Darwin and Lincoln

their legacy of human dignity*

Felton Earls

Harvard Medical School and School of Public Health
E-mail: felton_earls@hms.harvard.edu.


ABSTRACT  The legacy of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln is to champion the dignity inherent in every human being. The moment of the bicentennial of their births in 1809 provides an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on ways they have shaped our understanding and commitment to human rights. The naturalist and the constitutional lawyer, so different in circumstance and discipline, were morally allied in the mission to eradicate slavery. The profound lessons to be extracted from the lives of these two icons bind us to the agonizing reality that nearly 150 years after Gettysburg and the publication of the Descent of Man and Selection By Means of Sex, there remains much work to do toward advancing the security, respect, and equality of our species. This article describes how Darwin and Lincoln’s inspiring legacies guided the author’s personal choices as a scientist and activist. The essay concludes with a set of questions and challenges that confront us, foremost among which is the need to balance actions in response to the violation of negative rights by actions in the pursuit of positive rights.

It is with a sense of intellectual excitement that this year we celebrate the bicentennial of two extraordinary men who just happened to be born on the same day, February 12, 1809. Charles Darwin was born into a learned and landed family in Shropshire, England. Quite a different social and economic setting prevailed in Abraham Lincoln’s home in Kentucky. His father was a poor and uneducated farmer. Rather than declare this shared birthday a meaningless instance of chance, I prefer what some historians
assert when confronted with such probabilities—that this rare occurrence is an intriguing coincidence.

Despite the differences in origins of Darwin and Lincoln, there were captivating similarities in their life courses. Both lost their mothers at an early age, both were chastised by harsh fathers who did not regard them as very intelligent or courageous, and each lost his favorite child before it reached the age of 12. Both were dedicated readers and loners. They hated violence and were described as tender hearted. And they are both considered good, time-honored writers.

But my essay will not dwell on their biographies. Both have attracted enormous admiration—as well as mistrust. In the years since their most noted accomplishments, the world has granted them an eminence of the highest order. They have become icons: graceful and humble in manner in our recollections of them.

The legacies of Darwin and Lincoln in the domain of human equality have forced us to think about time in different ways. Darwin’s great insight was to recognize that, against the backdrop of geological time, primates, and particularly humans, have evolved recently as compared to the age of our planet measured in billions of years. The earliest unequivocal primates are dated from 50 million years. As a species *Homo sapiens* is a newcomer, having evolved over the past 500,000 years. The extraordinary adaptability of *Homo sapiens* is a product of the dramatic increase in the size and complexity of the human brain. This rapid biological evolution resulted in remarkable expansion of brain size in a relatively short period. It is worth emphasizing that this “punctuated equilibrium,” as it is often called, has not resulted in any appreciable change in brain size since those archaic forms of *Homo sapiens* appeared.

Lincoln’s achievements, as the 16 President of the United States, put time horizons on the struggle for equality in the United States, which is a mere 233 years old. From the Declaration of Independence to the recent election of Barack Obama as the 44th President, we have been wrestling with the meaning of “race” and its relationship to rights, equality, and justice in the context of a constitutional democracy.

My remarks will dwell on the significance of the ideas of Darwin and Lincoln in forging the modern interpretation of human rights. Their ideas buttress the foundation of our academies—particularly the beliefs that scientists are free to pursue knowledge, no matter how different from or risky to the prevailing
wisdom, and that one of the responsibilities of modern governments is to protect this right to rationality and critical inquiry. Although not so explicitly acknowledged in the mission statement of the International Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies, our Network is to promote truth and justice for all peoples of the world.

I will address these principles through three converging lines of evidence:

1. To review the context in which these two men worked and to view their achievements through the prism of the historical period in which they lived;

2. To relate how my own story as a scientist, doctor, and activist has been informed and guided by them; and

3. To imagine, along with you, what noble causes and courageous actions the Darwins and Lincolns born on this day, May 24, 2009, might assume as they face the moral challenges of the next 100 years.

