Desmond and Moore’s *Darwin’s Sacred Cause*: A Misreading of the Historical Record

Allen Esterson

Abstract

In their book *Darwin’s Sacred Cause* (2009) Adrian Desmond and James Moore purport to demonstrate that they have provided an original explanation for the inspiration behind Darwin’s determined pursuit of an explanatory theory for the transformation of species of which he became convinced as a result of his experiences during the *Beagle* voyage of 1831 to 1836. This, they argue, was the “moral passion” that was evoked by his encountering the horrors of slavery during the periods he was able to disembark to explore areas of South America in the years 1832 to 1835. In short, they provide what they describe as “the untold story of how Darwin’s abhorrence of slavery led to our modern understanding of evolution.” This article explores the means by which the authors seek to persuade readers of the validity of their thesis, and concludes that far from providing compelling evidence, by providing a mass of historically interesting material relating to slavery that is actually tangential to their case, they obscure the fact that they fail to accomplish their aim. There is nothing in their account of events that provides a reason for preferring their explanation for Darwin’s devotion to understanding the processes involved in the transformation of species to the known historical facts of Darwin’s early zeal for natural science, exhibited in his childhood exploits with beetles and his more organized scientific activities when he was a student at Cambridge, enabled to come to fruition by his scientific activities during the voyage of the *Beagle*.

Keywords

history of science, Darwin, evolution, scholarship, skepticism

Desmond and Moore’s basic contention in *Darwin’s Sacred Cause* (2009) is that “rather than seeing ‘the facts’ force evolution on Darwin (other circumnavigating naturalists had seen similar phenomena all over the globe), we find a moral passion firing his evolutionary work” (p. xviii, emphasis in original). They inform us that “no one understands Darwin’s core project,” and that unlike those who have attempted to “hijack Darwin” for their own ends, they will be revealing the “nucleus of his most inflammatory research,” his abhorrence of slavery and belief in the unity of all humankind (p. xix). This, according to the authors, accounts for Darwin’s dogged pursuit of an explanatory theory underlying the concept of the transformation of species that he alighted on shortly after he returned from the voyage of the *Beagle* in October 1836.

The authors’ central contention was expressed succinctly by Moore (2009) in an interview promoting their book:

Without the evidence of the Galapagos, we wouldn’t have an argument for evolution by natural selection. But why he went to the trouble and the risk of assembling that evidence and in the way that he did, to understand that we need a deeper explanation. He didn’t collect facts, as they were called, at random. There was a reason for what he did. And his reason had precedence in his own experience and his own family. The scream of a tortured slave, fired him to touch the untouchable and to develop what he called “my theory,” the theory of evolution.

In similar terms, Desmond (2009) writes,

The burning question, in fact, is why a young man fresh off the *Beagle* with a glittering career in prospect—a gentleman for whom honour was paramount—would have considered risking everything by developing a “monkey-man” theory that affronted the most sacred principles of the Christian society to which he belonged; and why he then persevered with it through these long years of doubt and fearful isolation. It is in his relationship with slavery and the abolitionist cause that we find our answer.

The relevant historical background in relation to slavery goes back some 45 years before the voyage of the *Beagle*, to the start of the organized campaign in Britain for the abolition of slavery in 1787. This rapidly gained popular support, and by 1791, a compromise bill in the House of Commons proposing its gradual abolishment was passed by a large majority.

1Independent Scholar, London, UK

Corresponding Author:
Allen Esterson, 1A Cromwell Grove, London, W6 7RQ, UK.
Email: allenesterson@compuserve.com
However, vested interests ensured that the bill was defeated in the House of Lords, and in the adverse political circumstances in the wake of the French revolution, further attempts at legislation for the complete abolition of slavery were thwarted for more than 15 years. Eventually, thanks in great part to the efforts of William Wilberforce, in 1807 (two years before the birth of Charles Darwin), the Slave Trade Abolition Act was passed in the Commons by 283 votes to 16, and in the Lords, by 100 votes to 34. Although the Royal Navy engaged in intercepting ships on the Atlantic routes to free slaves, the passing of the bill did nothing to prevent the practice of slavery in the British Empire and in the Americas. It was not until 1833, when Darwin was on the Beagle voyage, that a bill to abolish slavery in the British Empire was passed by both Houses of Parliament (Hague, 2008, pp. 142-168; 227-356; 390-395). The focus of antislavery campaigners thereafter was on providing support for abolitionists in the United States, described in admirable detail in Darwin’s Sacred Cause.

