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## **WAS CHARLES DARWIN PSYCHOTIC? A Study of His Mental Health**

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### **Introduction**

Darwin's many lifelong and serious illnesses have been the subject of much speculation and study for over a century. Darwin stated that his health problems began as early as 1825 when he was only six years old, and became incapacitating around age 28 (Barloon and Noyes, 1997, p. 138). Horan (1979, p. ix) concluded that Darwin was "ill and reclusively confined to his home in Kent for forty years." Darwinian scholar Michael Ruse even concluded that "Darwin himself was an invalid from the age of 30" (2003, p. 1523). And medical doctor George Pickering, in an extensive study of Darwin's illness, concluded that in his early thirties, Darwin became an "invalid recluse" (1974, p. 34). UCLA School of Medicine Professor Dr. Robert Pasnau (1990, p. 123) noted that Darwin also "remained ill almost continually" for the entire five years that he was on his HMS Beagle trip.

Dozens of scholarly articles and at least three books have been penned on the question of Darwin's illness. The current conclusion is that Darwin suffered from several serious and incapacitating psychiatric disorders, including agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is characterized by fear of panic attacks (or actual panic attacks) when not in a psychologically safe environment, such as at home. Darwin, as is common among agoraphobiacs, also developed many additional phobias—being in crowds, being alone, or leaving home unless accompanied by his wife (Kaplan and Sadock, 1990, pp. 958–959).

Agoraphobia is also frequently associated with depersonalization (a feeling of being detached from, and outside of, one's own body), a malady that Darwin also suffered (Barloon and Noyes, 1997, p. 138). A study of Darwin's mental condition by Barloon and Noyes concluded that Darwin suffered from anxiety disorders that so severely impaired his functioning that it limited his ability to leave his home, even just to meet with colleagues or other friends. This diagnosis likely explains his very secluded,

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hermit-like lifestyle (1997, p. 138). It also helps to explain the title of Desmond and Moore's 1991 biography of Darwin: *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*.

### **Other Psychiatric and Medical Problems**

Colp (1977, p. 97) concluded that “much of Darwin’s daily life was lived on a rack which consisted of fluctuating degrees of pain” that was sometimes so severe that Darwin called it “distressingly great.” Darwin’s many psychological or psychologically influenced physical health symptoms included severe depression, insomnia, hysterical crying, dying sensations, shaking, fainting spells, muscle twitches, shortness of breath, trembling, nausea, vomiting, severe anxiety, depersonalization, seeing spots, treading on air and vision, and other visual hallucinations (Barloon and Noyes, 1997, p. 139; Picover, 1998, p. 290; Colp, 1977, p. 97; Bean, 1978, p. 573). The physical symptoms included headaches, cardiac palpitations, ringing in ears (possibly tinnitus), painful flatulence, and gastric upsets—all of which commonly have a psychological origin (Pasnau, 1990). Colp noted that “behind these symptoms there was always a core of anxiety and depression” (1977, p. 97). Some speculate that part of Darwin’s mental problems were due to his nagging, gnawing fear that he had devoted his “life to a fantasy”—and a “dangerous one” at that (Desmond and Moore, 1991, p. 477). This fear was that his theory was false and there was, in fact, a divine Creator.

Darwin’s behavior also indicates that he suffered from a mental disorder. Although devoted to his wife and daughters, he “treated them as children” even after his daughters were fully grown (Picover, 1998, p. 289). Some of Darwin’s statements to others also cast doubt on his mental stability. For example, in 1875 he wrote the following words to fellow scientist Robert Hooker:

You ask about my book, & all that I can say is that I am ready to commit suicide: I thought it was decently written, but find so much wants rewriting. . . . I begin to think that every one who publishes a book is a fool (quoted in Colp, 1977, p. 228).

Colp noted that Darwin’s son Leonard claimed that his father’s illness even interfered with his feelings for his children. For example, Leonard once noted that As a young lad I went up to my father when strolling about the lawn, and he . . . turned away as if quite incapable of carrying on any conversation. Then there suddenly shot through my mind the conviction that he wished he was no longer alive (quoted in Colp, 1977, p. 100).

Darwin’s mental problems were considered so severe that Picover (1998, p. 289) included Darwin in his collection of historical persons that he calls “strange brains . . . eccentric scientists, and madmen.” That Darwin suffered from several severely disabling maladies is not debated; the only debate is what caused them (Pasnau, 1990, p. 121).

