CHAPTER 5

Foreign Bodies
The Human Species and Its Symptom

A recurrent analogy in Sigmund Freud's work characterizes the symptom as a foreign body.[1] Its first use dates from 1893, when it appears in the "Preliminary Communication" that Freud and Josef Breuer published two years before the *Studies on Hysteria*. Here, to present the thesis that hysterical symptoms embody traumatic memories, they write that "the psychical trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body [*Fremdkörper*] which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (Freud, 2:6; see also 2:290). The comparison of the hysterical symptom to a foreign body embedded in living tissue persists in Freud's writing long after he abandons his initial theory that hysteria is caused by trauma. The figure recurs as late as the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* of 1932, where Freud uses it to characterize the relation of the symptom to the ego (22:57). The fullest and most self-conscious use of this figure in Freud's late work, however, comes in 1926 from *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, where he begins a discussion of the symptom as a compromise formation between the ego and the id by recalling that "an analogy with which we have long been familiar compared the symptom to a foreign body which was keeping up a constant series of stimuli and reactions in the tissue in which it was embedded" (20:98).

The first section of this chapter will provide a genealogy for this conception of the symptom by showing its relation to the work of Charles Darwin.[2] Subsequent sections, however, will be concerned not with Freud, but with Darwin himself, whose influence on Freud has been misunderstood because it arises from aspects of his work that are themselves poorly understood and that today might even be said to appear foreign to it. These include theories of involuntary behaviour and unconscious agency. My ultimate aim in reading Darwin through Freud, though, goes beyond explaining some difficult points in one as a key to understanding the other. Freud's theory of the symptom emerges from cruxes in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

Darwin's thought that themselves require a symptomatic reading. Darwin's concerns with suspended or unconscious agency appear at moments where his work encounters the risk of producing what it purports to describe. Examples of this pattern to be discussed include somatic expressions, such as the blush, and concepts, such that of human species identity. Like symptoms in psychoanalysis, these objects of Darwin's thought make visible the libidinal structure of the analytic situation itself.

***

An identification – perhaps wishful – of his own work with that of Darwin recurs both in Freud's writing and in that of his earliest followers. One instance appears in his well-known list of the three blows that science has administered to human narcissism. The first of these, which Freud terms the cosmological blow, is "associated ... with the name and work of Copernicus," whose astronomical system displaced humankind from its position at the center of the universe (17:140). The second blow, the biological, was, according to Freud, administered by "Charles Darwin and his collaborators and forerunners," who showed that "Man is not a being different from animals or superior to them," but is "himself ... of animal descent" (17:143). The third blow of science to human narcissism Freud terms the psychological; this has been administered by psychoanalysis itself, which showed, as he put it, that "*the ego is not master in its own house*" (17:143).[3] In this list, Freud's identification of his work with Darwin's is explicit, as is his identification of the resistance to psychoanalysis with resistance to Darwinian evolution. Many signs of Freud's admiration for Darwin appear elsewhere in his writing; in a partial autobiography of 1924, he recalls the role played by his attraction to "the theories of Darwin" in his decision to study medicine (20:8); in a letter of 1907, he characterizes *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) as one of history's "ten most significant books."[4] That Freud understood his achievement as analogous to Darwin's emerges again after his death, when Ernest Jones in his authorized biography terms him "the Darwin of the mind."[5]

Notwithstanding this characterization, Jones also finds in the relation of Freud's ideas to Darwin's "a baffling problem."[6] The problem is Freud's belief in the heritability of acquired characteristics, a position Jones associates with Darwin's precursor Jean Baptiste Lamarck, which was contradicted by the genetic understanding of heredity that became available to science in the early twentieth century. The reason for his biographer's exasperated tone in discussing this aspect of Freud's thought, it gradually

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

emerges, is that the subject is one on which he and Jones had disagreed in the last year of Freud's life, when Jones had explained to him that his position conflicted with biology and "begged" him to modify it in the forthcoming *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Freud, however, did no such thing, incorporating Jones's arguments in the book only with the observation that in its "present attitude . . . biological science . . . refuses to hear of the inheritance of acquired characters by succeeding generations. I must, however, in all modesty confess that nevertheless I cannot do without this factor in biological evolution" (23:100).

From the standpoint of mid-twentieth-century biology, Jones had right on his side in this dispute.[7] His intellectual history, however, requires some correction, which is worth making because the picture he gives of Freud's views remains influential to this day.[8] Here is a condensed version of that picture: "Before Darwin, the only serious explanation of evolution that had any vogue was Lamarck's doctrine of inherited characteristics. . . . This doctrine has been completely discredited for more than half a century" – to support which position Jones gives a long quotation from Julian Huxley and then concludes that "in spite of innumerable . . . strictures Freud remained from the beginning to the end of his life what one must call an obstinate adherent of this discredited Lamarckism."[9] As Lucille Ritvo has shown, however, Freud's psychological publications contain no references to Lamarck; his correspondence suggests that he did not read Lamarck's evolutionary work until about the time of World War I.[10] Freud certainly had an early and comprehensive knowledge of Darwin, however – apparently more so than his biographer. He therefore knew, as Jones seems not to, that Darwin never rejected the idea that some acquired traits could be inherited and particularly that habits developed by an individual organism could appear as native instincts in its offspring. This idea appears only in passing in *The Origin of Species* (1859) but plays a much larger role in *The Descent of Man* and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), the later works in which Darwin treats human evolution.