Charles Darwin

Although he is best known for his skilled observations as a naturalist, Darwin was also concerned about human rights as he traversed the world on the *Beagle* and reflected on the significance of his scientific insights. As a fervent abolitionist, he was pleased that England had emancipated slaves in the 1830s—without a war. With slavery unsettled in the United States and the clouds of war gathering, his attention was drawn to the divisive politics that characterized the American discourse on slavery.

Authors Adrian Desmond and James Moore (2009) have published a captivating biography of Darwin, in which they present a detailed and authoritative portraiture of him as an abolitionist. Darwin’s grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was bitterly opposed to slavery as were the Wedgewoods on his wife’s side of the family. In his notebooks written while aboard the *Beagle*, Darwin recorded his disgust in clear and forceful language on witnessing the brutal treatment of man by man in Brazil and again in Mauritius. Desmond and Moore claim that a prime motivation for his intellectual endeavor as a naturalist was to gather evidence that would lay a rational foundation for the equality of all humans. They interpret and
synthesize a very compelling story to back up their claim.

Without overplaying the significance of this claim of Darwin’s concern for human equality and dignity as the basis for his scientific endeavors, it is true that he was well aware of conditions and events in the United States in the decade leading up to the Civil War. He carried on a frequent and detailed correspondence with Asa Gray, a professor of botany at Harvard with whom he shared both scientific and political interests. His correspondence with Gray was critical of Lincoln’s early stance towards the issue of slavery. He considered Lincoln too cautious for focusing more on the issue of preserving the nation than on freeing the slaves. He also expressed scientific and moral rejection of the theories of another Harvard biologist of that period, Louis Agassiz. Agassiz amassed what he considered to be evidence proving the physical difference between white Europeans and black Africans. His primary goal was to prove the superiority of the white race. In an essay in the widely circulated *Types of Mankind* (1855), Agassiz asserted that blacks and whites represented distinct species that had been separately “created.” He explicitly formulated this theory as a justification for the lack of equal recognition of black peoples.

As biologists interested in evolution of human species, Darwin and Gray were aware that their scientific judgments had implications for asserting a political stance. By promoting the idea that the races were separate, hierarchically arranged entities, a claim that justified the slave-owning states’ position, Agassiz and his confederates were using scientific stature to support the opposing political position. By contrast, in the *Descent of Man and Selection by Means of Sex* (1871), Darwin reasoned that the races of *Homo sapiens* were not the product of natural selection, but the result of sexual selection. In seeing the mixed races in South America, he realized that these people displayed no reduction in fertility nor were their mental capacities inferior. He interpreted his observations as supporting the theory of a common progenitor and of racial differences as a relatively recent event based on sexual selection as the determining mechanism. Darwin took strong exception to the idea that the mental faculties of modern man were subject to natural selection and that this justified unequal treatment based on superficial features of physiognomy. The evidence compiled and carefully weighed in the *Descent* is meant to discard this “polygenist” theory once and for all.
Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln was pursuing the same anti-slavery challenge as Darwin and Gray—not as a biologist, but as a constitutional lawyer. This convergence of science and politics, biology, law, and government on the theme of slavery is phenomenal. Lincoln confronted a reality that slavery had the potential to force a “two-state” solution on the United States. There were several political forces converging in the decade of conflict and argument that led up to the Civil War of 1861. Arguably, the most dramatic and far-reaching of the constitutional events that framed the moral dilemma of these times was the case of Dred Scott, a runaway slave living in a free state who was contesting his right not to be forced to return to the status of a slave in a Southern state. In 1857 the U.S. Supreme Court decided against the claim to have his freedom returned, by infamously ruling that “Negroes are not citizens, but property and have no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” This event set a precedent that interpreted the U.S. Constitution as meaning that we were a nation of two distinct human species: one white, who legally could be owners, and the other black, who legally could be claimed as property.

