

## Darwin's last child: Mental retardation and the need for a romantic science.

By: J. David Smith

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### **Abstract:**

The writer discusses how Charles Darwin's deep love for his youngest child, who had mental retardation, contrasted with his theory that people with mental retardation were evolutionary mistakes.

**Keywords:** Charles Darwin | evolution | developmental disabilities

### **Article:**

The term eugenics was derived from the Greek word eugenes, meaning well-born. It was first used by Francis Galton in 1883 to describe what he envisioned as a new discipline. He defined eugenics as a science through which investigators would discover the influences that could improve the inborn qualities of races and classes of human beings. One of the primary aims of eugenicists was the elimination from human populations of unwanted hereditary disorders through the use of selective marriage practices. Quickly, however, the movement also embraced the promotion of compulsory sterilization of people with traits that were judged to be undesirable, institutionalization of people diagnosed as defective, and restrictions on the immigration of races and nationalities deemed to possess inferior hereditary qualities (Smith, 1985).

Galton was a cousin of Charles Darwin. It is not surprising, therefore, that the concepts and language of the theory of evolution were associated with eugenics from its inception. The discourse on social policy regarding mental retardation in the late 19th century and early 20th century was filled with references to the survival of the fittest and the struggle for existence. As Davis (1995) has pointed out, eugenics was applied science founded on the central biological theory of the time, evolution. Eugenicists were obsessed with the elimination of people who were considered defective and viewed public policy that promoted the welfare of people with disabilities as an interference with the process of natural selection.

Darwin (1871) made references to mental retardation in his major work on human evolution,

The Descent of Man. He compared what he observed to be the imitative behavior of people with mental retardation to our "nearest allies, the monkeys" and the "barbarous races of mankind" (p. 133). Darwin drew other parallels between the behavior of people with mental retardation and animals. He described them as smelling their food like animals before eating it and cited a reference to an "idiot ... smelling every mouthful of food before eating it" (p. 53). Darwin closed his discussion by describing people with mental retardation as having filthy habits, no sense of decency, and, like animals, having remarkably hairy bodies.

Darwin conceived of people with mental retardation as evolutionary mistakes. He speculated that mental retardation resulted from reversions in the developmental process. From his perspective persons with mental retardation displayed the characteristics of other species and what he considered to be inferior races of human beings. They had reverted to these life forms even though they were born to parents of a superior level of evolutionary development. For reasons that were not clear to him, something had caused an error in reproduction that resulted in an individual who looked and behaved like a member of an inferior species.

A similar concept was developed by J. Langdon Down in his theory of the racial nature of mental retardation. Darwin's influence is very evident in Down's observations on what was to become known as Down syndrome and that he termed mongolian idiocy. In his "Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots," Down (1866, reprinted in Jordan, 1966) described children and adults that he thought were the products of "degeneracy." Although he provided little detail on the mechanisms of this phenomenon, Down theorized that in the case of "mongolism," the evolutionary degeneracy was caused most often by "tuberculosis in the parents" (p. 261).

Charles Darwin became an icon for scientific explanations of both biological and social phenomena. Thus, his impact on the field of mental retardation has been enormous. The theory of evolution, as interpreted through social Darwinism, has had tremendous consequences for hundreds of thousands of people. Arguments concerning the meaning of mental retardation, and the political and economic responses to that meaning, are still influenced by Darwin's observations and their derivatives. There is, however, another facet to what we can know about Darwin's understanding of the human issues associated with mental retardation. Through his relationship with his youngest child, who had mental retardation, we are able to see a different and contradictory view. Through the prism of personal experience, this giant of the scientific world viewed mental retardation in a different light.

In his book *The Medusa and the Snail*, Thomas (1979) expressed misgivings about the total reliance on science for knowledge. He explained, "The only solid piece of scientific truth about which I am totally confident is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature" (p. 73). Merleau-Ponty (1962) also commented on expanding our vision of knowledge:

I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world.... The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced.... we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world. (p. viii)

At the time that Darwin was working on *The Origin of Species*, the book that would establish

his place in the history of science, he was also worried about the health of his children. Darwin had been preoccupied with his own health throughout his life and feared that his marriage to his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, placed their children at special risk for "hereditary ill-health" (Colp, 1977, p. 56). Indeed, several of their children did suffer with chronic illnesses. Darwin was deeply and continually concerned for his ailing children and for the illnesses that Emma experienced. One of the most agonizing aspects of his family life, however, came with the birth of his 10th and last child, Charles Waring Darwin, who was his namesake.

