Man is a Mad Animal  
The Question of the Self as Addressed by Darwin and Wallace, 
Supplemented by Freud and Kierkegaard

By Daniel Luc Sullivan

As for...the origin of humans’ apparently unique intellectual and physical characteristics – today’s evolutionary biologists are satisfied with a biological explanation. To them, even mathematical abilities and musical gifts – just to name two apparently nonadaptive (at least to Wallace) traits – are not beyond the powers of natural selection. However, the widespread persistence of a belief in intelligent design (whether Creationist or not) into the twenty-first century suggests that the conflict between Wallace and Darwin on this issue is far from over.

– Ross A. Slotten

Drinking when we are not thirsty and making love all year round, madam; that is all there is to distinguish us from other animals.

– Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais

The theory of evolution by means of natural selection, upon first receiving widespread recognition in the late 19th Century, had many ramifications. The impact it had on our conception of what it means to be human was not the least significant among them. Philosophers and scientists have considered the question of Man’s unique place in the universe since before the time of Socrates; more often than not, this question has been answered through ontological and religious notions of humanity’s supreme distinction from, and superiority to, all other life. But the idea that all life has emerged from preexisting forms seems to be at direct odds with such notions. If Man was truly descended from microbial life, how could his superior status be maintained? As Sigmund Freud once declared:

In the course of centuries the naïve self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment
of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness…The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man’s supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature (1977).

The import of natural selection for Man did not go unaddressed by the two brilliant men who proposed the theory. Charles Darwin, the heralded father of evolution, devoted his second best-known work, *The Descent of Man* (1871), almost entirely to this very topic. And Alfred Russel Wallace, the largely uncredited co-originator of natural selection, broke ranks with Darwin and the majority of their contemporaries in the scientific realm to expound in numerous papers and books his own radically different views on the subject of natural selection in regard to Man.

By attacking the riddle of Man’s origins head-on from two opposing perspectives, Darwin and Wallace contributed important scientific insight to a question that had previously remained largely philosophical in nature. It is impossible, in light of knowledge gathered over the past 150 years, to discuss the birth of humanity without reference to evolution; however, the striking idiosyncrasy of our human consciousness seems to demand something of the philosopher’s approach, as well. In their writings on Man, both Darwin and Wallace played the dual roles of philosopher and naturalist. I believe that they admirably succeeded at both, despite the fact that Darwin is hardly ever considered outside of his naturalist role, and that Wallace’s contributions to the study of Man have been almost entirely overlooked. These giants of evolutionary theory complemented existing philosophy with critical scientific information, and paved the way
for future philosophical outlooks on Man, as well as for the reigning science of Man
which was to emerge only shortly after Descent’s publication: psychology.

In light of these claims, I believe it would be instructive to consider the theories
regarding the origin of Man proposed by Darwin and Wallace not only in contrast to each
other, but in comparison to two similarly contrasting theories proposed by another pair of
great 19th Century thinkers, who approached the question from the humanitarian rather
than from the biological perspective. I refer to the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard,
known as the father of existentialism, and the afore-quoted Freud, the father of
psychoanalysis. I choose these particular scholars for two reasons, the first being that
their own theories of human existence have been analyzed in comparison on prior
occasions. This was done notably in J. Preston Cole’s The Problematic Self in
Kierkegaard and Freud (1971) and F. J. Hacker’s article “Freud, Marx, and Kierkegaard”
(1957). Anthropologist Ernest Becker also devotes a large portion of his masterwork The
Denial of Death to consideration of the differences in theory between what he referred to
as “probably the two greatest students of human nature” (1973).

The second reason for the choice is that the differences in theory between
Kierkegaard and Freud on the subject of Man are remarkably similar to those between
Darwin and Wallace, with striking parallels arising between the writings of Wallace and
Kierkegaard on the one hand, and those of Darwin and Freud on the other. While it is
clear that Darwin’s ideas had a direct influence on Freud, it is unlikely that Kierkegaard’s
writing had any impact on Wallace; and yet, the two men arrived independently at
conceptions of Man that are nearly identical, with Wallace only adding the mechanism of
natural selection to Kierkegaard’s philosophy.
I shall endeavor to show, then, not only that Darwin’s biological arguments against Wallace influenced and were reiterated by Freud in all his important writings on the human mind; but also, and perhaps more significantly, that the neglected Wallace, who oft considered his own notions “heresies” (Shermer, 2002), and who was indeed outcast by his colleagues after daring to contest Darwin on the question of Man, formulated a theory of humanity that corresponds perfectly to that of no less a revered expert on the soul than Kierkegaard. I shall begin by delineating the points of contention on Man that existed between Darwin and Wallace, and conclude by demonstrating how their theories are excellently augmented by an understanding of the “humanists” Kierkegaard and Freud.

