ONE STEP UP, TWO STEPS BACK:
Aesthetics, Ethics, and Savagery in Darwin's Theory of Evolution

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In The Descent of Man, Darwin issues a scathing indictment of the behavior of savages, claiming that for his own part, he would

as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper; or from that old baboon, who, in descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs — as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, and practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions. (1: 404-05)

Clearly, the nature of savages so repels Darwin that he would rather count himself among animals than among them. Yet his condemnation of savages as worse than animals is puzzling, perhaps even anomalous, given the generally progressive evolutionary scheme that he presents in The Descent of Man. In this work, Darwin organizes his discussion of human evolution around the two more or less distinct categories of sexual and natural selection. One of his goals was to demonstrate that human ethical and aesthetic sensibilities had evolutionary origins and could be explained "exclusively from the side of natural history" (1: 71). Darwin hoped to answer critics who doubted the ability of his theory to explain the origin and persistence of traits which seemed to have no immediate or obvious evolutionary significance. Darwin believed that sexual selection, the corollary of the theory of natural selection which describes the processes by which mating pref-
ferences are exerted among animals, could account for the many strange and beautiful varieties of animal life. Armed with his theory of sexual selection, he could fend off intrusions from natural theology and arguments from design. Similarly, Darwin sought to explicate the processes of moral evolution without recourse to the theistic versions of evolution that insisted upon the existence of a higher being in order to account for human moral faculties. He saw no need to posit such differences in kind between animal and human endowments.

Darwin understood human moral and aesthetic evolution to consist of a progression in three phases, from instinctive behavior (exemplified by nonhuman animals), to “savage” behavior (based on weakened instincts and some rational capacity), to “civilized man” whose faculties are highly refined and largely devoid of instinctive impulses. He endorses a “cheerful” view that moral evolution has been a fairly steady progressions (1: 184). “Progress,” he observes, “has been much more general than retrogression . . . man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard” (1: 184).

Yet despite his belief in evolutionary progress, Darwin clearly finds more to commend in animal behavior than in the behavior of savages, as the passage I cited at the outset illustrates. As we will see, savage behavior stemming from vanity and selfishness results in what Darwin sees as a willful disruption of the processes of natural and sexual selection; animals, whatever else they do, are not guilty of such crimes. Darwin regards many savage practices, particularly those involving marital relations, infanticide, and self-adornment, as symptomatic of their depravity in contrast both to civilized humans and our animal progenitors. Savages appear to be a moribund strain of *Homo sapiens*, evolutionary misfits in Darwin’s scheme of evolution. At the same time, however, he rejects a model of savage devolution and dismisses the idea that savages have degenerated from a higher state. If evolution is generally progressive and savage races have not devolved from a more civilized state, in what sense are they inferior? Darwin’s treatment of savages as inferior to animals, morally and aesthetically, appears inconsistent with the progressive account of evolution he espouses. Where, then, do savages fit in?

To begin to answer these questions, it is necessary to refer to the basic components of Darwin’s evolutionary ethics and aesthetics. I argue that Darwin’s account is consistent on the issue of savage evolution: he can maintain that savages are in a sense devoled, while retaining a generally progressive model of moral and aesthetic evolution. His treatment of savages as simultaneously advanced and degenerate hinges on a number of normative assumptions about what an evolutionarily advanced — a “civilized” — sense of ethics and aesthetics should look like. Darwin’s evaluation of savage life and customs rests far more on his personal biases and, to some extent, the biases of his culture, than on scientific observation of savage societies. His framework of evaluation, moreover, bears a striking similarity to Kantian ethical and aesthetic categories.

Darwin’s critique of savage ethics and aesthetics employs disinterest as the appropriate standard of conduct. Using disinterest as a standard for evaluation, he arrives at a ranking of ethical and aesthetic judgments which permits him to categorize some behaviors as primitive and others as civilized. Darwin presents his conclusions on savage behavior as the product of scientific research and observation; Kant, on the other hand, generally eschewed “anthropological” approaches to human conduct in favor of formal, *a priori* moral principles. To put the point differently, Kant was more interested in stating what human beings ought to do, or are ideally capable of doing, than in describing or explaining empirical characteristics of human moral responses. While it appears that Darwin sets out to pursue the latter form of investigation — i.e., an empirical study of the evolution of ethics and aesthetics — his account is largely prescriptive and even, at times, predictive, for moral and aesthetic evolution. Contrary to his claims, his conclusions are not simply those of the impartial natural historian. As we will see, Darwin’s recounting of his own moral and aesthetic development in his *Autobiography* further illustrates the way in which normative assumptions and personal biases shaped his views of cultural evolution.

I. THE IMPERIOUS OUGHT: KANTIAN ETHICS IN *THE DESCENT OF MAN*

As I have already observed, Darwin sees civilized human moral sense as having developed through gradual evolution from pure instinct to a sophisticated moral response involving a variety of mental processes, such as memory, conscience, reflection, and
reason. In humans, the moral sense is closely tied to self-awareness or self-consciousness, which animals do not possess. Savages occupy a precarious middle ground between instinct and reason, and their ethics and aesthetics reflect this status.

