LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 7 July 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Recollections of the Development of My Mind and Character: the Autobiography of Charles Darwin

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Introduction

More than 150 years have passed since the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* launched a theological, philosophical and scientific revolution. Nearly everyone knows about the theory of evolution, but few know the man and motives behind it. Charles Darwin's autobiographical recollections were written for his children,—and written without any thought that they would ever be published. The autobiography bears the heading, *Recollections of the Development of my Mind and Character*, and end with the following date: - Aug. 3, 1876.From his autobiography we are able to understand the nature of his character. Many a time we are shocked.

Childhood

Charles Darwin was born at Shrewsbury on February 12th, 1809. His mother died in July 1817, when he was a little over eight years old, and he remembers hardly anything about her except her deathbed, her black velvet gown, and her curiously constructed work-table. In the spring of this same year he was sent to a day-school in Shrewsbury, where he stayed a year. He was much slower in learning than his younger sister Catherine, and he was a naughty boy.

By the time he went to this day-school his taste for natural history, and more especially for collecting, was well developed. He tried to make out the names of plants, and collected all sorts of things, shells, seals, franks, coins, and minerals. The passion for collecting which leads a man to be a systematic naturalist, a virtuoso, or a miser, was very strong in him and was clearly innate, as none of his sisters or brother ever had this taste.

Inventing Deliberate Falsehoods

One little event during this year had fixed itself very firmly in his mind, and it had done so from his conscience having been afterwards sorely troubled by it; He told another little boy that he could produce variously coloured polyanthuses and primroses by watering them with certain coloured fluids, which was of course a monstrous fable, and had never been tried by him. Darwin confesses here that as a little boy he was much given to inventing deliberate falsehoods, and this was always done for the sake of causing excitement. For instance, he once gathered much valuable fruit from his father's trees and hid it in the shrubbery, and then ran in breathless haste to spread the news that he had discovered a hoard of stolen fruit.

Friends of the Same Nature

Darwin must have been a very simple little fellow when he first went to the school. A boy named Garnett took him into a cake shop one day, and bought some cakes for which he did not pay, as the shopman trusted him. When they came out Darwin asked him why he did not pay for them, and he instantly answered, "Why, do you not know that my uncle left a great sum of money to the town on condition that every tradesman should give whatever was wanted without payment to any one who wore his old hat and moved [it] in a particular manner?" and he then showed Darwin how it was moved. He then went into another shop where he was trusted, and asked for some small article, moving his hat in the proper manner, and of course obtained it without payment. When they came out he said, "Now if you like to go by yourself into that cake-shop I will lend you my hat, and you can get whatever you like if you move the hat on your head properly." Darwin gladly accepted the generous offer, and went in and asked for some cakes, moved the old hat and was walking out of the shop, when the shopman made a rush at him, so he dropped the cakes and ran for dear life, and was astonished by being greeted with shouts of laughter by his false friend Garnett.

First Trust in God

In the summer of 1818 he went to Dr. Butler's great school in Shrewsbury, and remained there for seven years still Midsummer 1825, when he was sixteen years old. He boarded at this school, so that he had the great advantage of living the life of a true schoolboy; but as the distance was hardly more than a mile to his home, he very often ran there in the longer intervals between the callings over and before locking up at night. He often had to run very quickly to be in time, and from being a fleet runner was generally successful; but when in doubt he prayed earnestly to God

to help him, and he attributed his success to the prayers, and marvelled how generally he was aided.

Carelessness

As a very young boy, he had a strong taste for long solitary walks. He often became quite absorbed, and once, whilst returning to school on the summit of the old fortifications round Shrewsbury, which had been converted into a public foot-path with no parapet on one side, he walked off and fell to the ground, but the height was only seven or eight feet.

Poor Performance in Studies

The school as a means of education to him was simply a blank. During his whole life he had been singularly incapable of mastering any language. Especial attention was paid to verse-making, and this he could never do well. He had many friends, and got together a good collection of old verses, which by patching together, sometimes aided by other boys, he could work into any subject. Much attention was paid to learning by heart the lessons of the previous day; this he could effect with great facility, learning forty or fifty lines of Virgil or Homer, whilst he was in morning chapel; but this exercise was utterly useless, for every verse was forgotten in forty-eight hours.

Disgrace to His Family

When he left the school he was for his age neither high nor low in it; and he was considered by all his masters and by his father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect. To his deep mortification his father once said to him, "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat- catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family."