Darwin and Wallace

For those relative few who recognize the name of Alfred Russel Wallace, his contribution to evolutionary theory is well known. In 1858, having recovered from a serious bout of malaria while on the island of Ternate, Wallace composed a draft of a paper discussing his recently formulated ideas on the mechanisms by which individuals within a species are gradually modified over the course of generations. He sent the paper to Darwin, with whom he had been in correspondence, to procure an opinion on its significance. Darwin recognized immediately that Wallace had hit upon the idea of natural selection, which he himself had been preparing to present to the public in the form of a multi-volume work for the past two decades. After some deliberation over the issue of priority, it was decided that Wallace’s paper would be presented alongside some outlines of the subject by Darwin at the next meeting of London’s Linnean Society, so that the two men might be considered co-originators of the theory (see Eiseley, 1961, or
Slotten, 2004, for further discussion). Upon his return to England in 1862, Wallace was enthusiastically welcomed into the circle of “Darwinians” that included Huxley, Spencer, Sir Charles Lyell, and of course, Darwin himself.

Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, securing for himself the lion’s share of posterity’s recognition for the origin of natural selection and negating the need for Wallace to write his own book on the subject. However, the seminal work made no more than a passing reference to the implications of the theory for Man. Wallace took it upon himself to address the issue, and did so in 1864 by publishing what Darwin called “the best paper that ever appeared in the Anthropological Review” (Marchant, 1975).

In “The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man Deduced from the ‘Theory of Natural Selection,’” Wallace proposed that Man had evolved in two stages (Eiseley, 1961). The first “bodily” stage of Man’s development occurred via natural selection in the same manner as the evolution of all other species, with the organism adapting in response to the pressures of the environment and competition. However, the second “mental” stage of Man’s development, Wallace insisted, ushered in a new era in the evolution of life. With the origin of the uniquely human brain, the human organism began to shape the environment, rather than the other way around. The gradual modification and specialization of body parts was no longer necessary, because the human brain emerged as an unprecedented tool for modifying and specializing environmental factors in the best interests of the organism. Wallace concluded:

The same power which has modified animals has acted on man…

[However], as soon as the human intellect became developed above a certain low stage, man's body would cease to be materially affected by
natural selection, because the development of his mental faculties would render important modifications of its form and structure unnecessary (1973).

As historian of science Loren Eiseley noted: “Wallace was apparently the first evolutionist to recognize…that, with the emergence of that bodily specialization which constitutes the human brain, bodily specialization itself might be said to be outmoded” (1961). On this aspect of the question of Man, Darwin and Wallace were certainly in agreement: Man had a unique consciousness that allowed him (at least to a certain extent) to escape the shackles of the classic means of evolution.

However, their theories vastly diverged, becoming essentially irreconcilable, when they concurrently addressed the issue of how the mind of Man came to be, and to what extent it was differentiable from consciousness in all other species. While Darwin insisted time and again that “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind” (Darwin, 1981), Wallace became convinced that natural selection could not account for the appearance of human consciousness as distinct from that of lower animals (Wallace, 1973). He realized that the mind of the primitive man was vastly different from that of the ape, and comparatively very similar to that of the modern civilized European; thus, the human brain had achieved the greater portion of its structural capacity early in the evolution of Man (Eiseley 1961). Wallace was certain that natural selection could not have produced in early man a brain with the latent capacity to appreciate high art or perform complex algorithms. Man’s mind is too “perfect,” and too marked by abilities that would seem to have little bearing on the survival of Man in a state of nature, to have been the product of
classical natural selection, Wallace argued (1973). He foreshadowed the departure he was going to take from the Darwinian camp before the publication of *Descent by positing:

The mental requirements of the lowest savages, such as the Australians or the Andaman Islanders, are very little above those of many animals…

How then was an organ developed far beyond the needs of its possessor?