In its early stages of development, Darwin claims, consciousness is expressed primarily as self-consciousness. Only later in moral evolution (that is, in civilized humans) does an other-regarding ethic take root. Darwin’s view of the highly evolved moral sense accords well with Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative: at the apex of moral evolution, the imperative to perform our moral “duty” is wholly autonomous, rather than heteronomous. Following Kant, Darwin insists that moral actions be performed solely from a sense of duty; actions whose motives stem from our own interests, such as a desire for happiness, the admiration of others, avoidance of punishment, or any other consequences, do not have genuine moral worth, no matter how good they might appear. The elimination of all these heteronomous desires represents true moral freedom. Like Kant, Darwin argues that certain social and religious strictures may aid in perfecting our moral sense, but he insists that morality is ultimately rooted in rationality; it is indifferent to laws or standards external to ourselves. He begins his discussion of moral evolution by invoking Kantian raptures on the nature of simple duty and “that imperious word ought.”

Immanuel Kant exclaims, “Duty! Wondrous thought, that worketh neither by fond insinuation, flattery, nor by any threat, but merely by holding up thy naked law in the soul, and so extorting for thyself always reverence, if not always obedience; before whom all appetites are dumb, however secretly they rebel; whence thy original?” (1: 70-71)

Darwin proceeds to answer the question posed by Kant and adds that as far as he knows, "no one has approached it" from the angle of natural science (1: 71). The process by which our moral sense comes to be perfected begins, evolutionarily speaking, with a “well-marked social instinct” (1: 71). Animals (whom Darwin regards as models of our evolutionary progenitors) possess social instincts which lead them to "take pleasure" in the company of one another and to feel "sympathy" for other animals, on whose behalf they may even perform benevolent deeds (1: 72). In this incipient evolutionary stage, the social instinct does not extend generally to all of an animal’s fellows, but only to those immediately surrounding it, such as kin. Like any other thwarted instinct, the social instinct produces in the animal a profound sense of "dissatisfaction" when disobeyed (1: 72). The unpleasant sensation that attends overriding the instinct (or results from subverting it to a stronger but temporary drive) acts as a deterrent against disregarding it in the future. As the social instinct becomes strengthened, it eventually extends to all members of the same species. However, in animals, sympathy is seldom extended beyond the species boundary to other organisms. Among animals, the nagging sensation of an unsatisfied social instinct is not, strictly speaking, a pang of conscience. However, as higher mental faculties are increasingly selected and powers of reasoning become honed — as in human evolution — a variety of conscious processes are marshaled to reinforce the impulse to perform one’s duty. Whenever duty is disregarded, “images of all past actions and motives” pass “through the brain of each individual” (1: 72). A process of comparison then occurs such that, in remembering past responses to a similar situation, an organism senses what “ought” to have been done. Animals are guided to the proper action almost automatically by means of an “inward monitor” (1: 73). In humans with highly evolved mental powers, Darwin argues, the inward monitor becomes less intuitive and more deliberative and reflective as reason evolves to displace animal instinct. Eventually, the inward monitor evolves into conscience.

In addition to the rigors of conscience and reflection to which we are privately subjected, social existence has acted as a form of moral schooling as well, both in our evolutionary past and in the experience of our daily lives. In past stages of human moral evolution, the impulse to do good deeds was reinforced, if not solely motivated by, our recognition of how we might benefit personally. Personal gain, along with a desire for peer approval and self-aggrandizement, once accounted for much of our ancestors’ ostensibly altruistic behavior. Darwin argues that the “social instincts, which must have been acquired by man in a very rude state, and probably even by his early ape-like progenitors, still give the impulse to many of his best actions” (1: 86). Yet as he perfects his capacity for self-command through reason and experience, man will eventually “feel himself impelled, independently of any pleasure or pain felt at the moment, to certain lines of
conduct" (1: 86). Ultimately, peer approbation and censure are no longer needed to sustain our social ethic; we are moved only by naked duty and become truly autonomous. At this point, Darwin observes, one “may then say, I am the supreme judge of my own conduct, and in the words of Immanuel Kant, I will not in my own person violate the dignity of humanity” (1: 86). When the highest level of mental and moral evolution is attained, duty is performed with the perfect self-command of one who is free of an internal struggle among impulses. Humans simply embrace the golden rule: “To do good unto others — to do unto others as ye would they should do unto you — is the foundation-stone of morality” (1: 165). An action performed in this way, without the need for deliberation, can scarcely be distinguished from instinct; conscience becomes a nearly unconscious faculty. The crucial difference between animal instinct and rational ethics lies in the lengthy, intervening process of evolution. Darwin never indicates the exact point at which consciousness enters into the evolutionary process, except to say that animals generally do not possess it, and humans (in varying degrees) do. Darwin’s notion of incipient consciousness is key to understanding his apparent ambivalence about the placement of savages in his generally progressive evolutionary scheme. The first dawning of consciousness brings with it what Darwin considers to be an inordinate preoccupation with the self.

