It is 150 years since the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. Kezia Picard sat down with Samuel Grove, author of Retrieving Darwin's Revolutionary Idea, to talk about the relevance of Darwin's theory for psychoanalytic thought.

KP: Freud famously placed his discovery of the unconscious alongside Darwin's discovery of evolution in a tradition of humbling scientific discoveries. Was this a valid comparison?

SG: I do, but not for the reasons Freud thought.

Freud was clearly trying to establish scientific certainty in the unconscious, not to mention his own legacy in the history of science. Elsewhere Freud invoked Darwin in order to establish a biological foundation for the unconscious. Freud claimed he was operating on the very 'basic assumption' that there must be a process that gets us from the physical operations of the brain of which we are not conscious, to the mental operations of the brain of which we are.

And yet to ascribe scientific certainty in the unconscious is heavily misleading because at the core of the unconscious—its "nodal point" as Freud put it—is anxiety and doubt. If Freud taught us anything it was to be suspicious of any claims to certainty, scientific or otherwise.

Well, it turns out that scientific certainty was also very far from Darwin's mind, particularly when it came to human evolution. In his autobiography and his private letters, he wrote about how he was afflicted with a "horrid doubt"; a doubt that stemmed from his discovery of man's animal origins. What faith, he asked, can we have in the convictions of a monkey-mind?

KP: So, Darwin and Freud's discoveries are comparable but only in so far as they are distinct from the claims of certainty associated with other scientific discoveries?

SG: Yes. It might be helpful to compare Darwin and Freud's doubts with Descartes who formulated the early scientists' claims of certainty in a formal argument. Descartes derived certainty from doubt. His existential doubt served as the foundation for his certainty that he

was thinking. Francis Bacon made the same point. 'If man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts' he wrote, 'but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.'[1] Well both Darwin and Freud turn this upside down. They begin, if you like, with certainty in their discoveries, only for this certainty to give way to profound doubts. In different ways their discoveries challenged the foundations for scientific truth.

This is a very simple formulation, and it is important to note that neither Darwin nor Freud articulated what they had done as an inversion of Cartesian logic. Moreover, both Darwin and Freud very much wanted to be seen as scientists in the tradition of the Scientific Revolution. It is partly why their own subsequent doubts about their discoveries caused them so much anxiety.

KP: You suggest that Freud and Darwin turned Cartesian science on its head by eliciting doubt from certainty. Was Freud simply following what Darwin had done, or had he made the same move independently?

SG: Freud always claimed to have been inspired by Darwin, but he was also a notoriously bad reader of him. Freud confused Darwin's theory of natural selection with the theory of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Lamarck had believed that the driver of evolution was a conscious "willing" in animals. This was ironic not simply because Freud (of all people) was imputing a consciousness to animals, but because if Freud had read Darwin more closely, he would have realized that Darwin was much closer to his own ideas than Lamarck.

KP: How so?

SG: Both Darwin and Freud's theories are built upon the same epistemic premise. That we are subjects of a history that exceeds our understanding. History is too immense, too vast, ever to be held in conscious thought. Instead, we have to make do with interpretations of history that involve a great deal of repression of history's complexity. Michel Foucault makes this point in *The Order of Things*. He argues that 'the unconscious' is the last of the great modern discoveries because Western thought spent most of the nineteenth century slowly coming to terms with this idea; approaching it, but as if its back was turned. Foucault credits Freud with being the first thinker to finally face the unconscious and give it a name. A close

reading of Darwin, however, reveals that, unlike so many of his contemporaries, he had been prepared to confront this problem head on.

Darwin, you may recall, insisted on an 'unconscious process of selection'. Most people interpreted this simply as Darwin's repudiation of creationism—that there was no conscious deity, no conscious designer, behind evolution. In fact, Darwin was also referring to organisms themselves. He was insisting that organisms are entirely *unconscious* of the selective forces surrounding them. And when you think about it, he is right. The laws of selection dictate that every character of an organism is either an instinct (law of inheritance) or blind chance (law of variation), or some combination of the two. There is no room in the theory for conscious deliberation—still less a conscious awareness of the selective forces surrounding them.