Natural Selection could only have endowed the savage with a brain a little superior to that of an ape, whereas he actually possesses one but very little inferior to that of the average members of our learned societies (1869).

Wallace therefore concluded that to “prove continuity and the progressive development of the intellectual and moral faculties from animals to man is not the same as proving that these faculties have been developed by natural selection” (1889). Some other agent had sculpted the mind of Man.

Darwin, however, insisted that natural selection had indeed gradually shaped the human brain from the clay of less-developed forms of the organ present in lower animals. In 1869 he wrote to Wallace: “I can see no necessity for calling in an additional and proximate cause in regard to man” (Marchant, 1975). For Darwin, there are no distinguishable characteristics that decisively separate human consciousness from consciousness in all its other, animalistic forms – and therefore no need to explain human consciousness beyond the means already available through natural selection. Indeed, he finds everywhere in nature the qualities most often considered to differentiate Man from all other species: the use of tools and weaponry in the coordinated actions of baboons on the hunt or at war; memory, affection, and even the potential origins of a belief in God in
the unswerving devotion of a dog to its master; a sense of the aesthetic in the attraction of female birds to the most ornately decorated males (Darwin, 1981). As biographer Ross Slotten has observed, “Darwin countered every issue that Wallace had addressed” (2004). A telling passage from the early pages of *Descent* shows how clearly Darwin was opposed to Wallace’s notion that there was some wholly unique factor involved in the origin of the human mind, outside of natural selection:

If no organic being excepting man had possessed any mental power, or if his powers had been of a wholly different nature from those of the lower animals, then we should never have been able to convince ourselves that our high faculties had been gradually developed. But it can be clearly shewn [sic] that there is no fundamental difference of this kind…there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties (1981).

It is clear, then, that the mind of Man was a source of major contention between Darwin and Wallace. It is also clear that the locus of this contention was the question of whether human consciousness could have developed naturalistically, through the self-same evolutionary processes that had brought about the formation of all life’s organs and appendages, or whether, by its unique nature, human consciousness was necessarily the product of an agent that had operated outside the typical means of natural selection.

**Wallace and the “Spiritual Nature of Man”**

But what was the “agent” for which Wallace’s theory called? What was this illusive force or law, through the action of which the human brain had emerged? In his earliest writings on this agent, Wallace merely speculated that “some higher intelligence
may have directed the process by which the human race was developed” (1973).

However, as Wallace became increasingly (and notoriously) involved in the Victorian movement known as Spiritualism, he gradually defined with eloquent precision the force that he believed had come into being concurrent with the origin of the human mind, and had subsequently guided the course of its evolution. For his unswerving conviction that a force outside of natural selection had catalyzed the appearance of the uniquely human self, Wallace was ostracized by the members of Darwin’s circle and has since been condemned by the likes of Stephen Jay Gould as “fatally flawed” in his reasoning (Slotten, 2004). Yet Wallace never felt that he was deserting Darwinism in his theory; he conceived of evolution as a progressive process, tending towards the creation of “godly” beings, in the vein of Robert Chambers, and therefore felt that his conception of Man’s unique nature was an obvious tenet of evolutionary theory (Smith, 2003). He wrote twenty years after the fateful break from Darwin:

The Darwinian theory…not only does not oppose, but lends a decided support to, a belief in the spiritual nature of man. It shows us how man’s body may have been developed from that of a lower animal from under the law of natural selection; but it also teaches us that we possess intellectual and moral faculties which could not have been so developed, but must have had another origin; and for this origin we can only find an adequate cause in the unseen universe of Spirit (1889).