In the years leading to his election as President, Lincoln was faced with the enormous challenge of the increasing division between the Northern and Southern states on the issue of slavery. Lincoln’s decision to commit Union troops to achieve a military solution to the mounting conflict was far more challenging and costly with regard to life and property than anyone anticipated. The dominant idea in the federal government at that time was that the Northern Union Army could defeat the Southern Confederates in a matter of a few months. It did not take long for this conjecture to be proved wrong. By the end of the Civil War, there had been more than 620,000 deaths. To place this in perspective, more Americans died in this civil conflict than in all wars combined, from the Revolution to the two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. Following the most brutal and deadly of the Civil War battles in Gettysburg (where more than 59,000 men were killed), Lincoln delivered the most memorable and widely quoted of all American political speeches, the legendary Gettysburg Address. In a public statement of little more than 200 words that was just 12 minutes long, he proclaimed that “all men are created equal,”
and that there should be “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” A few months later he released the Emancipation Proclamation, which made freeing the slaves legally and constitutionally binding. The basis for his doing so was the recognition that all races deserved the same respect and equal protection under law. Saving the Union and freeing the slaves became one and the same cause for Lincoln. His Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation are recognized as major intellectual, political, and historical contributions to modern thought and morality (Wills 1992).

As a lawyer, Lincoln was able to convert an intellectual and scientific revolution into a constitutional reality. His legacy was to correct, while at the same time preserve, the Constitution of the United States. Before the Civil War, the United States was referred to in the plural: the United States are. After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, the United States is referred to in the singular, is. Similarly, as Americans, we now refer to ourselves as one people, not as owners and property. This is Lincoln’s legacy.¹ Yet on the heels of the monumental achievement of preserving the Union and emancipating the slaves, a disgruntled and deranged Southerner assassinated Lincoln on April 14, 1865.

One hundred and three years later, Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of the Civil Rights movement that culminated in the constitutional amendments that Lincoln’s armies had fought for, was assassinated. The assassination of King on April 4, 1968, was an event as resounding on the world stage as had been the assassination of Lincoln. Both were made martyrs because of their selfless commitment to the belief that all men are equal and entitled to full citizenship.

A Personal Story

You must pardon me for diverging from the “intriguing coincidence” of Darwin’s and Lincoln’s lives to discuss my own life course as an African American. The motivation for conveying my personal story is, in large part, in response to this moment in history. The world is witnessing the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States with a sense of amazement and great anticipation. It is a moment when we dare feel an ounce of compensation for the assassinations of Lincoln and King and the countless others who have sacrificed their lives in the struggle for racial equality in the United States.
At the time of my birth in Louisiana, the legacy of Lincoln had been undermined by a vicious system of racial segregation (referred to as Jim Crow legislation) that denied the rights of black people in the South. Out of loyalty to Lincoln, my father was a member of the Republican Party (popularly referred to at the time as the Party of Lincoln). Both my grandfather and father were proud of their careers in the U.S. Army, having fought in the First and Second World Wars respectively. But this gained neither our family members nor me any sense of progress towards equality with whites. We were still forced to sit in the back of buses, denied free access to public facilities and, on occasion, targeted with racial epithets. One of the sharpest memories I harbor from my school years is the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in the town of Money, Mississippi. Accused of whistling at a white woman, this 14-year-old boy’s brutal murder was an appalling manifestation of the resentment harbored by Southern whites against the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court to desegregate public schools (Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas). That horrific event involving a child my own age happened within miles of my own home.

By the time I reached college I had become a participant in the nonviolent civil rights struggle led by King. We were attuned to the reality that we were aiming to complete a mandate begun a century earlier by Lincoln. I viewed this political movement as an integral part of my education and became committed to disciplined, nonviolent protest. Political and civil rights were finally granted through two pieces of legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed racial segregation in public facilities, government, and employment, and the National Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed voting practices that had been responsible for the widespread disenfranchisement of African Americans. But the struggle was not over. In a matter of just three years, King was assassinated and the constitutional reforms were reversed. It was as if American history since Lincoln reversed itself.

At the time of King’s death, I had graduated from medical school in the District of Columbia and moved North to begin postdoctoral training in neurobiology in a region of the United States that historically had been beyond the reach of slavery and Jim Crow. The national crisis of King’s assassination resonated deeply in my own life and career plans. What could I do? Life could not just go
on by minimizing the reality that racial hatred was as deep-seated in the wake of King’s murder as it had been at the time of Lincoln’s. In the midst of my beginning to accomplish something in neurobiology, I received notification to report to active military duty. But my commitment to the nonviolent principles of King was enhanced, not diminished, by his violent death. Despite my father’s pride in his own military service, serving in the U.S. Army was not an option for me.