When Darwin’s Sacred Cause was published in 2009, it was greeted with enthusiasm by the great majority of the numerous reviewers in a wide range of publications, albeit with occasional reservations concerning whether the authors had fully made their case. In the issue carrying a review of the book, Nature even devoted an editorial to a celebration of the authors’ “new historical study” with a heading that implicitly endorsed its central thesis: “Charles Darwin’s thinking about the world was profoundly influenced by his revulsion for slavery” (Nature, Vol. 457, February 12, 2009, p. 763). Of some 25 reviews in newspapers, magazines, and journals, only three rejected the thesis outright, two of these being in scholarly journals and one in a history magazine (Fara, 2009; Kjærgaard, 2009; Richards, 2009). This context of general approbation is the background for the following detailed exegetical examination of Desmond and Moore’s argument.

In support of their central thesis, Desmond and Moore highlight virtually every mention of slavery they can find from among the mass of material in Darwin’s notebooks, albeit such items are exceedingly sparse during the period of the gestation of his evolutionary theory.1 More generally, on more than 320 out of some 380 pages of text, one finds items relating to one or more of the following: slavery, races in humans, unity of human races, racial theories, and Black men. However, relatively little of this material relates directly to Darwin at all, though from Darwin’s Sacred Cause, one would think that such issues, including the descent of human-kind, were ever present in Darwin’s mind and formed the ultimate raison d’être for the bulk of his writings and research on the transmutation of species. But in his letters from the time he left the Beagle in 1836 to his writing up the first formal sketch of Origin in 1844, it has not proved possible to trace a single one that mentions slavery or the slave trade (Darwin Correspondence Project). That, of course, covers the whole period during which Desmond and Moore strive to create the impression that the twin topics of slavery and the unity of human races were seldom out of his mind, and that his belief in the common descent of human beings was the crucial issue that led to his espousing his belief in the transformation of species.

In his four “Transformation of Species” notebooks of 1837-1838, amounting to some 70,000 words (van Wyhe, 2007, p. 185), Darwin mentions slavery only three times, hardly indicating that it provided the raison d’être for his endeavors on this subject. Moore, of course, is right to say that “there was a reason for what he did,” for the effort he put into collecting his Galapagos specimens, publishing monographs on geology that brought him wide recognition, and developing his ideas on the transformation of species—but according to Darwin himself, that reason was “a burning zeal to add even the most humble contribution to the noble structure of Natural Science.” That was aroused from his reading Humboldt’s Personal Narrative and John Herschel’s Introduction to the Study of Natural Philosophy in 1831 during his last year at Cambridge University (Darwin, 1958, pp. 67-68). But for Desmond and Moore this is evidently insufficient, and an extra-scientific motivation must be sought: The “barbarity of slavery” he had come across in Brazil “demanded a new commitment, the sort he had been unable to find till now” (p. 114).

This latter assertion is contradicted by the immense enthusiasm with which Darwin had thrown himself into his investigations into geology and natural science during his Beagle voyage overland excursions, amply demonstrating a passion that he had acquired before the journey. In his Autobiography, Darwin (1958) recalled in relation to the period immediately before and during the voyage how his “love for science gradually preponderated over every other taste,” and he went on to describe how he had “worked to the utmost during the voyage from the mere pleasure of investigation, and from my strong desire to add a few facts to the great mass of facts in natural science”—not to mention that he “was also ambitious to take a fair place among scientific men” (pp. 78, 80-81). These accounts of his early enthusiasm for scientific research provide evidence for the source of a powerful “commitment” that is inconsistent with Desmond and Moore’s claim that he had lacked this prior to his experiences in South America that aroused his abhorrence of slavery.