II. PRIMITIVE AESTHETICS AND ETHICS:  
THE VAN AND SELFISH SAVAGE

The concept of the “primitive” dominated much of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropology. In general, the term designated societies with a low level of technological development and little or no literacy or mathematical skills, among other things. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists held that human societies follow an ortholinear development from the primitive to the civilized, and Darwin’s views — at least in terms of cultural evolution — were no exception. Like other Victorians, Darwin also employed the term “primitive” to signify something other than mere lack of development; primitive societies were assumed to resemble our evolutionary forebears. The “primitive” and the “prehistoric” were overlapping concepts in the minds of many naturalists, and, thus, savages were viewed by some as examples of living fossils or “survivals.” Yet how could they have survived without progressing? Failure to change, and especially the failure to change at a satisfactory rate, was puzzling and repugnant to Darwin, who was contemptuous of any tribe that seemed unwilling or unable to make any significant innovations in, for example, their canoe designs or tool technologies. Some Victorians were, by contrast, “degenerationists” who countered that savages could not have survived in their current state; rather, they must have degenerated from a better, more exalted condition. As noted previously, Darwin clearly rejected this notion of the “fallen” savage, perhaps in part owing to the theological overtones of such a theory. The argument that “man came into the world as a civilised being and that all savages have undergone degradation” is, in Darwin’s view, “weak” in comparison to the evidence for gradual progression (1: 181).

Darwin concurrs with many of his contemporaries on the moral (or immoral) nature of primitive peoples. The general profile of the savage was that of an emotional, superstitious, and extremely social creature of habit. Victorian anthropologist Edward B. Tylor’s characterization of savages as highly conformist — tightly bound to custom, fearful of change, and largely devoid of curiosity — fits with the general picture of savage life painted by Darwin, and he often cites Tylor’s work approvingly. He was particularly grateful to Tylor for his demonstrations of the vast similarities — in art, music, language, even facial expressions — among “men of all races.” Darwin argues that the evidence that all civilized nations are the descendants of barbarians, consists, on the one side of clear traces of their former low condition in still-existing customs, beliefs, language &c.; and on the other side, of proofs that savages are independently able to raise themselves a few steps in the scale of civilisation, and have actually thus risen. (1: 181)

For evidence of the first sort, Darwin refers his readers to Tylor. Relying on the work of anthropologists such as Tylor, Darwin was better able to make his point that in humans, as in animals, common characteristics illustrate descent from “a common progenitor” (1: 232-33). Such demonstrations lent support to his theory of evolution; they were also effective ammunition against religiously minded naturalists such as Louis Agassiz, a proponent of the “polygenetic” school of thought which argued for discrete
centers of creation (and thus a distinct, species-like status) for each of the various races of humans.

While Darwin agreed with some of his contemporaries on the general features of savage existence, his placement of savages as an intermediate stage between animals and civilized humans distinguishes him from certain prominent anthropologists and natural historians of his day. Both Edward B. Tylor and American anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan, for example, assumed a basic three-stage process of cultural evolution, defined primarily with reference to technology: first was the savage stage (consisting of crude implements and subsistence on wild flora and fauna); next we find the barbarian (possessing some agricultural skills and metal work); and finally, of course, civilized culture emerged, typically defined with reference to the technological achievements of the investigator’s culture. Tylor explained that his principle of classification was the presence or absence of

industrial arts, especially metal-working, manufacture of implements and vessels, agriculture, architecture . . . extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles . . . degree of social and political organization, and so forth. (22-23)

Darwin, for his own part, tends to use the terms “savage” and “barbaric” interchangeably, not as terms for successive stages. More importantly, his placement of savages as intermediate between animals and more advanced humans reflects a different agenda. Like other theorists of the time, Darwin also defined savages with reference to their technological development, or the lack thereof, and he agreed with those who viewed savages as a paradigm of our evolutionary forebears. But he was especially intent on showing that animals could be viewed as the forebears of both civilized and primitive humans. In other words, his stages of evolution, both moral and aesthetic, take animals as the starting point. This fact supports Darwin’s claim (which is essentially correct) that he is the first to systematically address the origins of morality as a natural historian — as someone, that is, who pursues this question with reference to both humans and animals.

The notion that the savage is socially oriented plays a prominent role in Darwin’s account of savage ethics and aesthetics. He makes frequent reference to the savage’s need for the approval of others and his insatiable desire for self-aggrandizement and admiration. The sociability of the savage, at least as Darwin inter-
Scarcely any part of the body is left unmodified among the tribes that Darwin encounters. Face and body are painted, tattooed, pierced, and gashed; teeth are removed, filed, or stained; legs are reshaped, skulls are flattened or elongated, lips are stretched and distorted. While some of these alterations mark certain rites of passage or serve to distinguish one tribe from another, the majority of modifications are calculated to attract mates, Darwin believes. Savages willingly undergo painful and lengthy operations, primarily for the sake of enhanced appearance, whereas animal displays are natural and unconscious.

Darwin also attributes the frequency of abortion among savages (another unnatural disruption of natural selection) to the fact that they “pay the greatest attention to their personal appearance” (2: 338). This practice, so “fearfully common,” stems from the “desire felt by women to retain their good looks,” rather than allowing themselves to become disfigured by pregnancy, natural though such disfigurement would be (2: 344). Savages have lost the strong, instinctive love of offspring (possessed by animals) that inhibits infanticide and have acquired a consciousness of the value of beauty, a mental capacity largely absent in animals. The combination makes them repulsive to Darwin.