Darwin's understanding of how the inheritance of acquired traits affected a species' development, however, differed from Lamarck's, and, as we shall see, Freud's ideas on the subject were shaped by Darwin.[11] They may indeed have been Darwin's greatest influence on Freud; it is thus an irony of intellectual history that they led to his characterization as a Lamarckian. In Freud's psychological writings, the earliest citations of Darwin occur in the *Studies on Hysteria*, where Freud twice refers to *The Expression of the Emotions*: "When a hysteric creates a somatic expression for an emotionally-coloured idea by symbolism . . . these sensations and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

innervations belong to the field of 'The Expression of the Emotions', which, as Darwin [1872] has taught us, consists of actions which originally had a meaning and served a purpose" (2:180–1). In this passage, Freud represents the hysterical symptom as a sensation that at one time had a cause in external reality but now remains without a cause as what he terms a "menemic symbol." Preserved by an unconscious libidinal investment, the symptom is a sort of organic remainder, as Freud implies by his reference to Darwin's theory that certain innate bodily expressions of emotions are the recurrence of actions that had once been functional, occasioned by an unconscious mental association with the long-ago situation in which the action had been useful. Such associations may refer to the early life of the individual organism, as in this passage, where we see the Darwinian basis for the theory of neurosis as regression that Freud was to develop after the *Studies*:

> Kittens, puppies, young pigs and probably many other animals alternately press their fore-feet against the mammary glands of their mothers, to excite a freer secretion of milk, or to make it flow. Now it is very common with young cats, and not at all rare with old cats . . . when comfortably lying on a warm shawl or other soft substance, to pound it quietly and alternately with their fore-feet; their toes being spread out and claws slightly protruded, precisely as when sucking their mother. (Darwin, *Expression*, 52)

More typically, however, Darwin theorizes expressions of emotion as remainders of functional behaviours not from an individual's history, but from that of a species:

> The involuntary bristling of the hair . . . in the case of animals . . . serves, together with certain voluntary movements, to make them appear terrible to their enemies; and as the same involuntary and voluntary actions are performed by animals nearly related to man, we are led to believe that man has retained through inheritance a relic of them, now become useless. It is certainly a remarkable fact, that the minute unstriped muscles, by which the hairs thinly scattered over man's almost naked body are erected, should have been preserved to the present day; and that they should still contract under the same emotions, namely, terror and rage, which cause the hairs to stand on end in the lower members of the Order to which man belongs. (Darwin, *Expression*, 309)

By citing Darwin on the general theory of emotional expression in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud implies that the embodiment of memory in the hysterical symptom is only a special case of a process to be found at work in all kinds of affect. He also implicitly accepts Darwin's conflation of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

the retention of functional acts as habits in individual organisms with their supposed transformation into instincts transmitted by inheritance between the generations of a species. These implications are drawn out only in Freud's later work, in a treatment of affect in the *Introductory Lectures* of 1917 that is subsequently elaborated in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* of 1926. I quote here from the *Introductory Lectures*:

> An affect includes in the first place particular motor innervations or discharges and secondly certain feelings. . . . The core which holds the combination we have described together is the repetition of some particular significant experience. This experience could only be a very early impression of a very general nature, placed in the prehistory not of the individual but of the species. To make myself more intelligible – an affective state would be constructed in the same way as a hysterical attack and, like it, would be the precipitate of a reminiscence. A hysterical attack may thus be likened to a freshly constructed individual affect, and normal affect to the expression of a general hysteria which has become a heritage. (16:395–6)

As a generalized hysteria, then, affect is in itself pathological. Freud terms the affective state, like the hysterical symptom, "the precipitate of a reminiscence," using a figure that presents the embodied feeling as the trace or remainder of a memory. As in Darwin, the memory that survives only as an embodied trace is ultimately theorized as an inheritance whose origin is located not in the past of the individual, but in that of the species. The figure we began with of the foreign body within the body turns out to characterize not only the hysterical individual, but also the human species as a whole in relation to its prehistory.

***

The idea that the species body is by inheritance partly foreign to itself is indeed quintessentially Darwinian. Though current evolutionary science is principally concerned with natural selection as it promotes adaptation,[12] as Gillian Beer writes, in Darwin and Freud "maladaptation is part of the nature of both mental and physical world."[13] The data that most preoccupied Darwin concerned structures either imperfectly adapted or wholly useless, and *The Origin of Species* explains the reason for this preoccupation on many occasions. To demonstrate the shared ancestry of different creatures "we choose those characters which . . . are the least likely to have been modified in relation to the conditions of life to which the species has been recently exposed. Rudimentary structures on this view are as good as, or even sometimes better than, other parts of the organization" (408). For the purpose of classifying an organism, the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

most valuable traits are those that have not been adapted to its environment:

> Analogical or adaptive character[s], although of the utmost importance to the welfare of the being, are almost valueless to the systematist. For animals, belonging to two most distinct lines of descent, may readily become adapted to similar conditions, and thus assume a close actual resemblance; but such resemblances will not reveal – will rather tend to conceal their blood-relationship to their proper lines of descent. (410)

In the philological metaphor that runs throughout the *Origin*, "rudimentary organs may be compared with the letters in a word, still retained in the spelling, but become useless in the pronunciation, but which serve as a clue in seeking for its derivation" (432). The trait that renders the organism's past history legible is thus the one that has *not* been modified to its conditions of life, whose uselessness leads Darwin to figure it as an unvoiced letter.

