William Lawrence and The Natural History of Man
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In his book, *Darwin's Place in History* (1959), Professor C. D. Darlington drew attention, in a brief chapter, to the suppression of William Lawrence's *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and The Natural History of Man*, published in 1819. According to Darlington, the unknown story of Lawrence explained more than anything else the private submerged conflict which lay beneath the public and visible history of Darwin. And it was therefore helpful in setting Darwin in a true historical perspective. Unfortunately, though, Darlington's chapter on the suppression of Lawrence is both inaccurate and misleading, in relation to the development of XIXth-century ideas, and to Darwin's in particular. It has misled Sir Alister Hardy, for example, in his recent series of Gifford lectures, the first part of which was published in 1966, entitled *The Living Stream*. Here, Hardy, in his account of the thinkers who had previously expressed ideas similar to those of Darwin, like W. C. Wells and Patrick Matthew, remarks:

And recently Professor Darlington has drawn our attention to the very interesting story of Dr. Lawrence, a professor of the Royal College of Surgeons, who published a book, *Lectures on physiology, zoology and the natural history of man*, in 1819, in which he discusses evolution treating man as an animal. Lawrence, however, being threatened with prosecution for blasphemy, and fearing professional ruin, suppressed the book very soon after its publication, although several pirated editions were later printed by other publishers.¹

As this article will show, Lawrence did not discuss evolution at all; and his views on the zoological study of man were as completely and clearly opposed to Darwin's in *The Descent of Man* as they could be. But Hardy is certainly not to be blamed for what he infers from Darlington's argument. After restating Lawrence's view that "zoological study, the treatment of man as an animal, as an object of natural history, is the only proper foundation for teaching and research in medicine, in morals or even in politics," Darlington speaks of Lawrence's views on the "process of evolution, the past or the future of man." But Lawrence was not concerned with the process of evolution in the course of those lectures—except at certain points when he implicitly denied it; he was in fact concerned with an attempt to illustrate the position of the human species in zoological classification, by means of comparative physiology. Accordingly, he concludes the first section of his lectures² with a list of sixteen factors that constitute the major specific differences between man and his nearest animal associates. In method, as in thought, he persistently revealed himself the disciple, not of Buffon, but of Cuvier.

Darlington's interesting chapter on Lawrence needs, I think, to be corrected in two main respects. The first has to do with the history of the

publication of Lawrence's lectures, and the reasons for their suppression. Here, Darlington seems to me to be wrong in the interpretation he has placed on the facts. The second concerns the content of Lawrence's ideas where, as I have already suggested, I believe the emphasis of Darlington's remarks to be entirely misleading; and this in turn involves a reappraisal of the public concern which the lectures aroused.

But first, the history of publication. Lawrence delivered his lectures at the Royal College of Surgeons, where he was Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, in the years 1817–1818. He published them early in 1819, together with a reply to the charges made against him as a teacher by his own former instructor at Saint Bartholomew's Hospital, Dr. John Abernethy. (I shall deal with the nature of the charges later.) The book was attacked by the Edinburgh Medical Review, the Quarterly Review, the Christian advocate at Cambridge, and the lecturer in Christianity at Oxford. In addition, the Governors of Bridewell and Bethlem Hospitals, where Lawrence was a surgeon, demanded that, if certain passages in the book were not removed, Lawrence remove himself. Lawrence acted promptly. "The present volume had not been in circulation a month," The British Critic tells us, "before it was withdrawn, and the remaining copies bought up at a considerable expense, under a positive engagement, as we understand, either to alter certain passages in the work, or to withdraw it altogether from the public." 3 This in fact occurred, as we learn from E. W. Grinfield's "Congratulatory Address to Mr. Lawrence on the suppression of his 'lectures,'" between April 10 and May 22, 1819. 4

This suppression, though, had nothing to do, as Darlington suggests, with a case in the Chancery Court in which Lawrence was involved. That case did not occur until three years later, and was heard before Lord Eldon, between March 23 and 26, 1822. What had happened was this. A bookseller and publisher in the "Strand," named Smith, had printed and attempted to sell a pirated edition of Lawrence's lectures. Lawrence had obtained an injunction against Smith's sale of the edition, and the case before Lord Eldon (Lawrence v. Smith) was to decide whether the injunction was to be upheld. Smith's Counsel pleaded that Lawrence had no copyright in the work, for it was "a publication denying Christianity and Revelation, which was contrary to public policy and morality." 5 He cited, as a precedent, the case of Byron's Cain, recently heard before the Court, in which the Lord Chancellor had refused to allow copyright on the same grounds. Lawrence's Counsel argued, of course, that the book did not deny Christianity or Revelation, and that Smith had taken the fruits and profits of Lawrence's labor without any moral right whatever to the work. The Lord Chancellor gave the verdict in favor of Smith because he entertained "a rational doubt upon some parts of the work, as to their being directed against the truth of the Scripture." 6