The coupling of aesthetic instincts with conscious vanity interferes with evolutionary progress, Darwin believes. He is convinced that savages’ preoccupation with personal appearance can have grave ethical consequences, as the frequency of abortion illustrates. Their lack of well-developed ethics, in turn, has a negative impact on the beauty of the tribe: female offspring are considered more expendable than males and are more often victims of infanticide. This unnatural method of selection creates an “artificial scarcity of women” and an abnormal distribution of traits, talents, and physical beauty in subsequent generations of females. Rather than selecting the most desirable female (in terms of beauty or other traits), as males would if they had more to choose from, savage men are forced to take any female they can find. Darwin also claims that other marriage customs, such as early betrothal and the frequency with which savage men take wives primarily as “slaves,” prevent the proper “preference being exerted” for the most desirable mates (2: 366-68). All of these factors contribute to a downward spiral in the level of beauty and fitness of savage races.

Thus, in Darwin’s view, savage preoccupation with the self is manifested as vanity in their aesthetics and as selfishness in their ethics. As noted above, Darwin argues that animals exhibit feelings of sympathy toward members of their own species. Despite the fact that most animal species do not extend sympathy to all creatures, he nevertheless expresses admiration for their social arrangements. The savage social ethic is similarly restricted to the immediate tribe, but while he finds that the limited scope of ethical consideration is acceptable in animals, Darwin condemns it in savages: one of the “chief causes of low morality in savages,” he contends, is the “confinement of sympathy to the same tribe” combined with “insufficient powers of reasoning” (1: 97). Some savage tribes, he argues, have not even learned to identify with all members of their own group, rendering them hopelessly contentious, internally riven, and unable to compete with other, more “social” tribes who tend to band together. Such arguments suggest that Darwin sees degrees of selfishness among different tribes; with certain tribes, sociability appears to take a slightly more benign or virtuous form, producing at least some recognition of the good of the whole. Yet even these tribes manifest moral sympathies too narrow to be extended beyond their own group.

Because they retain some instinctive social impulses alongside a capacity for self-consciousness, savages are sufficiently aware of the consequences of their social actions to calculate benefits to themselves. This low motive, as Darwin calls it, is consistent with the savage’s transitional stage in evolution:

As reasoning powers and foresight became improved [during moral evolution], each man would soon learn from experience that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return. (1: 163)

Savages have not yet attained the moral and intellectual stage which permits a response to simple Kantian duty without regard to personal gain or loss. Even selfish impulses can hold a tribe together for a time. Yet if their moral consideration is not extended beyond themselves and their tribes, savages will continue to war with other groups. The persistent pugnacity of savages insures their eventual extermination by civilized races. “Violent
and quarrelsome men often come to a bloody end,” Darwin warns (1: 172).

To sum up, selfishness in savage ethics is the counterpart to vanity in their aesthetics. Above all, savages enjoy “the sentiment of glory” as illustrated by their “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” (1: 164). Both vanity and selfishness can be evolutionary dead-ends, the one leading to such practices as abortion, the other to war and extermination. Imperfectly formed mental faculties lie at the root of both. Having advanced somewhat beyond pure animal instinct, savages have essentially regressed. A little consciousness, it seems, is a dangerous thing.

III. Kantian Aesthetics

Just as Darwin’s account of moral evolution from animal instinct to rational duty draws on Kantian ethics, so too his theory of the evolution of aesthetics resembles Kant’s arguments in the Critique of Judgment. Before returning to Darwin’s discussion of savage aesthetics, let us highlight those features of Kant’s account of aesthetic judgments that are important for understanding Darwin’s critique.

Kant divides the subject of aesthetics into three main categories: the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime. He considers judgments of all three to be aesthetic judgments, but the pleasant is a judgment of sense while the beautiful and the sublime are judgments of taste. Kant’s distinctions between these categories depend upon the particular faculties involved in making aesthetic judgments (imagination, understanding, and reason) and the issue of whether a judgment is “disinterested” or “interested.”

Kant immediately distinguishes the pleasant (sometimes translated as “the agreeable”) from the beautiful and sublime as a judgment which is never disinterested. The liking we feel in judging something pleasant is always interested in the existence of the object as it relates to sense. Judging an object pleasant produces an inclination — the judgment is intermingled with a desire to attain the object in some way so as to enjoy it for oneself. We do not merely approve of such objects of liking; we are affected by them. Strictly speaking, judgments of the pleasant should not be considered judgments at all because our liking of the object im-

pairs our ability to judge it freely. If the pleasure we feel is intense enough, in fact, we do not bother judging it; we simply desire it. We observe this suspension of judgment, Kant points out, among persons who “aim at nothing but enjoyment” (207).

Judgments of the pleasant, beautiful, and sublime are all subjective (that is, not properties of the object itself) in the sense that issuing the judgment involves representing the object to ourselves and our particular feelings of pleasure or pain. In judging something pleasant, we do not assume that there ought to be universal assent to our opinion as we do — at least implicitly — when we judge something to be beautiful or sublime. The beautiful and sublime, while subjective, are thus universally subjective. The pleasant, on the other hand, is a private judgment which makes no such universal claim. Kant argues that animals and humans alike are able to judge things pleasant; pleasantness “holds for nonrational animals too; beauty only for human beings” (210). In contrast to the pleasant, the terms “beauty” and “sublimity” denote a liking that is wholly disinterested: “in neither of them does our liking depend on a sensation” (244). Kant considers judgments concerning the beautiful and the sublime to be free because the subjects who make these judgments are devoid of interest or desire that the object exist. A basic distinction between beauty and sublimity is that the former is concerned with limited objects whose form can be comprehended in its totality, while the sublime designates something vast, formless, or unbounded. Beautiful objects often display symmetry or uniformity. A flower, for instance, we call beautiful in its form, but a vast and stormy sea is more aptly termed sublime.