At College

As he was doing no good at school, his father wisely took him away at a rather earlier age than usual, and sent him (October 1825) to Edinburgh University with his brother, where he stayed for two years or sessions.. But soon after this period he became convinced from various small circumstances that his father would leave him property enough to subsist on with some comfort.

Trying to become a Clergyman

After having spent two sessions in Edinburgh, his father perceived, or he heard from his sisters, that Darwin did not like the thought of being a physician, so he proposed that Darwin should become a clergyman. He was very properly vehement against his son turning into an idle sporting man, which then seemed his probable destination. Accordingly Darwin read with care *Pearson on the Creed*, and a few other books on divinity; and as he did not then in the least

doubt the strict and literal truth of every word in the Bible. A person known to him once declared that he had the bump of reverence developed enough for ten priests.

As it was decided that he should be a clergyman, it was necessary that he should go to one of the English universities and take a degree; but as he had never opened a classical book since leaving school, he found to his dismay, that in the two intervening years he had actually forgotten, incredible as it may appear, almost everything which he had learnt, even to some few of the Greek letters. He did not therefore proceed to Cambridge at the usual time in October, but worked with a private tutor in Shrewsbury, and went to Cambridge after the Christmas vacation, early in 1828. He soon recovered his school standard of knowledge, and could translate easy Greek books, such as Homer and the Greek Testament, with moderate facility.

Natural Theology and Natural Philosophy

He read Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*, and his *Moral Philosophy*. This was done in a thorough manner, and he was convinced that he could have written out the whole of the *Evidences* with perfect correctness, but not of course in the clear language of Paley. The logic of this book and of his *Natural Theology*, gave him much delight.

During his last year at Cambridge, he read with care and profound interest Humboldt's *Personal Narrative.* This work, and Sir J. Herschel's *Introduction to the Study of Natural Philosophy*, stirred up in him a burning zeal to add even the most humble contribution to the noble structure of Natural Science. No one or a dozen other books influenced him nearly so much as these two.

Collecting Animals

Another of his occupations was collecting animals of all classes, briefly describing and roughly dissecting many of the marine ones. During some part of the day he wrote his Journal, and took much pains in describing carefully and vividly all that he had seen. Everything about which he thought or read was made to bear directly on what he had seen or was likely to see; and this habit of mind was continued during the five years of the voyage. It was this training which enabled him to do whatever he had done in science.

Ambitious to become a Scientist

He worked to the utmost with a strong desire to add a few facts to the great mass of facts in Natural Science. But he was also ambitious to take a fair place among scientific men, “whether more ambitious or less so than most of my fellow-workers, I can form no opinion”. His collection of fossil bones, which had been sent to Henslow, excited considerable attention amongst palaeontologists.

His chief enjoyment and sole employment throughout life had been scientific work; and the excitement from such work makes him for the time forget, or drive quite away, his daily discomfort and sickness. He published several books.

The Origin of Species

From September 1854 he devoted his whole time to arranging his huge pile of notes, to observing, and to experimenting in relation to the transmutation of species. During the voyage of the *Beagle* he had been deeply impressed by discovering in the Pampean formation great fossil animals covered with armour like that on the existing armadillos; secondly, by the manner in which closely allied animals replace one another in proceeding southwards over the Continent; and thirdly, by the South American character of most of the productions of the Galapagos archipelago, and more especially by the manner in which they differ slightly on each island of the group; none of the islands appearing to be very ancient in a geological sense.

It was evident that such facts as these, as well as many others, could only be explained on the supposition that species gradually become modified; and the subject haunted him. But it was equally evident that neither the action of the surrounding conditions, nor the will of the organisms (especially in the case of plants) could account for the innumerable cases in which organisms of every kind are beautifully adapted to their habits of life—for instance, a woodpecker or a tree-frog to climb trees, or a seed for dispersal by hooks or plumes. He had always been much struck by such adaptations, and until these could be explained it seemed to him almost useless to endeavour to prove by indirect evidence that species have been modified.

After his return to England it appeared to me that by following the example of Lyell in Geology, and by collecting all facts which bore in any way on the variation of animals and plants under domestication and nature, some light might perhaps be thrown on the whole subject. His first note-book was opened in July 1837. He worked on true Baconian principles, and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale, more especially with respect to domesticated productions, by printed enquiries, by conversation with skilful breeders and gardeners, and by extensive reading.

