

Avoidant Personality
Disorder:
A Diagnostic of Darwin's
Invalidity

Darwin's Revolution

'You are the greatest Revolutionist in natural history of this century, if not of all centuries'.

Hewett Cottrell Watson,
botanist, to Darwin, Nov. 1859

Darwin's Revolution

‘[The Origin of Species] must soon bring about an entire revolution in opinion in favour of the grand principle of the self-evolving powers of nature’.

Baden Powell, Savilian
Professor of Geometry, Oxford, 1860

Darwin's Revolution

[The Origin of Species] is the Whitworth gun of liberalism'.

T.H. Huxley, 1860

Revolution: A Conversion Experience

Liberation and transformation of opinion
capacitating a new horizon of improved
existence

Popular image of revolution: euphoric collective
action against oppressors (1848; 1789) that
confers a new identity

(Ref.: Billington, Fire in the Minds of Men)

The Old and the New

- The Oppressors: aristocracy (inequality) and clergy (ignorance, superstition)
- Liberation: freedom, equality, enlightenment
- Darwin's revolution: knowledge that dispels the ignorance of oppressive capture

IRONIES

- Darwin and his revolution were sanctified by the oppressor clergy (Westminster burial)
- Darwin was a member of the oppressor class in good standing (a rentier)
- Darwin suffered grievously in acquiring and communicating his liberating knowledge

Darwin's Personal 'Cross'

Deeply attached to Emma

'My dearest old Mammy, Without you, when sick I feel most desolate...Oh Mammy I do long to be with you and under your protection for then I feel safe' (1848)

Emma was devout, and believed deeply in Providence. But after the death of daughter Annie (1851), Darwin replaced Providence by chance. This was a fundamental personal conflict which added a dimension to his (and her) suffering.

The Hero's Suffering

- Darwin's description of symptoms: 'Age 56-57. - For twenty-five years extreme spasmodic daily & nightly flatulence: occasional vomiting, on two occasions prolonged during months. Vomiting preceded by shivering, hysterical crying[,] dying sensations or half-faint. & copious and very palid [sic] urine. Now vomiting & every passage of flatulence preceded by ringing of ears, treading on air & vision. focus & black dots[,] Air fatigues, specially risky, brings on the Head symptoms[,] nervousness when E[mma]. leaves me...'. From late 1863 to April 1864 he was 'spreadeagled every day on a sofa, steadily going downhill, wishing he were dead one day, wanting to live and do a little more work on the next.'

Psychosomatic Cycle

An Identity Crisis

- Thought induces symptoms
- Symptoms induce depression
- Depressive dysphoria induces death wish

Pascal's Syndrome: Positivism as a Symptom of Depression and Mania

Zygon, 1986

- Depressive neurosis associated with scientific certainty
- Willing self-mortification pays for forbidden knowledge
- Manic conversion experience liberates from the dysphoric effect by denying the reality of the world

Syndrome sufferers

August Comte: hysteria, depression

Hugh Miller: depression, suicide

Thomas Huxley: anxiety, depression

Herbert Spencer: depression, death wish

Ernst Mach: conversion experience, world denial

Max Weber: depression, invalidity

Ralph Colp, *To Be an Invalid* (1977); *More on Darwin's Illness* (2000)

++Physical symptoms (retching, flatulence, eczema, tachycardia, weakness) due to Chagas' disease

++Assembles detailed evidence for Darwin's sense of guilt for espousing evolution. Establishes correlation between severity of Chagas symptoms and intensity of evolution research/writing

++Writing *Origin* was 'the main causes of ills to which my flesh is heir to'. Could not write *Origin* for 20 minutes 'without interruption of pain'

Avoidant (or Dependent) Personality Disorder

- Life long pattern of wariness of others, feelings of inadequacy, self disparagement, pain of feeling rejected
- Avoidance of interactions that may lead to rejection. This complicates work and personal relationships
- Strong desire for acceptance and approval, consistent with ambition

Some case data

++Withdrawal to Downe, and substitution of written for personal contact, was major avoidance strategy

++Darwin stressed his horror of engaging in open debate

++There are numerous statements of his resentment of criticisms; he admitted hating some critics (Owen)

++He deeply resented Lyell's prolonged resistance to public endorsement of Origin

More case data

- ++Abstained (mostly) from expressing anger/impatience in print
- ++Expressed great satisfaction with Huxley's acerbic attacks on his critics
- ++Numerous statements of his ambition, highlighted by his mortification at Wallace's priority in the discovery of natural selection; and by his exaggeration of the originality of his thought

++Darwin's relations with trusted persons were normal, apart from his extreme dependence on Emma

++No evidence of dysfunction in the routines of life—household management, business activity, service to Downe community activities

++He experienced and expressed a normal range of emotions, especially affection for offspring and anger at mistreatment of domestic animals

Summary Thought

‘Grief and guilt surely played their part in his psyche. Fear, too, especially in the way his body would most often fail when he intended make a public appearance, suggesting some deep-seated dread of exposure. His customary reticence may have reflected a wish to avoid getting involved with other people’s emotions—reticence and modesty could have been the polite face of dissociation, the spurning of closeness’. --Biographer Janet Browne

Criticisms

++Age of onset. The young Darwin was deferential, but evidence of avoidance does not appear until about age 30.

++Dr. Colp doesn't accept the avoidance diagnosis.