

Darwin, Slavery and Humanism – or What Would Darwin Do?

A recent meeting with the nice people at [Anti-Slavery International](#) set cogs moving in my brain – hadn't I read somewhere that on the famous voyage of the Beagle Charles Darwin had encountered and been horrified by slavery? A Google search reminded me of the source of this vague memory: reviews of *Darwin's Sacred Cause* by Adrian Desmond and James Moore (Allen Lane, 2009), such as the one in *New Scientist* with the headline "[Hatred of slavery drove Darwin to emancipate all life](#)". Arguments justifying slavery were often based on the pseudo-scientific notion that the different races of humans were different species; Darwin's liberal-minded empathy with his fellow human beings, and his belief in a common human nature, contradicted that, and was a precursor of his later theories and writings about evolution and human origins.

Further Googling turned up the relevant extract from Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839):

"I thank God, I shall never again visit a slave country. To this day, if I hear a distant scream, it recalls with painful vividness my feelings, when passing a house near Pernamabuco, I heard the most pitiful moans, and could not but suspect that some poor slave was being tortured, yet knew that I was as powerless as a child even to remonstrate. I suspected that these moans were from a tortured slave, for I was told that this was a case in another instance. Near Rio de Janeiro I lived opposite an old lady, who kept screws to crush the fingers of her female slaves. I have staid in a house where a young household mulatto, daily and hourly was reviled, beaten, and persecuted enough to break the spirit of the lowest animal. I have seen a boy, six or seven years old, struck thrice with a horse-whip (before I could interfere) on his naked head, for having handed me a glass that was not quite clean; I saw his father tremble at a mere glance from his master's eye...

It is claimed that self-interest will prevent excessive cruelty; as if self-interest protected our domestic animals, which are far less likely than degraded slaves, to stir up the rage of their savage masters... It is often attempted to palliate slavery by comparing the state of slaves to our poorer countrymen: If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin...

Those who look tenderly at the slave-owner, and with a cold heart at the slave, never seem to put themselves into the position of the latter; – what a cheerless prospect, with not even a hope for change! Picture to yourself the chance, ever hanging over you, of your wife and your little children – those objects which nature urges even the slave to call his own – being torn from you and sold like beasts to the first bidder! And these deeds are done and palliated by men, who profess to love their neighbours as themselves, who believe in God, and pray His will be done on earth! It makes one's blood boil, yet heart tremble, to think that we Englishmen and our American descendents, with their boastful cry of liberty, have been and are so guilty: but it is a consolation to reflect, that we at least have made a greater sacrifice, than ever made by any other nation to expiate our sin."

The final sentence refers to the British outlawing of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the British navy's efforts to intercept and capture slave-runners, and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. However, as Darwin found on his travels, slavery was legal in other parts of the world, and it remained so until 1981 when Mauritania became the last country to abolish it. But as Anti-Slavery International points out, slavery, or practices horribly similar to it, continues today in many countries: in child labour, forced labour, bonded labour and people-trafficking, people are sold like objects, forced to work for little or no pay, and are at the complete mercy of their "employers".

Both the British Humanist Association and [Humanists for a Better World](#) have had friendly contacts with Anti-Slavery International, as slavery is very alien to the humanist ideal, shared with Darwin, of our common humanity, as well as to our support for universal human rights, and so anti-slavery would seem a cause that most humanists could champion. If you'd like to avoid buying the products of modern-day slave labour, please see <http://www.productsofslavery.org>, and for other ways to help see http://www.antislavery.org/english/what_you_can_do/default.aspx.

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