3 The British Critic (New Series, 1819), XII, 96–97.
4 This is to be found as an epilogue to the second edition of E. W. Grinfield's Cursory Observations of the Lectures on "Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man" (London, 1819).
6 Ibid., March 26, 1822.
The main points about this case are, I think, these: first, Darlington speaks of "illicit" editions of Lawrence's work; they were only illicit in so far as Lawrence's royalties were concerned, not in relation to any criminal proceedings, or charges of blasphemy, as Hardy suggests. (The Lord Chancellor underlines several times that he is only concerned with a question of property.) Secondly, an edition of the work, dated 1823, and imprinted, "James Smith, 163, Strand . . ." did appear. And it seems almost certain that this was the Smith of the law-suit. Thirdly, neither Lord Eldon nor Lawrence's lawyers refer to the work as suppressed; they speak of Lawrence as "having published it." This is of interest, not only because of the Lord Chancellor's judgment (it would clearly have been in the public interest to restrain Smith if the book was suppressed at the time) but because two further editions of the book came out in 1822. The first was "printed for the booksellers"; the second for "William Benbow." There seem to me to be two explanations of these other editions. Either three publishers were simultaneously trying to pirate Lawrence's work—which is unlikely; or else Lawrence himself had decided to republish. It seems more than possible that he might have felt compelled to do this, when he realized that his professional reputation would be endangered by Smith's edition, and that he would not even receive the compensation of royalties. In these circumstances, one at least of the 1822 editions might be authentic, together with the subsequent editions, with the exception of Smith's. In any case, no edition of the book is illicit. Fourthly, Darlington quotes a letter to the bookseller, William Hone, which he interprets as a note of commendation for the man who was thinking of bringing out the first "unauthorized" edition. As we have seen, there was no question of an unauthorized edition, except one which would scarcely meet with Lawrence's approval. In fact, the letter to Hone clearly refers to the time when Lawrence had suppressed all copies of the book. Hone must have written asking to read it. And Lawrence had sent him a copy, making quite clear his admiration for Hone, who was well known as a satirist of the Regency, and a writer of parodies of the Litany! And it is to Hone's scandalous public reputation that Lawrence was referring when he wrote: "... no considerations of expediency would ever induce me to shun the appearance of intimacy with one whom I respect so highly for talent and for the most important public services as well as for the possession of much greater courage in these matters than falls to the lot of yours very faithfully. . . ." The letter, in other words, expresses a tribute from the lesser rebel to the greater.

The publication history, then, tells little beyond Lawrence's quick decision to suppress the book—and three years later his attempt to prevent the appearance of a pirated edition, which was squashed on the curious ground that Lawrence had placed himself beyond the protection of the law because he appeared to contradict the Scriptures. This brings me to my second point, the content of Lawrence's lectures, and in particular his views on Man. In Lecture I Lawrence attacks Monboddo and Rousseau for asserting that man and the monkey, or at least the orangoutang, belong to the same species. In addition, he ridicules Monboddo for supposing that the human race once possessed tails.

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8 It is, of course, from Monboddo, not Lawrence, as Darlington suggests, that
The completely unsupported assertions of Monboddo and Rousseau only shew that they were equally unacquainted with the structure and functions of men and monkeys, not conversant with zoology and physiology, and therefore entirely destitute of the principles, on which alone a sound judgment can be formed concerning the natural capabilities and destiny of animals, as well as the laws according to which certain changes of character, certain departures from the original stock may take place.9

A little later, it becomes increasingly clear not only that Lawrence is not thinking about man’s evolution from the animal kingdom, but that if he were thinking about it, he would reject it:

The peculiar characteristics of man appear to me so very strong, that I not only deem him a distinct species, but also put him into a separate order by himself. His physical and moral attributes place him at a much greater distance from all the other orders of mammalia, than those are from each other respectively.10

These passages leave not a shadow of doubt that Lawrence was not in any sense a forerunner of Darwin and Huxley, in the matter of human evolution. On the contrary, he was fundamentally opposed to them in this respect, as in his whole concept of animal species, which was derived from Cuvier:

Fixed forms, perpetuated by generation, distinguish their species, determine the combination of secondary functions peculiar to each, and assign to them their respective situations in the system of the universe. . . . I have already mentioned that a fixed eternal form belongs to each animal, and that is continued by generation. Certain forms, the same as those existing in the world at the present moment, have existed from time immemorial. Such, at least, is the result of the separate and combined proofs furnished by our own observation and experience respecting the laws of the animal kingdom, by the voice of tradition and history, by the remains of antiquity, and by every kind of collateral evidence.11

But while Lawrence was not in any sense an evolutionist, Darlington is right in pointing out that these lectures became the center of a considerable controversy in which their author was made to appear the enemy of Church and State, as well as the corrupter of British youth. How did this come about? Lawrence’s first major critic, as I have already mentioned, was Dr. John Abernethy, his former instructor and fellow lecturer at the Royal College of Surgeons. Abernethy relates in his postscript to the Hunterian Oration for 1819 how he had persistently tried—and failed—to instill into William Lawrence the principles of his own master, John Hunter. Hunter had combined a scrupulous knowledge of comparative anatomy with a firm belief that Life was something “superadded” to Matter, and that Mind was immaterial. Abernethy claimed that Lawrence had scoffed at his reverence for Hunter, and had even gone so far in his lectures, in passages like the following, to challenge the idea of the immateriality and immortality of the mind, or soul:

Where then shall we find proofs of the mind’s independence of the bodily structure? of that mind, which, like the corporeal frame, is infantile in the

Peacock derives Sir Oran-Outan in Melincourt (London, 1817).

9 Lawrence, Lectures on Physiology, etc., 124. 10 Ibid., 132. 11 Ibid., 94.
child, manly in the adult, sick and debilitated in disease, frenzied or melancholy in the madman, enfeebled in the decline of life, doting in decrepitude, and annihilated by death? 12

The tone of these questions was certainly clear enough. Furthermore, Lawrence had taken the view throughout his lectures that Life was a matter of organization, and that "the phenomena of mind are to be regarded physiologically merely as the functions of organic apparatus contained in the head." 13 But he had been careful to underline that he was only speaking from a physiological point of view:

The theological doctrine of the soul, and its separate existence, has nothing to do with this physiological question, but rests on a species of proof altogether different. 14

These qualifications, though, were quite insufficient to exculpate Lawrence as a teacher, in the mind of critics like Abernethy or Grinfield. It seemed that he was setting his pupils on a course that could only lead to materialism in metaphysics and infidelity in religion.

There are two main points to be made about such criticisms. The first is that the argument over the relationship between mind and body—and whether they could be considered separately—was nothing new among physicians. It had, for example, been a matter of prime importance to the great XVIth-century physician, Jean Fernel, who had devoted a third of his treatise on physiology to the discussion of mind. But he had come to the opposite conclusion from Lawrence, because he had started from the assumption that at source everything that went on in the body was non-material and incorporeal. The integration of the body was brought about by means of the soul. Or again we might think, in the XVIIth century, of Lussauld, physician to Louis XIV, writing his Apologie pour les médecins, contre ceux qui les accusent de déferer trop à la Nature et de n'avoir point de Religion—which was a strong protest against the dualism of Descartes. 15

The right of scientist and physician to think in his own terms, without reference to religion, was no doubt only won in the late XIXth century, largely as a result of the dispute over Darwin's Origin of Species. And so it is not in the least surprising that Lawrence's attempts to speak with reference to physiology only were severely criticized. They involved an attitude that was not scientifically or professionally respectable for at least another fifty years.

The second point to be made about Lawrence's critics is the consistency with which their attacks on him involve political views. Grinfield imagined that a student of Lawrence would come away from his lectures no longer admiring the constitution of his country, inclined to faction in politics, and with all dignified and elevated moral sentiment removed. Abernethy's reflections were even less sanguine and more bloody:

There may be those who do not perceive how our notions respecting life can influence our conduct. But this indeed surprises me, because Voltaire was so well acquainted with the evil tendency of his own doctrines, that he checked

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12 Lawrence, Physiology, 7. 13 Ibid., 189. 14 Ibid., 8. 15 On these last two points see C. Sherrington, Man on his Nature (New York, 1940).
the conversation of his companions, whilst the servants remained in the room, lest, observed he, we should have our throats cut.\textsuperscript{16}

The attitude that lies just beneath the surface of this remark was summed up by Thomas Rennell, the Christian advocate at Cambridge, in his attack on Lawrence, when he said that materialism and atheism went hand in hand,\textsuperscript{17} and by an Oxonian who wrote of Lawrence in \textit{The Radical Triumvirate}:

\begin{quote}
How far however we can really benefit mankind by convincing them that the soul is mere perishable matter, like the body, may appear problematical to a large portion of society. For who does not know that we must attribute the French Revolution, with all its horrible attendants of anarchy, despotism and murder, to the persuasion that there was no future existence? \textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The case against Lawrence, then, has much in common with the case against James Hutton and Erasmus Darwin, at the turn of the century. The disfavor which their ideas aroused marked the end of the alliance between science and religion which had persisted throughout the XVIIth century, and revealed the fear that existed among the educated section of the English nation of a repetition in England of the events of 1789.\textsuperscript{19} In these circumstances, scientific theory and moral values were closely related; and an attack upon Revelation could very easily seem an attack upon orderly government: a situation that is reflected with particular force in Lord Eldon's judgment over the copyright of Lawrence's book.