The Darwin scholar Sandra Herbert (1993) notes in her review of their biography Darwin (1991) that a “missing or understated element is an accounting for Darwin’s strong sense of vocation,” and she points out that “From his youth he wanted to contribute something to science, and this desire usually dominated everything else” (p. 116). This missing element is equally apparent in Darwin’s Sacred Cause. In more than 30 pages covering the period of Darwin’s two years in Edinburgh when he was a medical student (pp. 17-50) there is much on the radical ideas (scientific and political) being aired by various people, but no mention of Darwin’s enthusiasm for natural science excursions, including his first systematic observations (Browne, 1995, pp. 78-82). Similarly, in
some 20 pages on Darwin’s time at Cambridge University (pp. 49-67) there is no mention of what Janet Browne describes as “the one subject that fired his imagination” in this period, an interest in entomology that resulted in his establishing “the foundation of his later collecting routines” (Browne, 1995, pp. 98-103; Darwin, 1958, pp. 62-64). The majority of these pages are taken up with issues directly or indirectly relating to slavery, although there is no evidence to suggest that Darwin took any great interest in these activities. Desmond and Moore, themselves, write in the context of his time at Cambridge that “we get little sense that the theory was his abiding concern about slavery. In some 70 pages in Darwin’s Sacred Cause devoted to Darwin’s activities from the time he returned from his Beagle voyage in 1836 to his completing the 189-page sketch of his species theory in 1844, they are unable to provide anything more than insinuations of the “angry abolitionist energy” (p. 290) that supposedly inspired his theory. This they do by seeking out every item they can find that might possibly suggest some involvement of Darwin with emancipationist activities. For instance, much is made of the fact that during the latter half of the 1830s he mixed in social circles that included Harriet Martineau, a woman with wide-ranging interests whose book Society in America (1837) emphasized the evils of slavery (pp. 127-129; 134-135). Yet, in the four letters in which Darwin alludes to Martineau in this period, he makes no mention of her views on this subject, though Desmond and Moore try hard to make the connection, telling us that “she shared his firsthand experience of slavery as no one else in their circle,” both having “witnessed brutality, felt threats of violence, heard shrieks of pain” (p. 128).

But at least Darwin actually had some contact with Martineau. Many of the pages in Darwin’s Sacred Cause devoted to the years from 1836 to 1844 (pp. 111-180) provide information directly or indirectly related to slavery involving the activities of a variety of people unconnected with Darwin, with the occasional reference to the Wedgwood family’s strong interest in the issue. However, close inspection of his letters and notebooks during this period indicates that he was engaged almost exclusively on his own affairs, namely, his writings on the Beagle voyage and on geological matters, and evidence of any great interest during these years in the emancipation issues that exercised the various activists named by Desmond and Moore is sparse.

The authors note that in his 1844 sketch of his evolutionary theory, Darwin “scarcely touched on humans,” contending that he had deliberately evaded the issue, for by their account “Nothing mattered to him more than ‘man’” (pp. 178-179). But this latter contention is not borne out by the contents of his several notebooks, despite their highlighting the occasional mention of his ideas relating to humans in his notes. It is a view that they are seeking to impose on the material, rather than a fact about the material itself, a view exemplified by their writing that Origin is “ultimately about man” (p. 311), when in fact it is about the evolution of all animal and vegetable species. As I. Bernard Cohen (1992) writes in his review of the same authors’ Darwin (1991), “Darwin’s primary purpose was not to look into the ancestry of human beings, but rather to set forth a rational and coherent explanation for the development of species” (p. 10).