I have already noted Darwin's belief that animals' inherited traits could be modified by habit as well as by natural selection. In accepting this idea, however, he consistently distinguished his position from that of Lamarck, for whom the inheritance of acquired traits was an indispensable mechanism of evolution. Darwin treats the question in the *Origin*'s chapter on instincts, which he opens by premising that though it "does sometimes happen" that habitual actions are inherited, "it would be the most serious error to suppose that the greater number of instincts have been acquired" in this way (235). The transformation of habits into instincts is nonetheless a recurring topic in Darwin's writing. It becomes more prominent in the works after the *Origin* in which he treats human evolution, and, as we have seen, he even revised his last edition of the *Origin* itself to give it greater emphasis. Though the case is never made explicit, Darwin characteristically represents instincts acquired from habits as useless to the species that bears them, and sometimes as actually maladaptive.[14] He differs from Lamarck, then, not only in believing that instincts can arise from the natural selection of advantageous traits, but also in his view that those instincts which are acquired from habits tend not to be advantageous. In *The Descent of Man*, when a habit is transformed into an instinct and becomes hereditary, it is degraded: "Some intelligent actions, after being performed during several generations, become converted into instincts and are inherited, as when birds on oceanic islands learn to avoid man. These actions may then be said to be degraded in character, for they

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

are no longer performed through reason or from experience" (88). Many other examples also appear in the *Descent*:

> In many instances . . . it is probable that instincts are persistently followed from the mere force of inheritance, without the stimulus of either pleasure or pain. A young pointer, when it first scents game, apparently cannot help pointing. A squirrel in a cage who pats the nuts which it cannot eat, as if to bury them in the ground, can hardly be thought to act thus, either from pleasure or pain. (128)

Such automatic behaviours govern large areas of human and animal behaviour; they organize, for instance, the entire process of sexual selection, Darwin's principal topic in the *Descent*, to be treated at more length later in this chapter:

> With the great majority of animals . . . the taste for the beautiful is confined, as far as we can judge, to the attractions of the opposite sex. . . . If female birds had been incapable of appreciating the beautiful colours, the ornaments, and voices of their male partners, all the labour and anxiety exhibited by the latter in displaying their charms before the females would have been thrown away; and this it is impossible to admit. Why certain bright colours should excite pleasure cannot, I presume, be explained, any more than why certain flavours and scents are agreeable; but habit has certainly something to do with the result, for that which is at first unpleasant to our senses, ultimately, becomes pleasant, and habits are inherited. (115)

The term "habit" thus designates for Darwin traits supplemental to the theory of natural selection, which he represents either as irrational automatism or as pure aestheticism.

Precisely *because* they have not been shaped by natural selection, however, inherited habits belong to the class of residual traits that, in Darwin's theory, are of the greatest value for categorization. This is the fundamental premise of Darwin's argument in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, originally planned as part of *The Descent of Man.* Here Darwin presents acquired habit as one of the three principles that account for the involuntary expressions and gestures used by human beings and other animals under the influence of various emotions and sensations. His overarching argument in this work is that these expressions and gestures are evidence of inherited relationships among the species in which they appear. One important strand of this argument relies on the hypothesis that functional behaviours can become hereditary as habits; Darwin frequently explains expressions that are useless to the organisms they affect by showing their resemblance to functional behaviours in related species. We have seen

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

an example of this argument in his discussion of the involuntary bristling of hair as a response to terror. Though such acquired habits make up the largest number of the behaviours studied in *The Expression of the Emotions*, some of the expressions it treats arise in other ways. The most notable instance occupies the last substantive chapter on the expressions characteristic of shame and self-attention, especially blushing. Here Darwin's belief in the special value for categorization of useless and non-adaptive traits is especially clear; he presents the blush as the only involuntary human expression that has no equivalent in other animals. His argument thus makes it a unique trait marking the human being as such, and uses evidence of blushing in all of what he terms "the so-called races" to argue for humankind's shared species identity, in opposition to polygenetic racial science, which held that the human races constituted distinct species.

The counterintuitive nature of Darwin's account of emotional expression emerges in a valuable modern critical edition by the psychologist Paul Ekman. In his commentary, Ekman repeatedly expresses surprise at Darwin's refusal to consider the expression of emotion as a form of communication, which would presumably confer an evolutionary advantage on the species that developed it (Darwin, *Expression*, xxxiii, 53, 63). As we have seen, though, for Darwin, a species' identity is recognized not by the advantageous characteristics it has acquired, but by the useless ones it has retained. And it is in this light that Darwin considers the involuntary gestures and expressions that accompany human feelings. The examples he discusses are never actually communicative; Darwin is rather inclined to argue that the expression of emotion actually inhibits communication, as in the anecdote he relates of an "extremely shy man" whose embarrassment before an audience rendered him mute.[15]