This relevant excerpt does more than confirm Wallace’s belief that Man is a unique being in the universe of life, and that his appearance was the logical result of a progressive system of evolution; it also reveals to us the factor, unparalleled in nature,
that he believed to be the unique element in Man’s composition, the basis of what it
means to be human. For Wallace, Man’s “spiritual nature” is the essence of his self, an
essence that is qualitatively different from the essence of any other being; a matter of
“kind,” and not merely one of “degree.” Another quotation will further inform our
investigation of Wallace’s concept of the distinctly human self:

If a material element, or a combination of a thousand material elements in
a molecule, are alike unconscious, it is impossible for us to believe that the
mere addition of one, two, or a thousand other material elements to form a
more complex molecule, could in any way tend to produce a self-
conscious existence. There is no escape from this dilemma, – either all
matter is conscious, or consciousness is, or pertains to, something distinct
from matter, and in the latter case its presence in material forms is a proof
of the existence of conscious beings, outside of, and independent of, what
we term matter (1973).

This argument was first presented in a paper entitled “The Limits of Natural Selection as
Applied to Man,” and it is clear, in accordance with his other writings, that Wallace
intended “conscious beings” to refer exclusively to humans. Wallace was obviously not
ignorant of the fact that various forms of “consciousness” are manifest in organisms other
than Man; therefore, it can be understood that he perceived the human “self-conscious
existence” to contain an element not at work in any other form of consciousness or life,
an element that indeed distinguishes Man from all matter. Once again, we have arrived at
the “Spirit,” Wallace’s characteristic quality of Man that he believed could not have
emerged naturalistically.
**Kierkegaard and the “Third Factor”**

At this point it would be illuminating to consider the augmentative perspective of Kierkegaard, another student of Man who felt that the uniquely human self was defined by an element operating outside the bounds of material existence. A hasty sketch of the fundamental tenets of Kierkegaard’s analysis should be sufficient to demonstrate the remarkable degree to which it is in agreement with Wallace’s. To this end, I will make liberal use of J. Preston Cole’s breakdown of Kierkegaard (1971), as his gift for translating the philosopher’s Byzantine prose into lucid, concise statements should be of great aid in our comparison.

Kierkegaard declared that “Man is a synthesis of the soulish and the bodily. But a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third factor. This third factor is the spirit” (1957). Here we can discern that what Kierkegaard considers to be the “soulish” aspect of Man is his psychology, his consciousness. The “bodily” aspect is obviously his physicality. The “third factor” Kierkegaard posits is the unique, self-mediating synthesis of consciousness and body that defines human existence. This is evident in the following oft-quoted passage: “A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself” (1980).

By defining the self as “a relation that relates itself to itself,” Kierkegaard is positing that human selfhood exists only in the act of relating the psychical and physical aspects of the self via the third, supramaterial factor of spirit. This is achieved through the individual’s free will to become a self. As Cole observes, “Selfhood…is that mode of being in which the individual assumes responsibility for itself. The relation takes up a relation to its own self” (1971). Indeed, Kierkegaard claims that Man’s free will is the
stumbling block for which all deterministic explanations of the purpose of his existence cannot account: “Life’s seriousness does not consist in…livelihoo...d to express perfection in everyday reality” (1947).

We recognize, then, that spirit is “the inherent power of being qua human being,” and that Kierkegaard defines spirit as the uniquely human factor relating the psychical and physical aspects of Man in the “drive toward self-determination, the instinct of the self to take responsibility for itself” (Cole, 1971). The human being becomes a self that “rests transparently in the power that established it” through the mechanism of free will, which allows the critical relation to arise (Kierkegaard, 1980). Discussing the potential for self-actualization present even in primal man, Kierkegaard assures us that this mode of existence is exclusively human: “In the state of innocence man is not merely an animal, for if at any time of his life he was merely an animal, he never would become a man. So then the spirit is present, but in a…dreaming state” (1957). By referring to the condition of spirit in primal man as the “dreaming state,” Kierkegaard is implying that in both primitive cultures and the early developmental stages of the modern intellect, Man’s potential for self-actualization is latent. Man becomes gradually aware of this potential through his imagination, which presents an image of the transcendent self it is his duty to become (Cole, 1971).

**Wallace and Kierkegaard**

It is becoming clear that Kierkegaard and Wallace have arrived at the self-same conception of what it means to be distinctly human. The illusive “third factor” of Kierkegaard (the mediating relation of the psychical and the physical) is the transcendent
ingredient of uniquely human consciousness Wallace termed Man’s “spiritual nature.”