Judgments of the sublime, even more than beauty, require a well-developed faculty of reason. The mathematical sublime, for instance, pertains to objects that often present a greater number of parts than imagination can begin to grasp. Here, imagination refers this manifold of parts to the faculty of reason because only reason can conceive of the idea of its wholeness. Reason adds to the perception of unboundedness “the thought of its totality” (245). Imagination’s failure to grasp the sublime implies that there exists another faculty, namely reason, which demands and can conceive of the absolute totality of the sublime. The sublime is such that “even to be able to think” of it indicates that “that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense” (250).
Kant argues that aesthetic perceptions are not produced by culture (since they invoke a priori faculties), yet a fairly high degree of culture may be required in order to experience beauty and sublimity — particularly sublimity which demands the exertion of reason over the senses. For Kant, as for Darwin, a high degree of culture corresponds to the advancement of reason. We possess a predisposition to reason as part of our nature, Kant argues, but it is incumbent upon us to develop and exercise it.

IV. The Civilized and the Barbaric: Kant’s Hierarchy of Aesthetic Judgments

Disinterestedness, whether in ethics or aesthetics, frees one from the contingency of motivations stemming from our fluctuating desires and inclinations. Kant is critical of any system of ethics or aesthetics which aims at the fulfillment of human inclinations. Judgments of the beautiful and the sublime are disinterested and free because “we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason” (210). A judgment of the pleasant makes no claims to universality and cannot function as a standard for everyone. Nor does judging something pleasant presuppose the same rational sophistication involved in the beautiful and sublime; these require understanding and reason, while the pleasant is a judgment that issues primarily from our sensuous faculties — faculties we share with animals. Desiring to exist in a feeling-oriented state, to order one’s life primarily around the goal of obtaining what is pleasant, is “pathological” in Kant’s view.8

Reason can never be persuaded that there is any intrinsic value in the existence of a human being who lives merely for enjoyment (no matter how industrious he may be in pursuing that aim). . . . Happiness, with all its abundance of agreeableness, is far from being an unconditioned good. (209)

Pure aesthetic judgments must be independent of emotions that can act as extrinsic “charms” to distract and influence. Emotion is a sensation which properly belongs to judgments of what is pleasant or agreeable (that is, judgments of sense rather than taste) and “does not belong to beauty at all” (226). Although emotion may accompany judgments of taste, it must never act as the “determining basis” (226). Kant groups emotion (or certain emotions) together with aesthetic charms such as color and ornament. Both are extraneous attractions, inappropriately “arousing and sustaining the attention we direct toward the object itself” (226). Not only are judgments affected by charms disqualified as universally valid claims, but they are also indicative of a vulgar and unpracticed aesthetic sense. “Any taste remains barbaric,” Kant argues, “if its liking requires that charms and emotions be mingled in, let alone if it makes these the standard of its approval” (223). By contrast, a civilized aesthetic expresses a desire for universal communication, not mere individual gratification: “Initially, it is true,” Kant argues, “only charms thus become important in society and become connected with great interest, e.g. the dyes people use to paint themselves (roucou among the Caribs and cinnabar among the Iroquois), or the flowers, sea shells, beautifully colored feathers” (298). However, when “civilization has reached its peak,” universal communicability is the goal of refined tastes (298).

Accordingly, Kant argues, in the visual arts, color should be used only to accentuate the form or outline of a work of art, for it is only form that is properly considered beautiful. Colors may attract because they stimulate and gratify our senses, but we should not confuse this attraction with our disinterested liking of the beauty of the form itself. According to Kant, “the colors that illuminate the outline belong to charm. Though they can indeed make the object itself vivid to sense, they cannot make it beautiful and worthy of being beheld” (225). When such attraction forms the basis of judgment, our judgment has been impaired. Ornament, too, has the potential to affect our judgment when it does not participate in the form of the object but is “merely attached” as a gratification of the senses (226). Kant pejoratively terms all ornaments “finery” when they distort judgment to the extent that the charm itself commends an object for our approval (226).

Kant devotes less attention to the subject of human beauty, but his discussion here is consistent with his analysis of visual arts in that accessory and ornamentation are secondary to — and can interfere with — the beauty of the form itself. Human beauty falls under the category of dependent or adherent beauty, distinct from free beauty.9 The beauty of the human form is adherent to our a priori notion of the ideal or perfect human form, and we judge all such forms accordingly. Judgments of human beauty
are not pure in the way that a judgment of a flower might be. When we look at a flower, our liking is not dependent upon an ideal conception of how it ought to look or what its purposiveness is. Even a botanist, Kant observes, disregards such considerations when he judges a flower beautiful.

