

The Moral Superiority of Victorian Women: Darwin on Male-Female Complementarity

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Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in *The Origin of Species* constitutes the majority of his contemporary legacy. His second prominent book, published about a decade later, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* is not as well known. This book highlights how scientists throughout history bring implicit cultural assumptions to research, often unknowingly. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* makes up the foundation of modern evolutionary theory about male-female differences and interactions in nature and society. Only a small percentage of the work focuses on females, making scholarship on Darwin's views on human gender quite difficult to ascertain; however, the "Darwin Correspondence Project", comprising of thousands of transcribed pieces of Darwin's communications with peers, helps to fill this gap.

Charles Darwin's 1882 correspondence with Caroline Kennard, an amateur scientist and women's rights advocate, discusses her concern with his belief in women's inferior intellectual capacity. Darwin's response seems to further promote traditionally sexist conceptions, yet his explicit statement that women are morally superior deserves further exploration. Darwin discusses morality as an evolutionary adaptation in *Descent of Man*, though he does not make direct connections to the moral superiority of women in the text. Despite Darwin's traditional view of women as intellectually inferior, his assertion of their moral superiority to men in his 1882 letter to Caroline Kennard complicates today's modern views on Darwin and gender, opening the possibility of conferring a degree of rationality onto women.

Darwin's traditional view of women according to his published work focuses on their supposed physical and mental differences from men. These differences fall into three categories: the female as a less-evolved or underdeveloped male; maternal instinct as fundamental to female function; and male distinction in intellectual power. Darwin believes that females halt their development earlier than males, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically (that is, they are evolutionarily stunted, as if an earlier species, and developmentally stunted, as if a child). According to Darwin, the female's underdevelopment implies lesser intelligence: "The female, however, ultimately assumes certain distinctive characters, and in the formation of her skull, is said to be intermediate between the child and the man" (Descent 557). Second, females are characterized by maternal instinct, apparent in her "greater tenderness and less selfishness." These instincts are "display[ed] towards her infants in an eminent degree; therefore it is likely that she would often extend them towards her fellow-creatures" (Descent 563). According to Darwin, the gentle nature of the maternal relationship constitutes a trait women cannot help but express in all interactions. Hence, her greater morality compared to man. Third, Darwin believes that a distinction in intellectual powers between males and females resulted from women's roles not requiring the "inventive genius" that men's roles do (Descent 557). Darwin claimed that men "attain higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination" (Descent 564). Whether unconsciously or not, here Darwin uses historical evidence to support his conclusions without consideration of history's powerful sociological and political forces.

Caroline Kennard questioned the conclusion Darwin's assertion of the "inferiority of women; past, present, and future" (Kennard 1881). Darwin responded stating that he "certainly think[s] that women, though generally superior to men [in] moral qualities, are inferior

intellectually.” Under Darwin’s theory of sexual and natural selection, the selective pressures of civilization have evolved modern humans from the “savage” world; women need not work, nor be “bread-winners” as put in his letter, thus, modern humans will never need to return to “savage” equality (Darwin 1882). Close examination of Darwin’s claim of women’s moral superiority holds potential for a new understanding of Darwin and gender.

Moral superiority reflects the Victorian social concept of men and women complementing each other both in nature and in society. Intellect belonged in the sphere of men, and morality in the sphere of women; these spheres are not antagonistic to each other, but rather both help to propel mankind forward. Interestingly, Kennard affirms this complementarity in her second letter to Darwin: “for in nature the male & female must work in sympathy together.” However, she also sees potential in women’s “enlightened intellect,” highlighting higher education for women as important (Kennard 1882). Regardless, they both agree that female’s moral superiority has the potential to improve mankind.

How does Darwin’s belief in women’s moral superiority enhance our understanding of his views regarding women’s place in society and, by extension, in nature? The first way to interpret his statement of women’s moral superiority translates morality as an extension of traditional sentimental notions of women’s maternal instinct and sexual virtue. In this interpretation, women’s virtues are tied directly to their reproductive functions. Males are seen to have evolved beyond this baseline species’ survival function. In this interpretation of Darwin’s view of women’s moral superiority, supposed laws of nature expertly and subconsciously mask Christian doctrine and Victorian social customs. Because much of women’s energy goes to reproduction, fragility of the female body was thought to overpower their brain capacity (Russett 116). In addition to maternal instinct, a lot of cultural significance was tied to women’s sexual

virtue during the Victorian era. Women who strayed from sexual purity were blamed, assumed to be going against their virtuous nature. Men, on the other hand, were forgiven due to their supposed moral inferiority.

However, there is a second interpretation of Darwin's belief in women's moral superiority. Morality implies a degree of self-control, and in this self-control exists an implication of rationality. Rationality is rarely, if ever, a term applied used to describe women, both during the Victorian era and even today. Yet rationality in morality plays out in Darwin's letter to Caroline Kennard, even in the traditional views he expresses regarding women's role as caretaker of the home and children. The train of logic follows as such: Morally superior people, according to Victorian social theory, better control their base instincts. Thus, by considering women as morally superior, Darwin bestows women a sliver of fundamental rationality that men must lack, even in their superior intellect. Men, deemed the morally inferior sex, do not have this particular form of rationality. Darwin's views reflected constricting Victorian notions of female sexual virtue and primary role in childcare. However, his additional implication of special moral rationality in women gives something to rescue. As often proclaimed, Darwin certainly was a man of his time; nevertheless, he uses the narratives of his day to bestow upon women a specific form of superiority.

Certainly, the idea of woman as evolutionary lesser to man still rings true throughout Darwin's published work. Women's supposed moral superiority could be appropriated to keep male and female social roles intact. Despite Darwin's potential for accepting that perhaps some observed sex differences had social and cultural roots, his ideas still support the traditional notion of male-female complementarity and normative gender roles.

Nevertheless, this understanding of Darwin's views on women's superiority places Darwin in a more appropriate historical context, and can enhance our picture of his study of gender and sex. By claiming, in his letters with Carole Kennard, that women have greater moral rationality, Darwin confers a degree of equality between the sexes. This small bit of equality gives a window into Darwin's more personal and complex thoughts and opinions about women. While we may never know the real intentions of Darwin, in his discussion of female moral superiority with Kennard, interpreted within the Victorian tradition, we can see his multifaceted views of on deep social issues such as gender roles and the male-female dynamic, issues still prominent today.

References

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