Wallace’s theory augments Kierkegaard’s by showing that Man’s psyche and physicality evolved from lower forms via natural selection (1889). However, with the advent of human consciousness, Wallace is in agreement with Kierkegaard that a latent potential for self-actualization became present, a potential all other organisms lack. Wallace also agrees that this potential is manifest in human will, an incomparable force: “I reject the hypothesis of 'first causes' for any and every special effect in the universe, except in the...sense that the action of man or of any intelligent being is a first cause” (1973).

Wallace believed that “our own free will cannot be explained by any known natural force (‘gravitation, cohesion, repulsion, heat, electricity, etc.’); therefore, there must be another force that accounts for our free will” (Shermer, 2002). That force is the uniquely human spirit posited by Kierkegaard.

Wallace also agrees that in the primitive man or the undeveloped intellect the spirit is in a “dreaming state,” waiting to be born in the critical relation. Just as Kierkegaard traced the progressive development of the self-actualizing potential from pagan cultures to modern Christianity (1957), Wallace explained the ascendance of the spirit through free will from an evolutionary perspective:

Biological organization…eventually co-evolved to a point permitting the increasing involvement of a domain of psychic organization. The growth of the psychic domain within human consciousness coincided with (and depended on) our increasing transcendence of the…survival instinct necessary to biological success. Such transcendence represented an accelerating "pull" effect within the operation of the hierarchy, because
consciously-willed acts by human beings increasingly enhanced the chain of causation enacted by rotely-operating physical and biological laws alone (Smith, 2003).

Elaborating in later years on his theory of Man, Wallace conceived of a meta-universe of energy created by the affirmation of the spirit: “we are, all of us, in every act and thought of our lives, helping to build up a mental fabric which will be and constitute ourselves in the future life, even more completely than now” (1894). Like Kierkegaard, Wallace clearly believes that the purpose of human life lies in “the will to be,” and not in “temporal things,” “livelihood,” or, for that matter, pure Darwinian “procreation.” Indeed, Wallace gives an imperative for Man that is an echo of Kierkegaard’s: “Just in proportion as he indulges in passion, or selfishness, or the reckless pursuit of wealth, and neglects to cultivate his moral and intellectual nature, so does he inevitably prepare himself for misery” (1894).

Kierkegaard’s study of Man led him to the conclusion that a God-concept, or faith in a suprahuman level of judgment, is vital to the formation of the self, because it is only through this concept, projected in the imagination, that Man learns of the transcendent self he must become (Cole, 1971). Similarly, Wallace felt that faith in the spiritual realm of existence after death compels Man to transcend his psychical/physical duality “by motives far stronger than any which either philosophy or religion can supply” (1894). Though their particular systems of belief differed slightly, both Kierkegaard and Wallace insisted that faith in forces operating superior to matter allowed Man to achieve his transcendent potential.

_Darwin and the Conflicting Instincts_
Darwin, however, saw no reason to posit a distinctly human self that existed outside of all matter and to be differentiated from all other organisms: “In Darwin’s conception, inductive science compelled humans to forfeit their special status in the scheme of nature” (Slotten, 2004). He rejects the spirit concept (as presented by Wallace and Kierkegaard) not only by claiming that the distinctions between animal and human consciousness are quantitative, but furthermore, by declaring that animals possess the faculty of imagination (1981). In Descent, Darwin makes the observance that dogs and other animals can dream, and, based on this observance, reasons that they possess at least a diminished version of the human imagination. Because imagination is the medium for projection of the Kierkegaardian/Wallacean spirit, presenting the individual with an image of the self to be actualized, a uniquely human self cannot be argued for if one believes that animals possess a comparable form of imagination.

