

Darwin and Ethics: The History of an Early Encounter

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ABSTRACT: *Charles Darwin's thoughts on the place of man in nature and on the naturalist approach to morality, far from being a secondary and belated development in comparison with his theory of evolution, already take clear shape as early as 1838 and are later developed in *The Descent of Man* (1871).*

*By examining the corpus of Darwin's published work (especially, *The Origin of Species* and the two editions of *The Descent of Man*, as well as his unpublished work (especially his notes and letters), we attempt to highlight the originality of Darwin's answer to the question of morality, without, however, effacing his roots in Victorian society, with its strong prejudices about, e.g. the intellectual incapacities of women, the inferiority of the Irish, or eugenics, as expressed in the tortuous formulations with regard to his cousin Francis Galton.*

All the same, the role of moral freedom and deliberation in Darwin's thought remain largely underestimated. Neither does his approach take into account the optimal way for a group to respond to new ethical questions.

In the final sections of this study, we examine the developments and continuities in Darwin's moral thought from his youth onwards, paying particular attention to the origin of the moral sense, the analogy of morals and instincts, moral freedom, the criterion of morality.

KEYWORDS: *Darwin, ethics, freedom, habit, instinct, moral sense, natural selection, Paley*

Introduction

Charles Robert Darwin (1809-1882) is well-known and glorified for his reflections on the transmutation of species and his theory of evolution, but his legacy on morality is much more controversial. Nevertheless his thoughts on the place of man in nature and on the naturalistic approach to morality, far from being a secondary, belated development in comparison

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