Confronted with crises in both my career goals and my moral guideposts, I sought refuge and clarification in a text that for years had served as a source of inspiration and bold thinking in my reflections on humanity, *The Descent of Man*. I informed the U.S. Army that I was a “Naturalist.” Darwin’s thesis had come to occupy the moral space of an organized religion in my life. The nonviolence inherited through King’s passive resistance was enlightened by my interpretation of the evolution of humans as equal members of a species that depended more on cooperation than violence. Establishing a philosophy that opposed war allowed me to imagine humans as a social species whose evolved capacities of thinking, language, and coordinated action were subject not just to biological evolution, but to a form of historical progress that reflected the capacities we had evolved for moral reflection and sentiments. Reminiscent of Darwin’s thinking, it was important not to consider evolutionary change as progress.

What one might consider social, political, or legal progress is better viewed as a temporary state of affairs that must repeatedly be invented, monitored, and protected in many settings and over time. Our capacities are not in themselves a guarantee that our practices will be directed towards respect for all members of our species.

After several years in U.S. Federal courts, my conscientious objector status was finally recognized and I could begin to plan my life and career in the post-King years. To answer the question of what to do about King’s assassination and the perpetuation of the Vietnam War, I had to leave laboratory science and become more systematically engaged in the lives of families, children, and communities. I relinquished my ambitions in neurobiology to pursue a career path that included clinical and research training in pediatrics, child psychiatry, and public health. To situate myself as directly as possible in contexts where the pursuit of human equality was most relevant was clearly the right thing for a Darwinian to do. That
choice has led to a rewarding career as a medical and social scientist.

To characterize the aim of my research in a few words, it is to discover how to encourage and strengthen human capacities to pursue life in a dignified and cooperative manner. My first efforts were directed to problems of early socialization of children as an approach to studying the origins of behavioral problems. With my wife, Maya Carlson (also a neurobiologist who also made the transition from the laboratory to the community), we have pursued our own version of the “Voyage of the Beagle” by examining the challenges children face, from the orphanages of Romania to the streets of Brazil. We have observed the human condition—not the enslavement of brown and black people as Darwin did, but the degradation of children as a consequence of neglect, abuse, and exploitation. We gathered evidence on how the maltreatment of children reflects the damaging economic, social, and political forces affecting families. These negative examples of early and late social deprivation have made the discovery of positive attributes of communities and children’s capacities all the more compelling. Our research gradually evolved from observing and studying what goes wrong in human socialization and in society to understanding the enormous potential we have for peaceful coexistence and mutual support. The idealized philosophy I adopted when moving out of the neurobiology laboratory 40 years ago has been realized in rigorous research grounded in concepts of human rights and good governance.

A few years ago I was asked by a publisher, who was compiling a collection of stories about one’s heroes, to write about the one person who had provided me with the most inspiration (My Hero Project 2005). I considered several persons, among them King, Lincoln, Mandela, and Eleanor Roosevelt. But it was an easy decision to make.

Why Darwin? It was the sense of social and political purpose that animated his pursuit of science. His sense of purpose did not compromise his objectivity. Darwin’s use of counterfactual reasoning is an elegant way of thinking in an experimental vein when the phenomena of interest cannot be formally manipulated. His powers of observation and documentation are legend. His strident independence gained my greatest respect. To think of ourselves as a species, not created according to a preestablished plan, but that evolved and adapted to particular circumstances on Earth, is an intellectual gift greater than any I can
think of. To establish a rational foundation for understanding human equality in all its manifestations, from tribal allegiances and national identities to the idea that we are a global community, is the most basic medium of human rights.

It becomes not just an intriguing coincidence, but a stunning one, that the man who freed our minds to think of ourselves as a variety of equals was born on the same day as the man who, more than anyone else in United States’ history, established the legal basis for human equality.