Rather than treating human expressions of emotion as communications bearing a specific message to a specified addressee, Darwin views them as independent of context, stereotyped, and automatic. They appear de-functioned in his work, in the same way as some of the animal behaviour we have discussed. This de-functioning is in some cases, like that of the bristling hair that expresses terror, the result of the species' evolution. In many others, though, it is an artifact of Darwin's method. To establish the physiological rather than cultural basis of human expressions, Darwin inquired by means of questionnaires whether particular gestures and behaviours were universally legible as expressions of specified emotions. This method required that any expression under study be reproducible; to meet this requirement, Darwin became a pioneer in the use of photographs for scientific research.[16] In producing and selecting the photographs he

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

circulated, some of which he also used to illustrate his book, Darwin made no distinction between expressions of actual emotions and simulated expressions. In the most striking of these images, obtained from Guillaume B. Duchenne de Boulogne's *Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* (1862), the expressions Darwin asked his subjects to recognize were produced in medical patients by the application of electricity to the muscles of the face (Figures 5–7). In others, they were performed for the camera by actors (Figure 8). The mechanisms that produce human expressions as an object of study thus also estrange them and render arbitrary their relations with the emotions they putatively express. Who could say, after all, what were the actual emotions of the "old, toothless man" of "inoffensive character and … restricted intelligence," as Duchenne described him (Darwin, *Expression*, 405), undergoing electrocution in the images reproduced here?

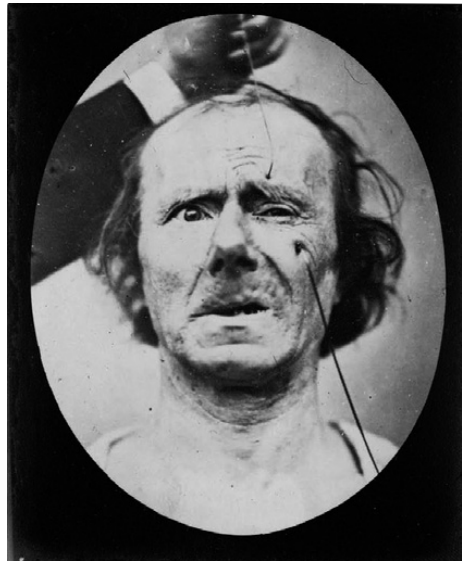


Figure 5 Photograph from Guillaume B. Duchenne de Boulogne, *Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine ou Analyse Électro-Physiologique de l'Expression des Passions*. Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France. Darwin describes this image as one in which "the muscles of half the face are galvanized in order to represent a man beginning to cry, with the eyebrow on the same side rendered oblique, which is characteristic of misery" (Darwin, *Expression,* 151). In the course of his research, he showed it to twenty-three subjects and asked them to identify the emotion being represented; he did not, however, reproduce the photograph in his book.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007



Figure 6 Photograph from Guillaume B. Duchenne de Boulogne, *Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine ou Analyse Électro-Physiologique de l'Expression des Passions*. Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France

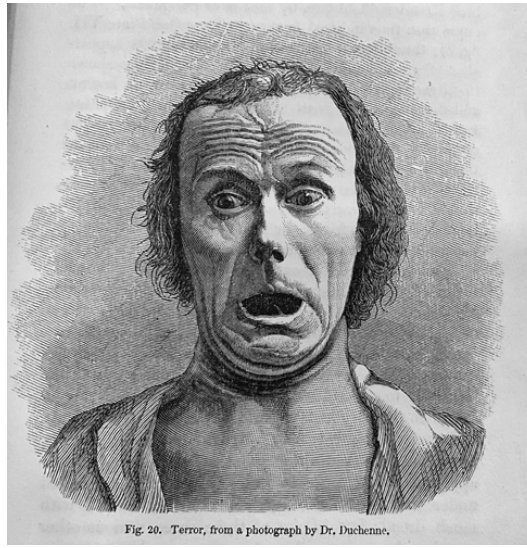


Figure 7 "Terror, from a photograph by Dr. Duchenne," engraving from Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Courtesy D. B. Weldon Library, Western University. This engraving in Darwin's work omits the electrodes that appear in the original photograph.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

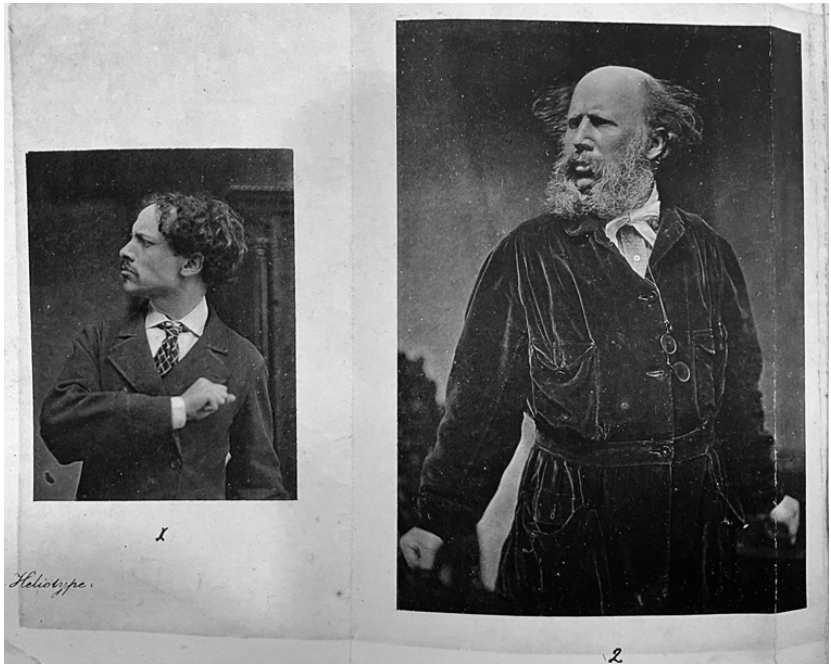


Figure 8 "Men simulating indignation," photograph from Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Courtesy D. B. Weldon Library, Western University

