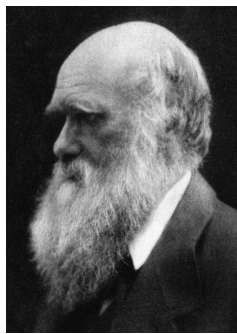


## Lessons from Darwin

Science has provided us with evidence-based answers to questions about what we are and where we came from. In 1859 Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published, followed in 1871 by *The Descent of Man*. Darwin's work explained how human beings, like all living things, had **evolved** by the process of **natural selection**.

Some people drew negative (and often mistaken) conclusions from Darwin's ideas, believing human beings were no longer special, or that human beings are selfish, or that we are all trapped in a battle for survival and only the strongest will (and perhaps should) survive. However, it is also possible to draw more positive conclusions. Here you will find some of the lessons **humanists** have drawn from Darwin's ideas.



### Knowledge and belief

- Before Darwin, many people believed the existence of a divine creator was necessary to explain the complexity of the living world around us. Darwin's work teaches us that we should be wary of accepting non-natural explanations for questions we cannot yet answer. We should not give up looking for natural explanations.
- For millions of years, and long before human beings even existed, animals have suffered in the fight for survival. This makes it difficult for many people to believe in the existence of a benevolent (all good) god, or that the presence of suffering in the world has some benefit for human beings.

'I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created parasitic wasps with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.'

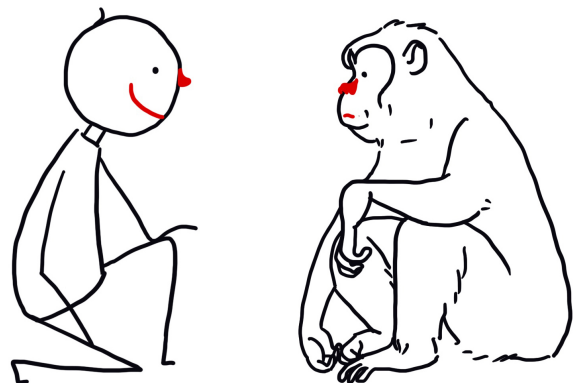
from *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*

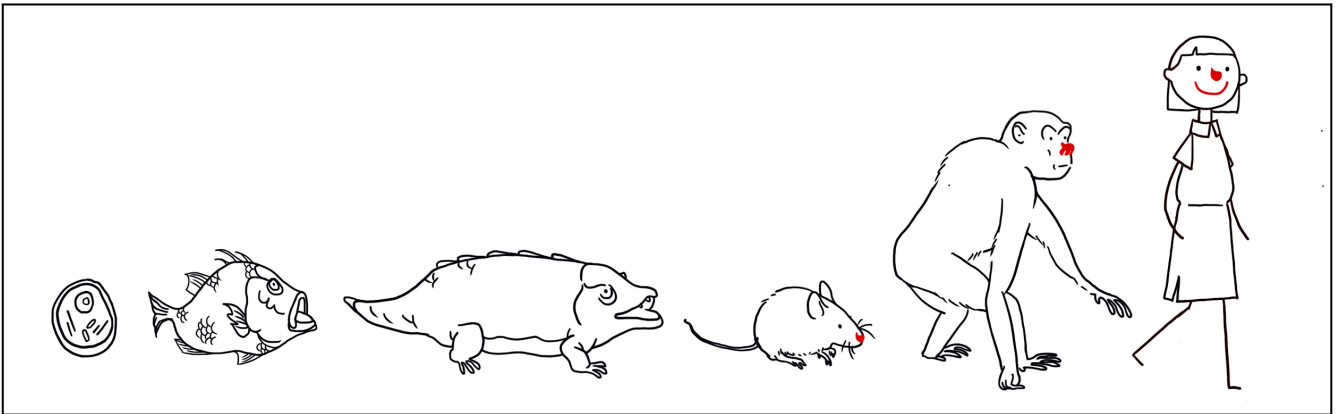
### Morality

- Darwin's theory helps explain how our moral instincts, such as empathy, have evolved naturally as we are social animals who have long lived together in groups.
- Science has revealed that human beings are all one species. When we focus on what we share, it can help us to recognise the error of prejudice and discrimination towards those who are different from us.
- Evolution teaches us that all life is part of one extended family. We therefore have good reason to extend our kindness beyond our immediate friends and family, and even beyond our own species. We should take care of other living things.

'The social instincts acquired by man will from the first have given to him some wish to aid his fellows, some feeling of sympathy... As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races.'

Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*





## Meaning and happiness

- Recognising our human nature and evolution can help us to see why we and others may sometimes not act in virtuous ways. That does not mean we should not aspire to be better, but it can bring about a sense of understanding rather than guilt or anger when we or others cause harm.
- Evolution teaches us that we were not designed for some particular purpose. Instead we have the freedom and responsibility to choose our own goals and aspirations in life.
- The probability of everything happening the way that it did for us to exist is tiny (every single one of our billions of ancestors had to survive long enough to reproduce). This can help us to see how fortunate we are to be alive and to celebrate our natural capacities and our opportunities.
- The fact that nature is capable of producing such astonishing variety and beauty from such simple beginnings can be a source of wonder and amazement.

These conclusions illustrate one way that humanists can connect a scientific approach to understanding the world with answers to questions about how we should live. For humanists, a recognition of our nature as evolved creatures can support our wellbeing, give us reason to celebrate, and back up arguments that might lead to a fairer and kinder world.

### Questions

- 1) What worries might somebody have about what Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection reveals about human beings, and how might a humanist respond to these concerns?
- 2) How might a humanist argue that an understanding of our natural evolution can support human wellbeing and kindness?
- 3) Do you think that the knowledge that we are evolved creatures is more likely to have positive or negative consequences on our lives?

'There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.'

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