Additionally, Darwin did not believe that there is a unique purpose to human life as distinct from life in all its other forms. His work “left man only one of innumerable creatures evolving through the play of secondary forces” (Eiseley, 1961) and sought to banish the notion (championed by Chambers and Wallace) that evolution was a progressive process resulting in the triumph of Man. Rather, Darwin saw equal beauty in all life, taking great joy in the fact that “from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved” (1859). And because he rejects the contention that “an additional and proximate cause” played a part in the origin of Man, Darwin negates the Kierkegaardian/Wallacean claim that such a transcendent power gives Man a code by which to live.
Instead, Darwin argues that the “social instincts” of Man are the root of all Man’s sense of morality and higher purpose (1981). Early Man felt “the same instinctive feelings which impel other animals to live in a body;” these feelings, which gave rise to the social qualities of altruism, sympathy, etc., were selected for because there is strength in numbers. “A tribe possessing the [social] qualities in high degree would spread and be victorious over other tribes…Thus the social and moral qualities would tend slowly to advance” (Darwin, 1981). But the social instincts did not entirely eclipse the more rudimentary, selfish drives that are the immediate routes to successful procreation. Darwin therefore sees modern Man as impelled by what are often conflicting instincts: the “lower” survival instinct that is pure testimony to our animal nature, and the more recently evolved social instinct. The social instincts, present in less-developed forms in other organisms, combine with our highly advanced faculty for memory retention to produce the human conscience, the source of all our compulsions toward moral behavior:

As man cannot prevent old impressions continually repassing through his mind, he will be compelled to compare the weaker impressions of, for instance, past hunger, or of vengeance satisfied or danger avoided at the cost of other men, with the instinct of sympathy and good-will to his fellows (Darwin, 1981).

Man reflects upon the choice he made to follow the selfish rather than the social instinct, and experiences regret more painful than the physical reaction would have been had the instinct gone unsatisfied. This is Darwin’s thesis for the birth of the human desire to act at all times in a manner that is condoned by, and appears to be in the best interest of, his fellows – the wellspring of morality.
Darwin and Freud

We will now see to what extent Darwin’s interpretation of Man as a being plagued by warring instincts influenced what was probably the most influential theory of the mind ever produced. The final student of Man we shall consider, Sigmund Freud, charted a map of the human brain at the beginning of the 20th Century that we in the 21st are only reconstructing in greater detail through the work of such recent disciplines as cognitive neuroscience. This amazingly durable document was drawn up by Freud largely based on information Darwin had already synthesized in his instinct theory of Man (see Becker, 1968, or Cole, 1971, for further discussion). A brief overview of Freud’s theory, made in concert with a recap of Darwin’s view of Man, will show that the work of these experts on the subject of humanity is both interlinked and complementary.

Freud is probably best known for the concepts of the id, the ego, and the superego. He draws on the Darwinian notion of Man’s retention of animalistic, selfish instincts when he claims that at birth, Man is solely driven by the libidinal impulse – the seed of instinct that will blossom into his drive to procreate and thus preserve the species (Freud, 1938). This state of libidinal dominance Freud eventually designated the id: “[Man] is a purely instinctual organism in this primal state. Any unfulfilled organic need creates a state of inner tension experienced as a desire or wish” (Cole, 1971). Freud augments Darwin by observing that the id operates exclusively within the human unconscious (Freud, 1957). The ego is the conscious element of the brain which moderates the libidinal instincts in accordance with the “reality-principle,” discerning the best ways to assure gratification of our animal needs within the reality of daily human existence (Freud 1960). In Darwin’s theory, the ego represents the highly developed
“mental faculties” of Man which are quantitatively different from those of the higher animals, so much so as to allow for the development of a unique human conscience.

This conscience, Darwin realized, was a product of Man’s social existence. His unique mental faculties (or ego), though evolutionarily developed to ensure the most successful gratification of the procreational (libidinal) impulses, simultaneously combined with man’s social instincts to produce a sense of deep regret when these “higher” instincts were sacrificed to the desires of the id. As Darwin noted:

It is obvious that every one may with an easy conscience gratify his own desires, if they do not interfere with his social instincts, that is with the good of others; but in order to be quite free from self-reproach, or at least of anxiety, it is almost necessary for him to avoid the disapprobation, whether reasonable or not, of his fellow men (1981).

In this telling passage, Darwin has laid the groundwork for what will become Freud’s concept of the superego. Essentially, what Darwin termed the “social instincts,” compelling Man to seek the approval of his fellows, are resurrected by Freud in the form of an unconscious element forged from a series of inhibitions to selfish action the individual encounters throughout the course of his social existence. This element, termed the superego, begins to form under the “influence of parental criticism” and is reinforced as the child develops “by those who trained and taught the child and by all the other persons of his environment” (Freud, 1959). It is the element of the mind, built on the inherited moral standards of the individual’s parents and culture at large, that compels the individual to conform to the ethical categories of his society in order to avoid “social extinction” (Cole, 1971). The superego is the unconscious analog of the id, with which it
is constantly at war; this war is mediated by the conscious ego, which tries to keep both elements satiated.

