were a medium through which Darwin could express his ideas unencumbered by the heated public critique he would certainly have faced with publication. As we examine his correspondence, we become aware that some of Darwin's most controversial public views may be more nuanced than they really seem. We may not be able to conclude that Darwin believed that men and women have similar intellectual abilities, but neither can we rule it out.

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