In short, what Desmond and Moore have done in the first part of their book is to run copious information about the antislavery movement in parallel with Darwin’s intermittent work on his transformation theory during the years 1836 to 1844 to create an impression of a close link between his developing his theory and his antislavery sentiments. But his private writings in this period show no such connection, which is why the great bulk of the book covering this period is not about Darwin at all, and when he is brought in, it is by generally spurious links between the two issues. Of course Darwin, like his family members (especially the Wedgwood side of the family), was a social liberal and had an abhorrence of slavery that was intensified by his brief glimpses of its iniquities in South America. But this does not mean there was anything close to a causal relationship between these feelings and his seminal ideas on the mutation of species. There is ample evidence of his zeal for scientific discovery that suffices to explain his steadfast espousal of his species theory. Desmond and Moore’s thesis is not necessary to explain Darwin’s development of his theory of evolution, and in Darwin’s Sacred Cause they have failed to demonstrate it has any merit. Rather, in this book they embed implicit viewpoints within a mass of extraneous and often irrelevant material in such a way to create a perception of their having provided evidential support for their conclusion.

Desmond and Moore, conveniently for their argument, omit from their chronological account of events what is undoubtedly the key historical event in Darwin’s conversion to a belief in evolution, leading to his commitment to developing an evolutionary theory that largely determined his future. In 1982, Frank Sulloway published the results of research that enabled him to identify the episode that finally convinced Darwin of the transmutation of species. This occurred in early March 1837, when Darwin met with the ornithologist John Gould, who had examined the specimens of Galapagos birds after Darwin donated his collection of birds and mammals to the Zoological Society of London in
January of that year. Gould directed Darwin’s attention to the fact that three different species of Galapagos mocking birds (labeled to identify the island on which they had been caught) were unique to their respective island residence. This led to Darwin’s starting his first Transmutation of Species notebook in July 1837 (Sulloway, 1982, pp. 21-23; Sulloway, 1985, p. 11).

In their biography, Desmond and Moore (1991, pp. 220-221) do indeed identify the meeting with Gould as the key episode in Darwin’s embracing the theory of the transmutation of species. Yet, this episode, the meeting with Gould and the revelations about the Galapagos mocking birds, is conspicuously absent in Desmond and Moore’s chronological account of events in Darwin’s Sacred Cause. They find space for masses of extraneous information about the campaigns against the continuing slave trade (Britain itself had banned the slave trade in 1807, two years before Darwin was born, and had abolished slavery within its territories in 1833) and much else that does not have any direct connection with Darwin’s activities. They also supply highly selective quotes from Darwin, giving a false impression of the prominence of his concerns about slavery and the unity of the human race in his notebooks. But at the place (pp. 118-119) where one would expect to find the crucial information about Darwin’s presenting his Galapagos specimens to the Royal Geological Society and Gould’s verdict on the mocking birds, there is a blank. This is an extraordinary omission in the context of Darwin’s activities in the wake of his Beagle voyage, one that leads Robert Richards (2009) to observe that in Darwin’s Sacred Cause “evidence for common descent in the form of Darwin’s Galapagos mocking birds is shoved right off the page” (p. 416).

The authors’ propensity for selectivity to support their contention is also evident in their treatment of one of their subsidiary themes, Darwin’s chronic illness. They set the scene early on in the period immediately following his return from the Beagle voyage when they write that “Darwin had been surreptitiously filling his evolution notebooks” [emphasis added], though there is no reason why at that stage he should have been expected to have informed anyone else of his making notes on a scarcely formed theory. They continue, “The mental torment he suffered is barely graspable . . .”. As evidence for this melodramatic report of Darwin’s mental state, they quote from the second of Darwin’s Transformation Notebooks: “Once grant that species [. . .] may pass into each other [. . .] & whole fabric totters and falls” (p. 120, the authors’ ellipses). They go on to say, “A young man’s bravado fired these jottings, as he ran full-tilt against the combined might of his Cambridge dons, indeed the conservative world: ‘the fabric falls!’”