Emma conceived this child when she was 48 years old. She was apparently quite uncomfortable and uneasy during the pregnancy. A description of her discomfort, and a comment about the new baby and his fate, was recorded by Darwin's daughter Henrietta.

This had been a suffering year for my mother. Her last child, Charles Waring Darwin, was born on December 6th, 1856. I remember very well the weary months she passed, and reading aloud to her sometimes to help her bear her discomforts. The poor little baby was born without its full share of intelligence. Both my mother and father were infinitely tender towards him, but, when he died in the summer of 1858, after their first sorrow, they could only feel thankful. He had never learnt [sic] to walk or talk (Litchfield, 1915, p. 162).

The baby's disability was apparently noticed quickly by the Darwins. Although there is no documentation that sufficiently describes the nature of the child's mental retardation, it has been speculated, largely on the basis of Emma's age, that Charles Waring had Down syndrome (Bowlby, 1990; White & Gribben, 1996). Regardless of diagnosis and etiology, however, Darwin wrote a sensitive and detailed description of his son as a memorial to him following his death. His words reveal his deep love of the child and elucidate the impressions of his daughter Henrietta.

Our poor baby was born December 6th, 1856 and died on June 28th, 1858, and was therefore above 18 months old. He was small for his age and backward in walking and talking, but intelligent and observant. When crawling naked on the floor he looked very elegant. He had never been ill and cried less than any of our babies. He was of a remarkably sweet, placid and joyful disposition; but had not high spirits, and did not laugh much. He often made strange grimaces and shivered, when excited; but did so also, for a joke and his little eyes used to glisten, after pouting out or stretching widely his little lips. He used sometimes to move his mouth as if talking loudly, but making no noise, and this he did when very happy. He was particularly fond of standing on one of my hands and being tossed in the air; and then he always smiled, and made a little pleased noise. I had just taught him to kiss me with open mouth, when I told him. He would lie for a long time placidly on my lap looking with a steady and pleased expression at my face; sometimes trying to poke his poor little fingers into my mouth, or making nice little bubbling noises as I moved his chin. I had taught him not to scratch, but when I said, "Giddlums never scratches now" he could not always resist a little grab, and then he would look at me with a wicked little smile. He would play for any length of time on the sofa, letting himself fall suddenly, and looking over his shoulder to see that I was ready. He was very affectionate and had a passion for Parslow [the Darwin's butler] and it was very pretty to see his extreme

eagerness with outstretched arms, to get to him. Our poor little darling's short life has been placid, innocent and joyful. I think and trust he did not suffer so much at last, as he appeared to do; but the last 36 hours were miserable beyond expression. In the sleep of Death he resumed his placid looks (Darwin, 1858, p. 521).

These beautiful and caring words of a father for his lost child are a testament to the value of a child with mental retardation to his family. They are the most poignant and moving expressions that I have read from this genius of modern science. They remind me of the contributions that people with disabilities often make to their parents, siblings, and communities. The words stand in stark contrast to Darwin's description of the similarities of persons with mental retardation to animals. They provide an important glimpse of the human side of our knowledge of what mental retardation is and how it should be constructed for others to understand. They remind us that social definitions and roles are created by what we mean to one another.

Linton (1998) issued a call for conceptualizing disabilities in a way that more completely recognizes the natural spectrum of human diversity. The eyes of both science and passion are required in order to achieve a full appreciation of the complementarity and interdependence of people. Commenting on the work of Nobel laureate and geneticist, Barbara McClintock, Linton wrote,

If something doesn't fit there's a reason, and you find what it is. Rather than overlook difference, for instance, by naming an exception an aberration, a contaminant, she worked to understand its place and function. (p. 120)

It appears that Darwin's last son taught him in a personal sense that mental retardation was not an aberration or a contaminant.

In his book *Awakenings*, Sacks (1983) wrote about a question he once asked A. R. Luria. When Sacks asked him what he considered to be the most interesting thing in the world, Luria replied:

I cannot express it in one word, I have to use two. I would have to speak of 'romantic science.' It has been my life's hope to found or refound a romantic science. (p. 253)

In recent years some critics of the effort to redefine and reconceptualize mental retardation have called for a dichotomous separation between a scientific understanding of mental retardation and the romance of advocacy and activism in the field. On the contrary, it seems to me, it is critical to the lives of millions of people that we create a "romantic science" of mental retardation.

#### ADDED MATERIAL

Author: J. DAVID SMITH, EdD, Dean, School of Education and Human Services, Longwood College, Farmville, VA 23909.

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