The mechanisms that enable Darwin's study, moreover, include not only photographic and electrical technology, but also the social institutions of painting, medicine, and imperial administration. To gather evidence of expressive behaviour that he was unable to obtain for himself, Darwin consulted other male professionals, such as doctors and artists, and circulated a questionnaire to missionaries and colonial functionaries. The chapter on blushing, in particular, provides rich examples of somatic expressions implanted by the very institutions used to record them. Here, Darwin's tendency to study expressive behaviour as automatism takes a less dramatic form than in the earlier chapters, where he used photographs of subjects undergoing galvanism for his examples. Now it manifests itself in a rigorous and reductive formalism that renders immaterial any substantive content the blush might be thought to communicate. Darwin's thesis on blushing is that a blush expresses "the thought that others are thinking about us" (335; for other versions of this formulation with slightly different phrasing, see 324, 333,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

and 343); that is to say that it expresses any thought whatsoever that iterates or refers to someone else's thought about the thinker. A blush expresses a thought about a thought about us; the citational structure of this claim opens the possibility of an indefinite series of iterations, in which we would blush at the thought that someone else is thinking about our thought about their thought . . . and so forth. Darwin does not discuss this possibility, which I will nonetheless shortly argue haunts his argument; nor does he follow his sources in discussing how blushing can be communicated mimetically from one person to another in the manner of hysterical symptoms.[17]

Darwin's lack of interest in the cognitive significance of blushing, or in the content of the thoughts it expresses, is of a piece with his reading of the blush as the token of a general human species identity. "Blushing," his chapter begins, "is the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions. Monkeys redden from passion, but it would require an overwhelming amount of evidence to make us believe that an animal could blush" (*Expression*, 310). Alone among the expressions treated in Darwin's book, blushing distinguishes human beings from other animals. It is also a trait whose uniform occurrence among human beings regardless of race or sex Darwin adduces to mount an argument against the racist science of the 1860s.

Darwin's stress on the universality of blushing as a form of expression, however, is in one respect at odds with the cases of blushing he actually describes. These take place in settings where differences of sex and race, far from vanishing, are obtrusively in evidence. There is something embarrassing – even blush-inducing – about the scenes Darwin represents that is not accounted for by the argument in whose service they appear.

Three examples will show what I mean. In investigating how far blushing extends down the body and in demonstrating that it is hereditary, Darwin has recourse to information gathered from a friend who as a doctor "necessarily has frequent opportunities for observation":

> Even peculiarities in blushing seem to be inherited. Sir James Paget, whilst examining the spine of a girl, was struck at her singular manner of blushing; a big splash of red appeared first on one cheek, and then other splashes, various[ly] scattered over the face and neck. He subsequently asked the mother whether her daughter always blushed in this peculiar manner; and was answered, "Yes, she takes after me." Sir J. Paget then perceived that by asking this question he had caused the mother to blush; and she exhibited the same peculiarity as her daughter. (Darwin, *Expression*, 312)

From the gendering of the relation between the medical gaze and its object in this passage, it is only a short step to the orientalist fantasy of the light-skinned

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

slave whose capacity to blush enhances her price in the seraglio, which Darwin duly cites a few pages later from Dr. Thomas Burgess, his predecessor in the study of the blush, and Mary Wortley Montagu (335). A more disturbing racial structuring of the relation between the researcher's gaze and the blush appears in passages where Darwin writes about blushing in non-whites:

> The Polynesians blush freely. The Rev. Mr Stack has seen hundreds of instances with the New Zealanders. The following case is worth giving, as it relates to an old man who was unusually dark and partly tattooed. After having let his land to an Englishman for a small yearly rental, a strong passion seized him to buy a gig, which had lately become the fashion with the Maoris. He consequently wished to draw all the rent for four years from his tenant, and consulted Mr Stack whether he could do so. The man was old, clumsy, poor, and ragged, and the idea of his driving himself about in a carriage for display amused Mr Stack so much that he could not help bursting out into a laugh; and then "the old man blushed up to the roots of his hair." (Darwin, *Expression*, 316)

This anecdote represents the blush as a token that identifies the humanity of its bearer. In so doing, however, it also attaches the blush to a wound – literally so in a final example, again cited by Darwin from Burgess: "Cicatrices of the skin remain for a long time white in the negro, and Dr. Burgess, who had frequent opportunities of observing a scar of this kind on the face of a negress, distinctly saw that it 'invariably became red whenever she was abruptly spoken to or charged with any trivial offense'" (318). The blush provoked in this woman by the figure who observes her is offered as a token of their shared humanity.[18] It appears through a scar, though, and is itself the mute expression of racial and sexual subjugation. When affect is made a token, it becomes traumatic, being implanted, as Freud saw it, as a foreign body in its bearer.