Judgments of the human form, on the other hand, entail a concept of its perfection and therefore certain embellishments cannot be reconciled with our ideal. Kant disapproves of facial tattoos in particular: "A figure could be embellished with all sorts of curlicues and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattoos, if only it were not the figure of a human being" (77). Such ornamentation detracts from the natural perfection of the human body. As we will see, Darwin similarly objects to decoration of the body that involves a substantial departure from its natural form.

Taken together, Kant’s remarks about the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime and their relation to culture, reason, and emotion, form a hierarchy of aesthetic judgments: beauty and sublimity require a higher degree of cultural development and powers of reason than does the pleasant. The pleasant, which is truly a judgment of sense, is common to both animals and humans. Failure to distinguish that which is pleasant and gratifying to sense (including charms and emotions) from judgments of taste indicates a barbaric and primitive aesthetic. The existence of a human being demands more than gratification of inclinations. Kant, like Darwin, considers a society of individuals bent on fulfilling their particular desires to be inferior to one united in universal, rational, and aesthetic judgment. With these features of Kantian aesthetics in mind, let us return to Darwin’s criticisms of the savage aesthetic sense.

V. Darwin’s Kantian Critique of Savage Aesthetics

Although Darwin does not explicitly credit Kant’s philosophy as the inspiration for his own aesthetic views (as he does in his discussion of ethics), there are many parallels between the two thinkers regarding the defining features of civilized and barbaric aesthetics. These parallels shed some light on Darwin’s low estimation of savages in his evolutionary scheme. His criticisms reflect a ranking of aesthetic responses similar to Kant’s in that both interpret the intermingling of the pleasant and the beauti-
“merely for ornament” (2: 353). Animal fanciers always “wish each character to be somewhat increased; they do not admire a medium standard” (2: 353). Thus, Darwin argues, the savage whose appearance departs from the natural form and the animal breeder who exaggerates features both engage in artificial selection. In some cases, the more conscious the process of selection of traits among savages, the more unappealing the results. “As the face with us is chiefly admired for its beauty,” Darwin writes, “so with savages it is the chief seat of mutilation” (2: 341).

Unable to separate aesthetic judgments from personal interests, savages seek primarily what is pleasant or enjoyable, whether in terms of admiring and enhancing their own beauty or in appraising the beauty of others. They cannot cultivate a disinterested liking; beauty is seen as a means to the end of gratification and mates are objects to be captured (hence Darwin’s revulsion toward the savage practice of “stealing” wives). Their aesthetics, like their ethics, is always a calculated endeavor. In this sense, as Kant would concur, they cease to judge altogether and merely desire.

Darwin’s remarks about the role of reason in aesthetic judgments recall Kant’s argument that beauty and sublimity depend in part upon a certain level of cultural and rational development. Both maintain that the inability to issue such judgments reflects a barbaric constitution. “Obviously,” Darwin writes,

no animal would be capable of admiring such scenes as the heavens at night, a beautiful landscape, or refined music; but such high tastes, depending as they do on culture and complex associations, are not enjoyed by barbarians or by uneducated persons. (1: 64)

In Darwin’s view, an evolved aesthetic sense eschews all traces of vanity and excess that savages exhibit. A civilized aesthetic is one which has virtually shed a preoccupation with beauty, particularly where personal appearance is regarded as a means to pleasure and gratification. Once the instinct for beauty has diminished and aesthetics evolves in accordance with reason, beyond the stage of mere vanity, civilized humans no longer engage in self-conscious, flagrant displays. In civilized courtship, Darwin argues, mates are chosen freely and rationally, without the distortion introduced by emotions and aesthetic charms. Darwin maintains that civilized races select mates on the basis of moral virtues and intellectual merits, rather than physical attraction. “Civilized men,” he writes, “are largely attracted by the mental charms of women” (2: 356, emphasis mine). Women likewise are “largely influenced by the social position and wealth of men, and the success of the latter in life largely depends on their intellectual power and energy” (2: 356). The instinctive lures of our evolutionary past — our enchantment with colorful displays, physical charms, and the seductive rhythms of music — gradually lose their power over civilized races. Having evolved beyond the reach of these controlling passions, civilized races are truly free to judge.

VI. CONCLUSION: EVOLUTION TOWARDS ANAESTHESIA

Darwin’s objective in *The Descent of Man* was to study the processes of aesthetic and ethical evolution as a scientist, to pursue this topic from the perspective of natural history. He arrived at a set of criteria which enabled him to rank an entire range of human behaviors as primitive or civilized. In fact, however, his study of savages was far from objective and involved a number of normative assumptions that drew upon Kantian moral and aesthetic arguments. As a good scientist, Darwin also applied these criteria to himself, and he gradually cultivated what he considered the aesthetic tastes and the moral conduct of a civilized man.

Darwin recounts his own creeping anaesthesia in his *Autobiography*, describing a process that mirrors the Kantian scheme of disinterested ethics and aesthetics found in *The Descent of Man*. But in his own evolution, Darwin went beyond Kantian vigilance: he viewed the alliance between aesthetics and emotions as thoroughly primitive, atavistic, and dangerous. Aesthetic and emotional responses should not merely be checked by reason, he believed; they should be rooted out altogether. He admits that the deterioration of his aesthetic sense was often a source of “great regret” to him (44). Yet considering the dim view he took of savage behavior and its potential to disrupt evolutionary progress, it is plausible to suggest that he viewed the diminution of these faculties as an acceptable loss.