**Young Darwins and Lincolns**

My third theme assumes that there are young Darwins and Lincolns being born today—May 21, 2009—all around the world. Does anyone doubt this? I can make an informed proposition that this is true in places where I have worked: Tanzania, Sweden, Costa Rica, Brazil, Romania, and Chicago. These are places where I have gotten to know children as a scientist. Why should it not be the case in China, India, Madagascar, Taiwan, Uganda, and Morocco? The context of human development is paramount in shaping our destinies: without trivializing individual differences in temperament, the guidance and opportunities afforded through the social environment determine what we make of our lives. Darwin and Lincoln can only be properly understood in the contexts of their families, societies, and the particular historical period in which they lived. They were great precisely because of the way in which they engaged the challenges of their era. Every generation faces the challenges and obstacles of promoting human security and dignity. I doubt that we will ever outlive the demand for human rights.

My purpose today is to imagine, along with you, what scientific and legal challenges the young Darwins and Lincolns of today will confront. With what strokes of genius and courage will they contribute to improving the lot of mankind? Here are some fundamental questions I would pose to them, questions that pertain to human rights:

1. Is it possible to confirm scientifically that waging violent conflict is irrational, unprofitable, and ultimately destructive? These three hypotheses could be treated separately or linked, but we
need better scientific evidence then we currently have to produce unbiased answers. The strongest evidence I have been able to gather supports the common wisdom that violent behavior is reproductive, that “violence begets violence” (Bingenheimer, Brennan, and Earls 2005).

2. How do we make greater use of our capacities for critical thinking and deliberation to solve problems and make better predictions? And with our large brains and complex language systems, how do we deal constructively with human diversity and defeat the growing disparities that characterize modern societies? My assumption is that much of human capacity is wasted through poverty, lack of opportunity, and institutional arrangements that regulate education and development in the modern world. Our work in Tanzania is an example of research undertaken to promote deliberative skills in children. In this project, young adolescents are encouraged to understand the epidemic of HIV/AIDS and take on responsible and effective action as citizens of their communities to control it (Kamo et al. 2008). Much unfinished work remains.

3. Will the political movement towards shifting power from aristocracies to plebiscites continue to spread, or are there real limits to the degree to which power can effectively be decentralized? Against the backdrop of political disenfranchisement and civil rights in the United States, two to three hundred years should not be regarded as a long time. We must be constantly reminded that progress is neither linear nor cumulative in this sphere.

4. Assuming protective custody of the biological and physical environment will require not just raising consciousness, but discrete changes in behavior and expectations. Given the pace of degradation in these systems, what knowledge and strategies are necessary to accelerate the realization of these objectives?

In confronting questions of this sort, it is important for young Darwins and Lincolns to know that they are standing on the shoulders of giants. The most demanding issues during the time of Darwin and Lincoln were slavery and creationism. Although these men have become icons in efforts to create liberal democracy and rational thought about man’s place in the universe, it is important to remind ourselves that they were also losers. Within a year of Lincoln’s death, the republic had reverted to a racism that only
transformed black slaves into diminished and marginalized citizens. Darwin’s discoveries on natural selection were hijacked by Herbert Spencer and branded as “social darwinism” and adopted as an edict to justifying racism and nationalism. Anyone embarking on a career devoted to tackling problems of rights, citizenship, equality, and equity should be aware that the path is not a straight one.

Addressing these questions will advance the human rights movement by balancing the protection of negative rights with the resolve and strategies required to promote positive rights. An example of what I mean is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a comprehensive document, which includes civil and political rights along side economic and social rights. Further, it is the most widely ratified charter in the history of the United Nations, bringing all U.N. member countries, with the exception of Somalia and the United States, into a common legal and ethical framework to enhance the well-being of children. But for all of its breadth and richness as a human rights proclamation, it does not deal with responsibilities of rights-holders, nor does it envision the types of opportunity structures that should exist to permit the achievement of well-being.

In strengthening the human rights claim, we should widen our scope to include the promotion of science education and the attainment of well-being for all men, women, and children. This is not to diminish in any sense our first interest in the freedoms of thought and expression. I close with a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (as we celebrate the 60th year of this monumental charter). I choose it because it substantiates all three themes that I have presented:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have
meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.

References


Footnotes

¹As noble as these sentiments may sound, the reality is that it took another 100 years for the United States to actually extend civil and political rights to African Americans. One can easily make the claim that even today the economic and social rights of Americans of all ethnicities are not recognized as “legitimate” categories.