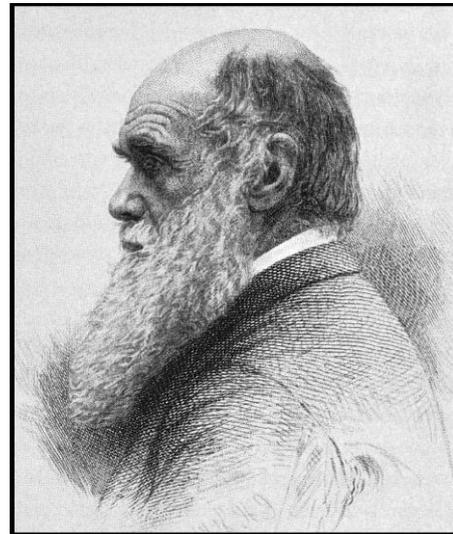


Darwin's views on human diversity: neither a racist nor a sexist

In his Editorial "The Descent of Man, 150 years on", A. Fuentes argues that Darwin "offers a racist and sexist view of humanity" (Science 372, p. 769; 2021). In addition, he writes that (a) "race is not a valid description of human biological variation"; (b) "there is no biological coherence to 'male' and 'female' brains, and (c) "'survival of the fittest' does not accurately represent the dynamics of evolutionary processes". Moreover, he argues that "We can acknowledge Darwin for key insights, but must push against his unfounded and harmful assertions". I disagree with some of these conclusions for the following reasons.



On the first pages of "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex" (1), Charles Darwin (1809–1882) summarizes the aims of his book as follows: "The sole object of this work is to consider, firstly, whether man, like every other species, is descended from some pre-existing form; secondly, the manner of his development; and thirdly, the value of the differences between so-called races of man". In this context, Darwin (1) implicitly refers to sexual selection as an evolutionary force. He points out that, in his book, no new facts on human biology are presented; it rather consists of a compilation of observations published by other scientists, based on which the author draws "interesting conclusions".

With respect to argument (a), it is important to recollect that Darwin was horrified by reports on slavery, and strongly rejected all forms of violence towards humans and animals. Accordingly, the question as to the existence of "human races" was regarded by him as controversial, or problematic. Nevertheless, Darwin referred to the work of leading anthropologists of his time, who distinguished between several (usually 5) "human races". Today, some biologists and philosophers, such as the African-American Professor Quayshawn Spencer (PhD, Stanford University), argue that the so-called "Five Human Races" (i.e., Sub-Saharan Africans, Asians, Caucasians, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders), to which Darwin (1) referred, represent distinct, evolved human populations, or genomic ancestry groups (2).

Concerning statement (b), i.e., that differences between male vs. female brains (and other biological features) are not based on convincing data, I refer to the "Organization for the Study of Sex Differences (OSSD)"(3). This interdisciplinary society of experts in the area of "Sex & Gender-Research" publishes a journal entitled "Biology of Sex Differences" (Vol. 1/2010; Vol. 12/2021). On the Internet-page of this peer-reviewed periodical, hundreds of Online-articles can be down-loaded that corroborate what Darwin (1) wrote 150 years ago: The fact that men and woman differ from each other in numerous biological and psychological features (3).

The argument (c), i.e., that the phrase "Survival of the fittest" is outdated, is indeed a matter of ongoing debate. Darwin borrowed this slogan from the philosopher Herbert

Spencer (1820–1903) and introduced it as a synonym for “natural selection” in later editions of the “Origin of Species” (1. Ed. 1859; 6th Ed 1872). Numerous studies have shown that the “Darwin-Wallace-principle of natural selection” can explain evolutionary processes in nature, such as the adaptation of populations to their corresponding environment (4). However, it must be admitted that the phrase “survival of the fittest” is problematic, since “fitness”, i.e., life-time reproductive success, is often confused with “physical strength”.

Concerning the charge that Darwin distributed “a sexist view” (i.e., that he regarded women as second-class humans), we should remember that he was the loving father of ten children, three of whom did not survive childhood. When his second child, Anne Darwin (1841–1851), died, he wrote to his cousin William Darwin Fox (1805–1880) the following disturbing letter (April 29, 1851): “My dear Fox, I do not suppose you will have heard of our bitter & cruel loss. Poor dear little Annie ... was taken with a vomiting attack ... (that) ... rapidly assumed the form of the low & dreadful fever, which carried her off in ten days – Thank God she suffered hardly at all, & expired as tranquilly as a little angel... She was my favourite child ... Poor little dear soul” (5). In early 1851, Darwin was the proud father of three sons and two daughters; as a result of the “un-fair” death of his beloved Annie, he lost the last traces of his Christian faith.

The sentences quoted above (5) are not the words of a “sexist”, who ranks men higher than women (or girls); it rather documents that for Darwin, all members of the “Human Race” (mankind) are of identical value—with equal dignity and the same rights. However, Darwin (1) accepted human diversity, i.e., the differences between average members of the “Five Human Races”, and those between the two biological sexes, based on the scientific literature available at his time, as well as on his own observations.

Taken together, I conclude that Darwin was neither a racist nor a sexist. However, as a “man of the 19th century”, he adopted and perpetuated ideas of other scientist of his time, inclusive of some unfounded “racial- and gender-stereotypes”. Today, we know much more about human diversity and sexual selection. Recently, P. J. Richerson et al. (6) correctly argued that „Darwin’s insights (of 1871) are (still) of particular interest to modern science”. In my opinion, it is unfair to accuse the British naturalist for some of his misguided conclusions. Darwin was a human being, and humans (even great scientists) make mistakes!

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