***

Reading and writing are bodily acts; writing about the body is thus prone to a special kind of self-reflexivity.[19] As we have seen, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* was a trailblazing work in its use of photography for scientific purposes, and its verbal representations, like those I have already discussed, characteristically follow the logic of the photograph by making bodies available to sight from the point of view of an apparatus that itself remains unseen. On occasion Darwin breaks this convention and asks his readers to test his claims on their own bodies, as in this passage where the reader's eye itself becomes an object of attention: "Any one who will

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

gradually contract the muscles round the eyes, will feel, as he increases the force, that his upper lip and the wings of his nose (which are partly acted on by one of the same muscles) are almost always a little drawn up" (Darwin, *Expression*, 150). Nonetheless, Darwin's usual practice is to take no account of what might be his reader's somatic response to his writing, though – as I have said – I think we blush to read the chapter on blushing, and I doubt if anyone has ever read the sections of *The Origin of Species* on the homologous structure of arms, wings, and flippers without a heightened attention to their own bone structure. Still less does Darwin refer to his own embodiment or to that of his collaborators. The omission is particularly striking in the chapter on blushing, given the recursive structure that he argues causes the blush. If blushes arise from the "thought that someone else is thinking of us," we would expect them not only in the blushing subjects the chapter represents, but also in the investigators who prompt and report their blushes. Nonetheless, in spite of his concern with "self-attention," Darwin shows us no blushing scientists, doctors, or painters.

Even so, the chapter on blushing is exemplary among Darwin's writings for the way it makes legible in spite of itself what Lacan would call the desire of the analyst. Though at one remove, as thoughts of thoughts, the blushes it describes bear witness to the emotions of the figures who record them: to the desire of the painter as he views his model; surely to scopophilia, not to say sadism, in the colonial administrators' and missionaries' inspection of their Polynesian and African subjects' skins; to class *ressentiment* in the doctor who relates how one of his patients, a young duke, blushed on giving him his fee. In these episodes and elsewhere in the chapter, the institutional and affective context in which Darwin's evidence was gathered becomes part of that evidence. The scientific frame is incorporated by its own object of study.

A relation of this kind between the object of study and the institutional and technical means by which it is observed and represented characterizes the whole of *The Expression of the Emotions*, as I have already implied. Though it is a larger claim than I can properly defend here, I think it could be shown that involutions of Darwin's methods of observation and representation into his objects of study throughout his work account for some recurrent problems in its interpretation, such as the significance of personification in the representation of natural selection and the relation between the specific intellectual-historical context in which Darwinian theory originated and the universal claims it makes.[20] I will close with only one further example, in which, as in *The Expression of the Emotions*, Darwin links an anti-racist argument about human species identity to an analysis of habits that, as he believes, have by repetition become hereditary.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

In the much longer work of which the *Expression* was an offshoot, *The Descent of Man*, Darwin announces at the outset that he will have three topics, of which the first two, human descent from earlier forms of life and the manner of human development, are implied by the main title. The third topic, "the value of the differences between the so-called races of man" (18), however, is not so implied. Of the book that follows, moreover, less than a third is actually spent on human origins and development. Far more space is devoted to Darwin's theory of sexual selection, first as it operates in non-human animals and, in the book's last section, in relation to human beings. Only with the publication of Adrian Desmond and James Moore's *Darwin's Sacred Cause* (2009) did it become apparent how close was the link between Darwin's development of the theory of sexual selection and his objection to scientific racism. Sexual selection, Desmond and Moore show, provided Darwin with a means to account for racial differences without linking them to function or representing them as the result of a useful adaptation.[21] Though Desmond and Moore do not discuss the *Expression* at any length, there too we see the connection between Darwin's belief in classification on the basis of useless modifications and his racial politics. In the *Descent*, he argues that sexual selection has been the "most efficient" cause of "the differences in external appearance between the races of man" (675); the entire seeming digression on sexual selection thus has race as its implicit topic.[22] The unifying topic of this apparently loosely structured work is in fact Darwin's rejection both of polygenetic theories of race and of racialist theories of human evolution that emerged in the 1860s in work by Herbert Spencer and even by natural selection's co-discoverer Alfred Wallace.[23]

The distinction between natural and sexual selection – that is, the idea that non-adaptive modifications from the point of view of survival can be retained for other reasons – is by no means generally accepted among evolutionary theorists in our own day.[24] Some of Darwin's data are clearly weakened by historically specific assumptions about sex and gender that he brought to his research, and some can be explained in other ways. Nonetheless, his development of a theory of sexuality in which it is divorced from function is one of the now-unrecognized points of affinity between Darwin's work and Freud's. His insistence on the point is of a piece with the general refusal to make natural selection a totalizing theory that informs all of his work. In the *Origin*, the idea that every organism and structure is perfectly adapted to its function is rejected as theological; the world Darwin describes is one where adapted structures coexist with residual and rudimentary ones, and which is only rendered intelligible by the differences between them.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