Now of course Darwin isn't denying that human beings have the power to reason. What he is denying however (and this is a theme that runs all the way through *The Origin of Species*) is that man has the power to reason definitively upon historical causes that he describes as "incomprehensibly vast". Darwin leaves no room for equivocation on this point at all. He emphasises repeatedly man's "profound ignorance" of evolutionary history.

KP: Why do you think he was so emphatic about this?

SG: I think Darwin was serious about applying natural selection to man—and applying it entailed also applying its consequences. Darwin considered it fundamental to his theory that organisms are *unconscious* of natural selection. Achieving a comprehensive understanding of history would make him conscious of natural selection. It would also imply that man might be able to consciously interfere in his own evolution. Darwin explicitly ruled this out in his notebooks—"by my theory no animal as now existing can be a cause of itself." Should there ever come a time when man's powers of selection became equal to that of nature—whether through his own selective breeding or his comprehension of natural selection—then he would become a "deity". Darwin was very insistent that this day would never come.

Freud once wrote that there was a spot that is "unplumbable" a "navel" point that is essentially unknowable. I think Darwin also had this view of human consciousness.

KP: Right. But drawing a distinction between what we can and can't know wasn't that radical. Kant had done this a century and a half before. Darwin never explicitly formulated an 'unconscious' in the Freudian sense of a depository of repressed memories or a 'cauldron of seething excitations'.

SG: True. This was undeniably Freud's creation and achievement. Nevertheless, it is instructive to look at examples in which Freud quoted Darwin favourably. In the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* Freud credited 'the great Darwin' for recognizing that scientists are prone to forgetting facts that they found 'unpleasurable'.[2]

KP: This still isn't the 'unconscious'.

SG: No, but I think it is further evidence that, prior to Freud, there was a reckoning with the unconscious—in this case an ethical reckoning—even if the unconscious hadn't yet been named. Freud was very concerned with these types of ethical problems, particularly in relation to science. What if, Freud asked, the scientist's objective to simplify, or generalize was not the result of his or her commitment to truth at all, but rather his or her desire to repress inconvenient facts. Turns out Darwin had the same concerns.

KP: Was this simply a matter of Darwin and Freud being particularly conscientious and rigorous, or was there more to it?

SG: Darwin and Freud certainly were both those things, but I think there is more to it. Where does the ethical values of cautiousness, and rigour come from? I think they are more recent than many of us imagine.

Scientific truth since Galileo was assumed to be arrived at or discovered from pure thought. Even once we get to figures like Kant and Hegel, history is seen fundamentally as an unfolding of pure thought. Lacan and Foucault referred to this period as the 'Age of the Ego' and the age of 'transcendental narcissism' respectively because for all the complexity and sophistication of many philosophical works during this time, truth is always something that corresponds, more or less, with the scientist's inner world.

Freud represented a break from this because the unconscious is something that is discovered from without. First of all, in the sense that the unconscious is literally a thing—mistakes or parapraxes—that exist in spite of the mind. We meant to say one thing, we said another. The unconscious then is that which disrupts and subverts pure thought. Second of all, it is through his encounter with *other* people that Freud properly could have said to have discovered the unconscious. It is through the encounter with 'the other' that the unconscious reveals itself. So even when Freud begins his own self-analysis this is very different from a Cartesian meditation. Freud's own self-analysis is only possible, as Freud puts it, by treating himself as 'another'.[3]

Now if you look at Darwin's discovery of evolution you see something similar. We can easily kid ourselves, Darwin argues, into believing that nature operates in the same way as our minds do, especially if we concentrate on nature's perfections. That is how we delude ourselves into believing that nature is the artifice of a designer. Darwin did something different. Like Freud, he focused on nature's mistakes. What the rudiments of teeth in unborn calves and birds, mammae in males, the 'soldered wings' in insects etc. demonstrate is the *absence* of design in nature. Such artefacts, it turns out, can only be explained through common origin. I think by proceeding in this way Darwin, like Freud after him, became very suspicious of thought. The mind can easily play tricks on you—particularly when it is far from clear what counts as solid evidence. Freud once described psychoanalysis as dealing in the "dregs of world phenomena". Evolution no less so. Hence the need for caution and rigour.

