

## *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*

Charles Darwin (1871)

Turning now to the social and moral faculties. In order that primeval men, or the ape-like progenitors of man, should become social,<sup>1</sup> they must have acquired the same instinctive feelings, which impel other animals to live in a body;<sup>2</sup> and they no doubt exhibited the same general disposition. They would have felt uneasy when separated from their comrades, for whom they would have felt some degree of love; they would have warned each other of danger, and have given mutual aid in attack or defence. All this implies some degree of sympathy, fidelity, and courage. Such social qualities, the paramount importance of which to the lower animals is disputed by no one, were no doubt acquired by the progenitors of man in a similar manner, namely, through natural selection, aided by inherited habit. When two tribes of primeval man, living in the same country, came into competition, if (other circumstances being equal) the one tribe included a great number of courageous, sympathetic and faithful members, who were always ready to warn each other of danger, to aid and defend each other, this tribe would succeed better and conquer the other. Let it be borne in mind how all-important in the never-ceasing wars of savages, fidelity and courage must be. The advantage which disciplined soldiers have over undisciplined hordes follows chiefly from the confidence which each man feels in his comrades. Obedience, as Mr. Bagehot has well shewn,<sup>3</sup> is of the highest value, for any form of government is better than none. Selfish and contentious people will not cohere, and without coherence nothing can be effected. A tribe rich in the above qualities would spread and be victorious over other tribes: but in the course of time it would, judging from all past history, be in its turn overcome by some other tribe still more highly endowed. Thus the social and moral qualities would tend slowly to advance and be diffused throughout the world.<sup>4</sup>

But it may be asked, how within the limits of the same tribe did a large number of members first become endowed with these social and moral qualities, and how was the standard of excellence raised? It is extremely doubtful whether the offspring of the more sympathetic and benevolent parents, or of those who were the most faithful to their comrades, would be reared in greater numbers than the children of selfish and treacherous parents belonging to the same tribe.<sup>5</sup> He who was ready to sacrifice his life, as many a savage has been, rather than betray his comrades, would often leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature. The bravest men, who were always willing to come to the front in war, and who freely risked their lives for others, would on an average perish in larger numbers than other men. Therefore, it hardly seems probable, that the number of men gifted with such virtues, or that the standard of their excellence, could be increased through natural selection, that is, by the survival of the fittest; for we are not here speaking of

This is an excerpt from Chapter 5, "On the Development of the Intellectual and Moral Faculties." I have added explanatory sidenotes, and have included two of Darwin's footnotes. The full volume is widely available, and online e.g. at [The Complete Works of Charles Darwin Online](#) (linked).

—C. Eliot

<sup>1</sup> That is, the following requirements must be met for any animals that form social groups.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. in a group

<sup>3</sup> Darwin's note: See a remarkable series of articles on 'Physics and Politics,' in the 'Fortnightly Review,' Nov. 1867; April 1, 1868; July 1, 1869, since separately published. CE: Walter Bagehot was an essayist and Social Darwinist; see his (linked) *Physics and Politics, or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of 'Natural Selection' and 'Inheritance' to Political Society*.

<sup>4</sup> That is, the criteria required for these traits to spread in a population through natural selection are fulfilled — except perhaps heritability? Darwin hasn't said anything about that.

<sup>5</sup> This creates a puzzle: would *individuals* with these traits actually survive and reproduce at a greater rate? It seems they might not, and if so, doesn't that undermine the story?

one tribe being victorious over another.

Although the circumstances, leading to an increase in the number of those thus endowed within the same tribe, are too complex to be clearly followed out, we can trace some of the probable steps. In the first place, as the reasoning powers and foresight of the members became improved, each man would soon learn that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return.<sup>6</sup> From this low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions certainly strengthens the feeling of sympathy which gives the first impulse to benevolent actions. Habits, moreover, followed during many generations probably tend to be inherited.

But another and much more powerful stimulus to the development of the social virtues, is afforded by the praise and the blame of our fellow-men. To the instinct of sympathy, as we have already seen, it is primarily due, that we habitually bestow both praise and blame on others, whilst we love the former and dread the latter when applied to ourselves; and this instinct no doubt was originally acquired, like all the other social instincts, through natural selection. At how early a period the progenitors of man in the course of their development, became capable of feeling and being impelled by, the praise or blame of their fellow-creatures, we cannot of course say. But it appears that even dogs appreciate encouragement, praise, and blame. The rudest savages feel the sentiment of glory, as they clearly shew by preserving the trophies of their prowess, by their habit of excessive boasting, and even by the extreme care which they take of their personal appearance and decorations; for unless they regarded the opinion of their comrades, such habits would be senseless.<sup>7</sup>

They certainly feel shame at the breach of some of their lesser rules, and apparently remorse, as shewn by the case of the Australian who grew thin and could not rest from having delayed to murder some other woman, so as to propitiate his dead wife's spirit. Though I have not met with any other recorded case, it is scarcely credible that a savage, who will sacrifice his life rather than betray his tribe, or one who will deliver himself up as a prisoner rather than break his parole,<sup>8</sup> would not feel remorse in his inmost soul, if he had failed in a duty, which he held sacred.

We may therefore conclude that primeval man, at a very remote period, was influenced by the praise and blame of his fellows. It is obvious, that the members of the same tribe would approve of conduct which appeared to them to be for the general good, and would reprobate that which appeared evil. To do good unto others—to do unto others as ye would they should do unto you—is the foundation-stone of morality.<sup>9</sup> It is, therefore, hardly possible to exaggerate the importance during rude times of the love of praise and the dread of blame. A man who was not impelled by any deep, instinctive feeling, to sacrifice his life for the good of others, yet was roused to such actions by a sense of glory, would by his example excite the same wish for glory in other men, and would strengthen by exercise the noble feeling of

<sup>6</sup> The answer lies in the combination of (a) our capacity for reason and (b) our self-oriented motives.

This flirts with Lamarckism—the idea that characteristics acquired during life can be inherited by offspring, which Darwin increasingly accepted later in life. Most of Lamarckism is now rejected. However, if by “inheritance” he means *social transmission*, then that's possible.

<sup>7</sup> i.e. our desire to be praised and avoid blame seems like a deep-seated instinct.

<sup>8</sup> Darwin's note: Mr. Wallace gives cases in his 'Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection,' 1870, p. 354. CE: This refers to Alfred Russel Wallace who arrived at the idea of natural selection around the same time Darwin did.

<sup>9</sup> Many of you will recognize this as referencing the Gospel of Matthew 7:12: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

admiration. He might thus do far more good to his tribe than by begetting offspring with a tendency to inherit his own high character.<sup>10</sup>

With increased experience and reason, man perceives the more remote consequences of his actions, and the self-regarding virtues,<sup>11</sup> such as temperance, chastity, etc., which during early times are, as we have before seen, utterly disregarded, come to be highly esteemed or even held sacred.<sup>12</sup> I need not, however, repeat what I have said on this head in the fourth chapter. Ultimately our moral sense or conscience becomes a highly complex sentiment—originating in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, and confirmed by instruction and habit.

It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an increase in the number of well-endowed men and an advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.<sup>13</sup> At all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase.

<sup>10</sup> So, if we accept this mechanism for social transmission of virtues, then there might not need to be genetic transmission.

<sup>11</sup> This addresses the question of whether *all* virtues can be handled in the above way. Darwin suggests that they can, as humans' reasoning about consequences becomes more sophisticated.

<sup>12</sup> Notice that Darwin assumes the morality of Victorian England has a kind of inevitability.

<sup>13</sup> That is, natural selection adequately explains the proliferation of morality.