Darwin briefly introduced the distinction between natural and sexual selection in the first chapter of the *Origin* (136–8); only, however, with the publication of the *Descent* twelve years later did he treat the latter in an extended discussion. He remained committed throughout his work to the distinction between the two: natural selection operates by favouring individuals fitted to succeed in the struggle for survival; sexual selection, however, "depends on the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species solely in respect of reproduction" (Darwin, *Descent*, 243). Sexual selection as Darwin theorizes it can operate in innumerable ways, for instance by modifying organisms' powers of locomotion or prehension, or their ability to defend themselves against competition. In many cases such as these, as he notes, it is impossible to distinguish between the effects of sexual and natural selection (245). Nonetheless, Darwin always insisted that the two forms of selection tend to effect modifications of quite different and potentially conflicting kinds:

> There are many . . . structures and instincts which must have developed through sexual selection – such as the weapons of offense and the means of defence of the males for fighting with and driving away their rivals – their courage and pugnacity – their various ornaments – their contrivances for producing vocal or instrumental music – and their glands for emitting odours, most of the latter structures serving only to excite the female. It is clear that these characters are the result of sexual and not of ordinary selection, since unarmed, unornamented, or unattractive males would succeed equally well in the battle for life and in leaving numerous progeny, but for the presence of better endowed males. We may infer that this would be the case, because the females, which are unarmed and unornamented, are able to survive and procreate their kind. (Darwin, *Descent*, 245)

Sexually selected characteristics thus need confer no advantage in the struggle for survival; in some cases, indeed, they can actually be disadvantageous – the well-known examples from the *Descent* are the colouring of birds, particularly when displayed in elaborate plumage such as that of the peacock and the argus pheasant, and the development of horns in the stag, which in some cases has been carried "to an extreme which, as far as the general conditions of life are concerned, must be slightly injurious" (Darwin, *Descent*, 262).

Of all the effects of sexual selection, Darwin claims that the most powerful are those that confer an advantage in courtship. And it is to modifications of this sort that he attributes the differentiated physical appearance of the human races. Whereas with most non-human animals, the selection of mates belongs to the female, Darwin believes that in humans, it has generally

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

been the privilege of men. The historical development of human appearance is thus driven by the preservation of female traits that prove attractive to men. This development, Darwin argues, has unfolded differently in different human populations with differing ideals of beauty:

> It is certainly not true that there is in the mind of man any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body. It is, however, possible that certain tastes may in the course of time become inherited, though there is no evidence in favour of this belief; and if so, each race would possess its own innate ideal standard of beauty. . . . The men of each race prefer what they are accustomed to; they cannot endure any great change; but they like variety, and admire each characteristic carried to a moderate extreme. Men accustomed to a nearly oval face, to straight and regular features, and to bright colours, admire, as we Europeans know, these points when strongly developed. On the other hand, men accustomed to a broad face, with high cheek-bones, a depressed nose, and a black skin, admire these peculiarities too when strongly marked. (Darwin, *Descent*, 652)

The process of racial differentiation for Darwin thus takes the form of a feedback loop, where an arbitrary difference in appearance between two populations shapes their different ideals of beauty, which in turn reinforces the original difference by sexual selection.[25] Separate populations,

> exposed to slightly different conditions and habits of life, would sooner or later come to differ in some small degree. As soon as this occurred, each isolated tribe would form for itself a slightly different standard of beauty; and then unconscious selection would come into action through the more powerful and leading men preferring certain woman to others. Thus the differences between the tribes, at first very slight, would gradually and inevitably be more or less increased. (Darwin, *Descent*, 665)

Darwin's argument in these chapters presents some of the same difficulties as that of *The Expression of the Emotions*. Here again we find him treating as non-adaptive traits that might be – and subsequently have been – explained by means of natural selection. Why not assume that sexual selection will ultimately promote adaptation as individuals with the power of selection choose partners who either themselves possess useful traits or appear likely to transmit such traits to their offspring? I have already noted a political reason for Darwin's choice, but the question nonetheless remains. Here, as in the *Expression*, we find recourse to the theory that habitual actions or preferences can be transformed – or degraded – into instincts and become heritable, in that case as emotional expressions, and in this as a predisposition toward a particular ideal of beauty.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

Darwin's claim in *The Expression of the Emotions* that the behaviours he describes are the remainders of long-ago voluntary acts bespeaks, I think, his awareness that they embody a problem of agency. My claim is that he misunderstands this problem by framing it historically; the agency of his subjects in the book is not compromised by their heredity but by the contexts in which they are studied and represented. The same holds, moreover, though in a somewhat different and broader sense, for the subject of sexual selection. In representing sexual selection's way of acting, Darwin begins, as he had in the case of natural selection, with an analogy to selection under domestication, and in particular to what he termed unconscious selection. As we saw in Chapter 4, this is the historical process by which species under cultivation will change over time, with separate populations diverging from one another, owing to the uncounted individual selections made by their cultivators. The analogy has a double force: it at once illustrates the operation of modification by selection over many generations and shows how such modification can take place unobserved. Of the actors in unconscious selection, Marx might say, they do not know what they are doing, but yet they are doing it. Here is Darwin from the first chapter of the *Origin*: "A large amount of change in our cultivated plants . . . slowly and unconsciously accumulated, explains, as I believe, the well-known fact, that in a vast number of cases we cannot recognize, and therefore do not know, the wild parent-stocks of the plants which have been longest cultivated in our farms and household gardens" (95). If we cannot recognize our own work, Darwin wants us to see, how much more difficult will it be to recognize the impersonal operation of natural selection?