### **Other Possible Causes of Darwin’s Condition**

Others, including Darwin’s own wife, argued that his mental problem stemmed from guilt over his life’s goal to refute the argument for God from design (Bean, 1978, p. 574; p. 28; Pasnau, 1990, p. 126). Most of the psychoanalytic studies have argued that his problems were a result of his repressed anger toward his tyrannical father and “the slaying of his heavenly father” by his theory (Pasnau, 1990, p. 122).

Diagnosis of the *cause* of Darwin's mental and physical disorders include parasitic disease (Chagas's disease—caused by an insect common in South America), arsenic poisoning, and possibly even an inner ear disorder (Picover, 1998, p. 290; Pasnau, 1990). All of these causes have largely been refuted. Many persons conclude he had a classic, essential mental disturbance bordering on psychosis (a severe, incapacitating mental disorder). Regardless of the diagnosis, Darwin's condition was clearly incapacitating, often for months at a time, and rendered him an invalid for much of his life, especially in the prime of his life.

Arnold Sorsby concluded that Darwin was also an obsessive-compulsive and gives the following evidence:

If Chagas's disease did not cause Darwin's symptoms what did? My personal diagnosis would be an anxiety state with obsessive features and psychosomatic manifestations. Anxiety clearly precipitated much of his physical trouble, and regarding the obsessive component there are several important points. . . .

Darwin exhibited the obsessional's trait of having everything "just so"; he kept meticulous records of his health and symptoms like many obsessional hypochondriacs. Everything had to be in its place; he even had a special drawer for the sponge which he used in bathing . . . Then there is the health diary he kept. Days and nights were given a score according to how good they were; the score was added up at the end of each week, and there is evidence of frequent changing of mind in deciding whether a night was very good or just good (1974, p. 228).

### **Darwin's Own Words about His Condition**

In addition to the diary on his health problems and complaints (Colp, 1977, p. 136), he frequently discussed his health problems in his letters and his autobiography. Darwin's own description of his condition included the following: "I am forced to live, . . . very quietly and am able to see scarcely anybody and cannot even talk long with my nearest relations" (quoted in Bowlby, 1990, p. 240). Darwin once complained that speaking for only "a few minutes" to the Linnean Society "brought on 24 hours vomiting" (Darwin, 1994, pp. 98–99). At another time, Darwin had a "house full of guests" and after he visited the parish church for a christening, he was "back to square one" and his good health "had vanished 'like a flash of lightning'" and sickness (including the vomiting) returned (Desmond and Moore, 1991, p. 456). The suddenness of his illness, as illustrated by these incidents, indicates that his incapacitating episodes were psychological in origin.

Another side of Darwin revealed his sadistic impulses. His own words taken from his autobiography give a vivid example:

In the latter part of my school life I became passionately fond of shooting, and I do not believe that anyone could have shown more zeal for the most holy cause than I did for shooting birds. How well I remember killing my first snipe, and my excitement was so great that I had much difficulty in reloading my gun from the trembling of my hands. This taste long continued and I became a very good shot (1958, p. 44).

The fact that he loved killing so much that killing his first bird caused him to tremble with excitement could certainly indicate a sadistic streak in Darwin. His passion for killing birds is well known. One wonders if this "passion" for killing

may have, in part, motivated his ruthless “survival of the fittest” tooth and claw theory of natural selection.

## Conclusions

Darwin was clearly a very troubled man and suffered from severe emotional problems for most of his adult life, especially when he was in the prime of life. The exact cause of his mental and many physical problems has been much debated and may never be known for certain. Since Darwin wrote extensively about his mental and physical problems, we have much material on which to base a reasonable conclusion about this area of his life. The diagnosis of the cause of his mental and physical problems includes a variety of debilitating conditions, but agoraphobia with the addition of psychoneurosis is most probably correct.

Unfortunately, most writers have shied away from this topic, partly because Darwin is now idolized by many scientists and others. Often listed as one of the greatest scientists of the nineteenth century, if not the greatest scientist that ever lived, Darwin is one of the few scientists known to most Americans. To understand Darwin as a person and his motivations, one must consider his mental condition and how it affected his work and conclusions.

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