We see here an elaborated version of the conflicting instincts theory posited by Darwin, with one major distinction. For Freud, the drive to behave in a socially acceptable manner is not an instinct present at birth, but rather the result of the construction of the superego throughout life as parental inhibitions and cultural norms are assimilated (1989). This would seem to be at odds with Darwin’s constant reference to the social instincts. However, we shall quickly see that this discrepancy can be reconciled. In a brief passage in *Descent*, Darwin compares the social instincts with “habits gained in early youth and strengthened during our whole lives, perhaps inherited, so that they are at last rendered almost as strong as instincts” (1981). Here Darwin concedes that the basis of Man’s moral actions need not be entirely inherited at birth, but instead can be acquired, as Freud opined. Likewise, Freud provides for an instinct, present at birth, that drives Man to form the superego. Separation anxiety, a consuming fear of aloneness originating in the expulsion from the idyllic womb, urges Man to obtain continued social contact with the force of an instinct (Freud, 1936). The inherent drive to avoid separation anxiety is the Freudian analog of Darwin’s social instinct – a desire to maintain social connections that compels the individual to conform to moral standards, whether or not they be the “strangest customs and superstitions, in complete opposition to the true welfare and happiness of mankind” (Darwin, 1981).

Darwin and Freud did not believe that Man need be explained outside of naturalistic phenomena, and differentiated from the rest of the animal kingdom; on the contrary, they were convinced that Man was the product of animal instincts placed in a
social context and governed by a consciousness marked by exceptional powers of memory and introspection. Furthermore, they did not believe that Man received moral mandates from a suprahuman force, but rather, that moral action developed to facilitate social existence, and was subsequently defined along various trends by coevolving cultures.

**Darwin and Wallace, Noch Einmal**

Darwin and Wallace, co-originators of natural selection, differed astonishingly in their writings on the theory as applied to Man. They agreed that the human brain forged a new era in the history of life by outmoding the classic mechanism of specialization of parts, and allowing Man to simply shape his environment to suit his needs. But beyond this point of accord, their theories diverge.

Wallace insisted that Man’s unique consciousness could not have been produced by natural selection. His arguments centered around two key points: 1) the fact that the brain of the modern intellectual was not far removed from the primitive hut-dweller, despite the fact that mathematical ability, art appreciation, etc., could have no survival value to select for; and 2) the enigma of human free will. Wallace came to believe that Man’s will was the means by which he forged a unique self, a spirit, that mediated the relation between mind and body. Faith in an afterlife, projected through the imagination, compels Man to live in a moral way, developing his intellectual faculties and actualizing the transcendent self. Wallace’s theory of the essence of Man emerging at the pinnacle of a progressive system of evolution is identical to that of Kierkegaard, and indeed foreshadows arguments later made by such thinkers as Jung and Sartre.
Darwin denied the unique place of Man in the web of life. Instead, he believed that the mind of Man evolved gradually from the homologous organs of lower forms. He found evidence for this claim in numerous observances of anthropomorphous traits in animals. By showing that Man had descended from primates, Darwin set the stage for Freud’s model of the mind, which included an unconscious, instinctual drive to procreate borne out of our animal lineage. And like Freud, Darwin believed that mankind was not impelled to behave morally by some illusive entity; rather, conformance to culturally generated moral standards was the product of a need for social contact. This need was inherited as an instinct because sociability in early man had been selected for. Besides providing the basis for Freud’s map of the mind, which has in turn influenced generations of psychologists, Darwin also preceded philosophers such as Wittgenstein, who have taken a more “embodied” view of the mind.

As my epigraph from Slotten suggests, the question of Man’s status in the universe may never be fully resolved. Whatever the answer, it is important to recognize Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace for the contributions they have made to our understanding of the question, not only through their critical contribution of natural selection, but through their equally instructive and influential writings in the philosophic vein.
Bibliography