The agency of human beings in Darwin's discussion of unconscious selection thus operates as a personification, a heuristic device that helps us to envision the operation of natural selection. Natural selection itself, though, does not serve the interest of any agent other than the species it works on; to understand natural selection correctly thus entails passing through this personification, retaining it only as a representation that has been superseded by the argument that follows.

Nonetheless, the personification of nature and natural selection of course never entirely disappears from the *Origin*. Moreover, the figure is reintroduced and in a certain sense loses its figural quality in *The Descent of Man*. As George Levine puts it, "intention, that central motif of natural theology, went out with the *Origin*, only to return with the *Descent*."[26] Here the theory of sexual selection is also explained with reference to what Darwin continues to call unconscious selection, but in this case, we cannot

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

exactly speak of a personification, but only of an analogy between what emerge as two actual forms of unconscious agency:

> When a foreign breed of our domestic animals is introduced into a new country, or when a native breed is long and carefully attended to, either for use or ornament, it is found after several generations to have undergone a greater or lesser amount of change. . . . This follows from unconscious selection . . . without any wish or expectation of such a result on the part of the breeder. So again, if during many years two careful breeders rear animals of the same family, and do not compare them together or with a common standard, the animals are found to have become, to the surprise of their owners, slightly different. Each breeder has impressed . . . the character of his own mind – his own taste and judgment – on his animals. What reason, then, can be assigned why similar results should not follow from the long-continued selection of the most admired women by those men of each tribe who were able to rear the greatest number of children? This would be unconscious selection, for an effect would be produced, independently of any wish or expectation on the part of the men who preferred certain women to others. (Darwin, *Descent*, 664)

In the subject of sexual selection, then, an explanatory trope from the *Origin* takes on substance and enters evolutionary theory as a real agent. Here is another case of the incorporation of the theory's discursive frame by its object. The difference between the breeder or cultivator who is responsible for the unconscious selection of domesticated species and the subject of sexual selection, moreover, is that the species cultivated by the latter is his own; as Desmond and Moore write, sexual selection makes animals into "self-breeders."[27]

Darwin's theory of sexual selection thus enters his work as the embodiment of his own rhetorical figure and as evidence of the recursive structure of his discourse.[28] In his theory, sexual desire is attached to arbitrarily chosen and useless variations; leaving aside such incidental moments of self-revelation as his concern for the reproductive success of the "unarmed, unornamented, or unattractive male" (Darwin, *Descent*, 245), the theory as a whole incorporates into Darwin's work an image of the taxonomical drive that produced it. Recall Darwin's rigorous distinction in the *Origin* between useful structures that have been perfected by natural selection and the useless or rudimentary parts, compared to unvoiced letters, which are most useful to the taxonomist. Natural selection, in short, cares nothing for taxonomy; scientists who study taxonomy and the kinship relations among organic beings set themselves in opposition to it and seek to discover what it tends to conceal. This is why the structures most useful to the taxonomist are those

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

which natural selection has least affected. Given this antithesis between natural selection and the method by which it is studied – between what we might call the interest of natural selection and that of the scientist – there is a deep dialectical irony to the emergence in Darwin's work of sex as another mode of selection that is said to operate *principally* on useless traits and that seems under the sign of racial difference to produce structures *designed* to attract the taxonomist.[29]

Current debates notwithstanding, for Darwin the crucial problem posed by natural selection was not that it left no room for God, but that it left no room for what he termed "man." In the *Origin*, he came to the conclusion that the term "species" itself was necessarily arbitrary; George Levine notes the irony that in a work entitled *The Origin of Species*, "species … have no real existence."[30] Darwin saw that after his work, species could only be viewed as "artificial combinations made for convenience. This may not be a cheering prospect," he wrote, but by it "we shall at least be freed from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of the term" (Darwin, *Origin*, 456). Once the concept of species as such no longer had a metaphysical basis, neither did the human as a particular instance of speciation.[31] And yet long after he had abandoned the Christian belief in the universal brotherhood of human beings created in God's image, Darwin remained committed to the concept of species, not least as providing a ground for anti-racism.[32]

In Darwin's work, species identity in general, and human identity in particular, are conferred by the arbitrarily selected, residual, and otherwise purposeless traits that define an organism's relations with members of other species and with members of its own. In *The Descent of Man* and *The Expression of the Emotions*, this logic determines Darwin's focus on sexual selection, aesthetic preference, and affect as the symptoms of being human. These works were the source of Freud's early understanding of the symptom, which thus reflects the emergence of a biological species from the ruins of a metaphysical idea of "man."[33] Indeed, Freud's symptom was more than a reflection. Neither his work nor Darwin's was only an event in intellectual history. Because they produce symptoms and affects in their own right they also belong to the history of the body. The same will prove true of the anthropological and medical writing to be discussed in Part III. The result is a recurrence of problems of reference like those we have studied in Darwin, where de-functioned or symptomatic habits and traits are studied as inherited remainders of the evolutionary process, but are also recognizable as implanted and invested with meaning by the very apparatus used to study them.[34] From this standpoint, Darwin may be less important as an influence on Freud than as the figure who made our species body foreign to itself.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 04:44:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009409940.007