The second thing to note is that Darwin arrived at his conclusions about human evolution, in part, from his encounters with non-Europeans in the 1830s. In his letters he describes the experience of meeting a Fuegian as extremely distressing and alienating. The Lacanian theorist Gillian Beer argues, persuasively I think, that Darwin's distress arose from the reciprocal nature of the gaze. In discovering the radical otherness of the Fuegian he was forced to also confront his own. It was in this moment that Darwin was forced to contend with his own animal origins. Another interpretation, but by no means, at odds with Beer's psychoanalytic interpretation, is that Darwin was confronted with the *sorites paradox* where we realise that two categories that we like to think are qualitatively separate—man and animal—are only separated by degree. At any rate, I think a great deal of Darwin's subsequent work can be read in terms of his fidelity to this moment—but also his keen interest to keep this experience at bay. The funny thing about both *The Origin of Species* and

more clearly *The Descent of Man* is just how far Darwin will go to *avoid* recognizing explicitly the animality in man—particularly Anglo-Saxon men like himself. He is far more inclined to anthropomorphise the entire animal and plant kingdoms.

KP: So in some ways he represents a continuity with the 'transcendental narcissism' of his time?

SG: Yes. I think a psychoanalytic approach reveals as much Darwin's limitations as his undoubted achievements. Darwin wasn't perfect and I think it is interesting to apply Darwin's 'golden rule' and ask if there were any "unpleasurable facts" that Darwin repressed? What kind of role did 'forgetting' have in his work? I began the interview emphasizing the importance of "ignorance' in Darwin's work. Well, forgetting is a form of ignorance.

KP: Are you suggesting that Darwin was repressing, to some degree, the evolutionary origins of humans?

SG: I suspect he was. Although two notes of caution should be raised here. The first is that symptomatic readings of historical figures are always highly speculative, if not outright dubious. There was a reason Freud was hostile to biographies and memoir. They are always works of fiction. The second is that Darwin, as I have stated, had very logical reasons to deny that man could understand his evolutionary history. It was, indeed, a principle of his theory. Nevertheless, events in Darwin's life are acutely, even tragically, suggestive.

In his autobiography Darwin notes that as a young boy he developed a taste for 'long solitary walks' in which he says he became absorbed in his own thoughts, but what he was thinking about he cannot now recollect. He even suggests that this was the time his mind became suited to science—like a machine for grinding out general laws. The psychoanalyst and biographer John Bowlby pinpoints these walks to around the time he lost his mother when he was eight years old. This must have been very traumatic for Darwin. Especially as he was prevented from seeing her before she died and forbidden by his father to even mention her name thereafter. Darwin of course knew that his mother had died but never seemed to properly process it. Even as an adult. In a letter to his cousin, who had just lost a loved one, Darwin expressed his condolences but wrote that having never lost a close relation he has no idea how that must feel.[4]

If this wasn't extraordinary enough, the elder Darwin, now a grandfather, used to play a word game with his grandchildren in which you steal a letter from an opponent's word to make a new word. When one grandchild added the letter 'm' to 'other' Darwin apparently exclaimed "MOE-THER—there's no such word!"[5]

Now, was Darwin's denial of the circumstances of human origins symptomatic of his evident denial of his maternal origins? I think that is too strong a statement. Nonetheless, I do think these biographical events, observed from a psychoanalytic perspective, help explain why the question of origins in Darwin's work were so fraught.

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Samuel Grove is an activist and independent researcher. His book *The Reluctant Radical: Retrieving Darwin's Revolutionary Idea* is out now with Lextington Books.

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[1] Stephen Gaukroger. *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 90.

[2] Darwin cited in S. Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1975), 199.

[3] S. Freud "Letter to Fleiss November 14th 1897," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume I*, 259-260.

[4] J. Bowlby, *Charles Darwin: A new life* (WW Norton & Company, 1992), 78.

[5] ibid, 78.