Finally, Lawrence's scientific interests touched on matters about which the ruling classes—and Lawrence's livelihood as a surgeon had largely to depend on them—had reason to feel sensitive in 1819. With George III insane and George IV parading his extravagant debaucheries, it was perhaps not the most tactful moment to start talking about hereditary disease, and the ill effects of intermarriage among the aristocracy. But Lawrence quoted, for example, with approval this passage from Haller's \textit{Elements of Physiology}, as an illustration of the facts that he had observed:

\begin{quote}
We know a very remarkable instance of two noble females, who got husbands on account of their wealth, although they were nearly idiots, and from whom this mental defect has extended for a century into several families, so that some of all their decendants still continue idiots in the fourth and even in the fifth generation.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

And he was not likely to impress his social overlords either by remarking:

\begin{quote}
This inattention to breed is not, however, of so much consequence in the people as in the rulers. \ldots Here, unfortunately, the evil is at its height: laws, customs, prejudices, pride, bigotry, confine them to intermarriages with each other, and thus degradation of race is added to all the pernicious influences inseparable from such exalted stations. \ldots \textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} J. Abernethy \textit{Physiological Lectures} (London, 1817), 335.

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Rennell, \textit{Remarks on Scepticism} (London. 1819).

\textsuperscript{18} An Oxonian: \textit{The Radical Triumvirate or Infidel Paine, Lord Byron and Surgeon Lawrence} (London, 1820), 20.


\textsuperscript{20} Lawrence, \textit{Physiology}, 460.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}
It may well have been that this aspect of Lawrence's work had considerable bearing on the rapidity of the book's suppression. His older colleagues may well have pointed out that, while he might gain a reputation for frankness, his more immediate concern with performing operations was unlikely to be helped by insulting his most influential patients. At any rate, shortly after the suppression, Lawrence resigned his lecturership in order to devote himself to his practice, and became towards the end of his career Surgeon-General to Queen Victoria. If my interpretation of the events of 1819 is correct, this would fit in well with what the rest of his career tells us: Lawrence was a man well-equipped with that scientific scepticism that Huxley so much admired, but was also endowed with a strong grasp of practical tactics. And this was one of the factors that saved him from Huxley's heavy-handed asseverations on the subject of his own honesty.

In this paper, then, I have tried to illustrate the following points that seem to me important, not only in relation to Lawrence, but in maintaining a correct perspective on the development of XIXth-century ideas.

1. Lawrence was not, in any sense, as Darlington described him, one of the "English medical evolutionists." Had he been, the attack upon him would certainly have been more widespread and virulent, as the controversy over Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in 1844 makes clear.

2. Lawrence derided the idea of man's descent from the apes.

3. Lawrence was attacked because he was thought to deny the immateriality of the soul, and the truth of revelation. This renewed the historical argument about materialism, and the contemporary argument over the relationship between ideas and political stability, making clear the prevailing moral objections to the progress of science.

4. The suppression of his lectures had nothing to do with the Lord Chancellor's case; and some of the later editions may well have been authorized by Lawrence. In any case they were certainly not illicit—though they could have been pirated—and one of them, Smith's, certainly was.

5. Lawrence's interest consists in the skill and knowledge with which he arranged his facts on the natural history of man; and the accumulation of such facts in massive array (one thinks of William Smith and Charles Lyell in geology) was the sort of ground on which Darwin's great work was founded. Lawrence played his part in the slow but steady erosion of hypothesis, by means of fact, which in the course of the XIXth century transformed, among other things, the relationship between science and religion. In particular, it effectively brought to an end that tradition of natural theology which had been written into the charter for scientific research that was granted to the Royal Society in 1667. But Lawrence was not a seminal thinker. In all except his views on the limits of scientific knowledge, and his ideas on heredity, he was extremely conservative. He belongs, like Cuvier, to that XVIIIth-century world that viewed itself not as a dynamic equilibrium, but as an almost static hierarchy.

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He himself refers to his suppression in his letters to Hone, as a matter of expediency.