According to Darwin’s *Autobiography*, over the course of his life he attained the level that marks the culmination of moral evolution: he was never motivated in his professional endeavors by desire for flattery but insisted demurely that his scientific works
have been "over and over again greatly overpraised" (126). He cared little "about the general public" and states unequivocally that he never turned 'one inch' out of his course "to gain fame" (82). He is guilty of none of the savage love of glory which he condemns — and which he considers an inferior form of social glue.

Darwin's loss of taste for the arts — music, poetry, even natural scenery — was particularly severe. Up to the age of thirty he remained quite fond of poetry, especially "Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Shakespeare" but confesses that in his later years he finds it utterly intolerable (138). Music, once a source of "great delight" has only a jarring effect, for it "sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure" (138). He has lost the sense of wonder and awe that "fine scenery" once held for him as well (138). Only science, that esteemed art of "grinding general laws out of large collections of facts," affords him any enjoyment (139). As his rational pursuits increased, his strongest emotional bonds fell away, and by the end of his life, he felt strangely unable to form warm attachments. Although he retains "friendly feelings," he forever "lost the power of becoming deeply attached to anyone" (115). In a similar way, the civilized man ultimately casts off much of his primitive emotionality and savage sociability. Looking back on the "higher" pleasures of reason that he came to appreciate above all else, Darwin concludes, "the primeval instincts of the barbarian slowly yielded to the acquired tastes of the civilized man" (79). It is interesting to consider that this process of civilization entailed a rejection of what are usually deemed civilized tastes; Darwin arrives at a kind of cultural illiteracy and social isolation. Yet this is essentially the transformation that he regards as progressive in his evolutionary scheme.

Darwin's treatment of savages as simultaneously advanced and retrograde is illuminated by his Kantian understanding of the transition from instinct to reason. Savages illustrate a progressive link between animal and human evolution, yet they also occupy an unstable position. Lurking between the lines of Darwin's Autobiography is a cautionary tale for savage tribes: they must somehow be carried forward in their evolution and relinquish their self-regarding ethics and aesthetics. Otherwise, they will ultimately be supplanted by the more civilized races. For his own part, Darwin was able to civilize himself; it remained to be seen whether savage races could do the same.

Perhaps oddest in Darwin's account of moral and aesthetic development is his prediction of, and apparent desire for, a particular course of evolution that has not occurred and does not appear likely to occur. Darwin's account of the emergence of rational ethics and subdued aesthetics of nineteenth-century Europeans bears little resemblance to reality. Did he simply believe that evolution should follow this path toward reason and anaesthesia, regardless of the actual course of history? Strangely, his description of his own irreversible anaesthesia seems to misrepresent reality as well: Darwin was, by most accounts, a profoundly compassionate person, deeply troubled by suffering, both in the human and natural world. He abandoned a career in medicine early on, unable to bear the sight of pain, especially the suffering of children. He eventually had ten children of his own, seven of whom survived, but he never recovered from the slow, painful death of his favorite child, Annie. A great supporter of the anaesthetic chloroform, Darwin once administered such a large dose of it to his wife Emma, during childbirth, that she remained unconscious for an hour and a half. He suffered from severe and recurring bouts of illness throughout most of his adult life (one of the reasons for his decreasing sociability, according to his autobiography). In short, Darwin was "extraordinarily sensitive to the slightest pain" (Desmond 358). Perhaps emotions, and the pain they carried with them, became too heavy a burden for him to bear.

Interestingly, Darwin's account of emotions and moral evolution resembles the stages of moral development proposed by more recent theorists such as Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget. As such, it is subject to many of the same criticisms of these theories. Kohlberg's Kantian scheme maintains that moral development parallels intellectual development. In the early stages of development, children (like Darwin's savages) tend to think of right and wrong selfishly, in terms of which behaviors they can get away with. At this stage, they are highly motivated by reward and punishment and generally understand right action as that which will instrumentally satisfy their own needs. Gradually, at the "conventional" level of moral development, they begin to respond to external social pressures and expectations, identify-
ing with their immediate group (peers or family), and the standards set by those groups. This stage, too, recalls the profile of the "sociable" savage as chained to custom and desperately seeking peer approval. In the final stages of moral and rational development, the individual attains a "post-conventional" moral outlook, characterized by adherence to self-chosen, abstract, and generalizable ethical principles, as well as respect for the dignity of others. The post-conventional stage corresponds to Darwin’s depiction of the civilized, rational human; it is essentially governed by the categorical imperative. It is worth noting, however, that Kohlberg conceded that few individuals reach this final stage. Darwin, for his own part, simply assumes that civilized races have reached it or are on the way to reaching it. For Darwin, “scientific” illustrations of the moribund state of savages served as a reminder of why cultural progress was necessary and desirable. His own life experience, combined with the insights of moral theories such as Kant’s, may have convinced him that rational disinterest in all human endeavors was the recommended course.