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after he had begun his systematic enquiry, he happened to read for amusement Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck him that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here then he had at last got a theory by which to work; but he was so anxious to avoid prejudice, that he determined not for some time to write even the briefest sketch of it. In June 1842 he first allowed himself the satisfaction of writing a very brief abstract of his theory in pencil in 35 pages; and this was enlarged during the summer of 1844 into 230 pages. In September 1858 he set to work to prepare a volume on the transmutation of species, but

was often interrupted by ill-health. It cost him thirteen months and ten days' hard labour. It was published under the title of the *Origin of Species*, in November 1859.

How the Book was Received

It was no doubt the chief work of his life. It was from the first highly successful. The first small edition of 1250 copies was sold on the day of publication, and a second edition of 3000 copies soon afterwards. During Darwin's life time, in 1876, sixteen thousand copies were sold in England. It was translated into almost every European tongue, even into such languages as Spanish, Bohemian, Polish, and Russian. It was also translated into Japanese, and was there much studied. Even an essay in Hebrew appeared on it, showing that the theory is contained in the Old Testament!

When he found that many naturalists fully accepted the doctrine of the evolution of species, it seemed to him advisable to work up such notes as he possessed, and to publish a special treatise on the origin of man. The *Descent of Man* took him three years to write, but then as usual some of this time was lost by ill health, and some was consumed by preparing new editions and other minor works. A second and largely corrected edition of the *Descent* appeared in 1874.

What Scientists now say about *The Origin of the Species*

Breeding Limitations

While Darwin expressed plants and animals could vary to an unlimited degree, breeders were discovering otherwise. They were discovering that even though it was possible to breed a sheep with shorter legs, it was not possible to breed a sheep with legs of a rat, or breed a plum the size of a watermelon, or breed a horse with tusks. Each living thing was found to have built in limitations which prevent it from moving too far from the norm. Excessive breeding for a characteristic was also found to either result in a reverse back toward a given average after many generations, or it resulted in dead end species which were unable to reproduce (like the mule which is a cross between a horse and donkey). To date no breeding experiments have ever resulted in major, new traits resulting in a completely new species. Darwin had no answer for this limitation and simply assumed these variations could continue to an unlimited degree without evidence.

If Breeding is not the Cause of Evolution, then maybe Mutations are?

Though Darwin also felt that if breeding were not the answer, then mutations might be. In other words, he felt maybe it was possible for forms of life to inherit changes, which could explain changes from one form of life to another over long periods of time.

"Natural Selection" Is a Mindless Process

As part of the theory of evolution, Darwin also proposed that each time any organism evolves, every stage must be an immediate advantage to the species because "natural selection" is a mindless process with no idea where it is going, so it cannot plan or conceive an end goal. Creationists immediately argued that how could many organs of the human body, such as the incredibly complicated human eye, develop bit by bit by chance mutation, not knowing it was going to be an eye? Of what use would a half developed eye be? How could each step have been an advantage until the entire eye was complete? How about other parts of a body such as a kidney or jaw? How about the wings of a bird? What good is a half of a jaw or half of a wing? .

Is Evolution Occurring Right Now?

Darwin had always stressed that "survival of the fittest" was an underlying component of his theory of evolution. Though evolutionists cannot identify which aspects are important for survival because survival cannot be seen or proved. No evolutionist really knows how "natural selection" really works, or if it is currently working. Neither has a "struggle for existence" been found to exist among plants and animals.

Why Have We All Been Taught the Theory of Evolution as Fact?

It's been over 150 years since the theory of evolution was proposed and promoted throughout the world, yet to this day we know little more about the origin of species than we did then.

Conclusion

It is a fact that Darwin and many others who had an initial hand in theories surrounding evolution were known atheists or agnostics. The theory of evolution for them was essential to give them a mechanical explanation of the universe without any spiritual principles. Without the theory of evolution, atheists and agnostics have nothing substantial on which to base things, hence they tend to cling to the theory of evolution, even when presented with facts that show sub-theories like natural selection cannot be. Creationists on the other hand do not have that attachment since when the theory of evolution falls apart, creation still stands regardless.

For those that believe in God and in Scripture, many questions arise when discussing the Theory of Evolution. First, if every human being is given a soul by God, at what point during the evolutionary process did God step in and give human beings their souls? And when considering the earliest human beings, were their immediate ancestors non-human without souls? You may have heard the joke: if Adam and Eve were the first human beings, were their parents apes? This actually becomes a serious question for those who believe in Scripture.

Sir Julian Huxley, an English biologist and author, declared that "Darwin's real achievement was to remove the whole idea of God as creator from the sphere of rational discussion." What this

means is, man, being descended from animals, is thus freed from being answerable for his own behavior. A few results of this are sexual license, the criminal as victim of society, and the Marxian belief that the end justifies and makes "moral" any means."

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