Critics of models such as Kohlberg’s charge that it ignores the role of emotional maturity as an integral part of moral development and trivializes relational and interpersonal virtues. As we have seen, Darwin’s attitude towards his own emotional and social bonds was at best ambivalent. Kohlberg, like Darwin, also rejects the possibility that moral development can progress along more than one line. Although Darwin sees civilized and savage lineages as existing concurrently, he clearly believes that savages must raise themselves up from their condition and attain a higher degree of civilization if they are to succeed in evolutionary terms. The Kohlberg scheme imposes a fairly rigid, universal, and linear model of progression on all individuals, despite important differences, such as gender and social context. Kohlberg’s model of development, like Darwin’s, is culturally biased. The fact that Darwin was unable to bring a purely scientific, value-neutral perspective to his study of other cultures is hardly surprising or noteworthy. No scientist ever does. The great irony is that these biases prevented the founder of the theory of natural selection from considering the possibility that the peoples he termed “savages” were in fact well-adapted to their own environments, regardless of how they might have fared in Europe or industrial England. The remaining question of why Darwin so willingly embraced the scenario he appears to predict in The Descent of Man — potentially, the loss of an entire range of cultural achievements in music, literature, and the arts, for the sake of evolutionary “progress” — is difficult to answer. Perhaps his study of savage societies convinced him that in the long run, the only alternative was extinction.

NOTES

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1. I hasten to add that the term “savage” is Darwin’s. Like many of his contemporaries, Darwin understood it to refer to a general category of humans assumed to be marked by a low degree of technological development, little or no orderly system of government, and a penchant for superstitious and fetishistic religious practices. The term “savage” did not connote a single “racial” designation but was applied widely to all peoples assumed to have these characteristics. The terms “savage” and “civilized” (by which he typically meant European) indicate the two poles of Darwin’s analysis of human evolution.

2. An exception to this general rule is dogs, who experience and express a great deal of kind feelings toward humans and even, at times, toward cats, according to Darwin.

3. Darwin denied that biological or morphological evolution followed a clearly linear or progressive pattern and tended to refrain from using the terms “higher” and “lower” in the context of biological evolution.

4. See for example, Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871). In the Descent of Man, Darwin cites Tylor’s earlier works, such as Researches into the Early History of Mankind (1865).

5. Morgan subdivided these three main stages, ending up with seven progressive stages in all.

6. Although he uses the term “infanticide,” Darwin clearly has in mind abortion in some of his comments on infanticide.

7. I am greatly simplifying Kant’s discussion of sublimity here. For instance, he distinguishes the mathematically sublime (sublimity in terms of vastness) from the dynamically sublime (sublimity characterized by nature’s might or dominance [Gewalt], such as a thunderstorm), but for the sake of brevity, I will not develop this distinction.

8. Kant does not necessarily use this term in a pejorative sense, but rather in its broader meaning (pathologisch) as a state of being thoroughly conditioned by subjective sensations, including, but not limited to, emotions. Nevertheless, his remarks indicate that he disapproves of the desire to live pathologically.

9. For a discussion of Kant’s view of the beauty of the human form, see Robert Wicks, “Kant on Beautifying the Human Body.”
Darwin originally coined the phrase “natural selection” in contrast to the artificial selection of animal breeders and domesticators. Of course, these savage modifications are acquired and not inherited. Nevertheless, they depart from the sexual selection that would naturally occur in that savages are attracted to traits that are artificially heightened.

11. Darwin does believe, however, that animals have the ability to judge beauty in one another, though they do so instinctively.

12. For a discussion of Darwin’s autobiographical account of his loss of feeling, see Donald Fleming’s “Charles Darwin, the Anaesthetic Man.” Fleming argues that Darwin truly lamented the “stripping bare” of his personality, whereas I would suggest that Darwin cultivated his anaesthesia and perhaps even viewed it as normative for the human race, however much he may have regretted it from time to time.

13. Indeed, aesthetic trends at the moment show evidence of a return to what Darwin would deem a tribal aesthetic, given the current vogue of body piercing and tattooing.

14. See, for example, Lawrence Kohlberg’s “Cognitive-Development Approach to Moral Education.”

15. This, of course, is a criticism put forth by Carol Gilligan in her classic work, In A Different Voice.

WORKS CITED


LANGUAGE AND BEING: A Philosophical Look at Literary Theory

Henry McDonald

You say you lost your faith,
But that’s not where it’s at.

— Bob Dylan, “Positively 4th Street”

1.

In the John Searle-Jacques Derrida debate of the late seventies and early eighties, which had its origin in Derrida’s still earlier critique of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory, there were few points of agreement between the two sides, but one held fast from the beginning and reflected a view of the role of philosophy in literary studies that was to exercise a crucial influence during the following decades. It consisted in the conviction that although the debate appeared to stage “a confrontation between two prominent philosophical traditions,” in fact “no confrontation” took place because each of the sides so thoroughly failed to understand the other. That conclusion is announced at the beginning of Searle’s original “Reiterating the Differences: Reply to Derrida,” where he maintains that Searle had so profoundly misinterpreted Austin that he, Searle, could not be sure whether he had misinterpreted Derrida (198). In his lengthy rejoinder to Searle, “Limited Inc a b c . . .,” Derrida agreed with Searle that there was “no confrontation” between the two traditions — Searle’s contention to this effect being the “one sentence of the Reply to which I can subscribe” — but added that Searle failed to understand the reason for this fact, which was that the “premises and method” of his own analytic tradition “are derived from continental philosophy” (37-38).

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