The passage in full in the notebook reads as follows: Once grant that species one genus my pass into each other, – grant that one instinct to be acquired (if the medullary point in ovum has such organization as to force in one man the development of a brain capable of producing more glowing imagining or more profound reasoning than other, if this be granted!) & whole fabric totters and falls – Look abroad, study gradation, study unity of type, study geographical distribution, study relation of fossil with recent. the fabric falls! (Notebook C, pp. 76-77)

There is no indication here that Darwin has in mind anything other than undermining the fixity of species, rather than the grandiose notion of the fabric of “the conservative world” that Desmond and Moore impute to him. As Marjorie Grene (1993) writes in response to similar comments by the authors in their Darwin (1991) in relation to this paragraph of Darwin, it seems to her “not specially political: given transformation, it is the fabric of nature that totters” (p. 670). Even less is there any indication of a mind in mental torment—this is pure invention to further their view of a Darwin trembling at the thought that his novel ideas had the potential to undermine the very basis of society. To this end, they maintain, both explicitly and implicitly, that the chronic illness that plagued Darwin was to a large extent caused by his pursuing heretical ideas:

Anyway, these years [the late 1830s] saw the beginnings of Darwin’s nervy, stomach-churning bodily reactions. Illness was to plague him until he put the human question aside again, thirty-five years later. He was now on a much longer voyage, and sailing into very dangerous waters. (Desmond & Moore, 2009, p. 121)

The sailing metaphor appears again a little later:

Darwin in his evolutionary notebooks, having made one creature the progenitor of another and released them from Creative bondage, was sailing against the prevailing wind and now became ill in the choppy waters. Aunt Sarah Wedgwood had seen him in Shrewsbury [in 1838], her niece Emma heard, and pronounced him to be “very unwell,” with heart “palpitations” . . . In June 1838 . . . Darwin was still poorly: “Some little Species theory, & lost very much time by being unwell,” he recorded in his diary that month; it was a connection now well established. (Desmond & Moore, 2009, p. 133)

But is it well established? Not by Desmond and Moore, who fail to test their contention against the documentary evidence. A close reading of Darwin’s personal Journal and letters shows that his transmutation of species theory was unrelated to bouts of illness. During the first 8 years after his return from the Beagle voyage, Darwin undertook an immense amount of work. During these years this included bringing out the Journal of Researches of the Voyage of H. M. S. Beagle (1839 and revised in 1845), five volumes of Zoology of the Voyage of H. M. S. Beagle (1840-1843), which he edited, three volumes of the Geology of the Voyage of the Beagle (1842-1846), and almost 30 papers and reviews (Richards, 1983, p. 46). Darwin’s Journal entries show that he increasingly had to take a respite from his labors to
recover from bouts of illness. In the entry for December 24, 1839, he notes that he had to suspend his main work schedule because he

became unwell, & with the exception of two or three days remained so till the 24th of February. In this interval read a little for Transmut theory, but otherwise lost these whole months.

In the early part of 1840, he again “became unwell & did not commence Coral volume till March 26th.” In a letter to his friend William Fox dated June 7, 1840, he reported that he had “scarcely put pen to paper for the last half year, & everything in the publishing line is going backward.” In the Journal entry for November 14, Darwin wrote, “During this summer when well enough did a good deal of species work.” In other words, contrary to the impression Desmond and Moore assiduously seek to create, it was concentrated work, not thoughts about his transmutation theory, which led to severe episodes of illness.

Social activities also exacerbated his symptoms. On March 28, 1840, Darwin wrote to the Geological Society apologizing for having missed their last four meetings as “I have never once attended, without having suffered the next day.” Again, in a letter to Fox on January 25, 1841, he wrote, “I am forced to live, however, very quietly and am unable to see anybody & cannot even talk long with my nearest relatives.”

Far from there being a correlation between Darwin’s severe bouts of illness and his working on evolutionary theory, if anything, the contrary was the case: When not well enough to work on his writing commitments, as already indicated above, he sometimes turned to his notes on the transmutation of species. In the spring of 1841 he noted in his Journal that he had completed a “paper on Boulders & Till of S. America,” then records, “idle & unwell—sorted papers on Species theory.” He later wrote in the context of his work pertaining to his Beagle voyage in the period up to his leaving London in 1842: “Nor did I ever intermit collecting facts bearing on the origin of species; and I could sometimes do this when I could do nothing else from illness” (Darwin, 1958, p. 99).

Desmond and Moore portray Darwin as a man who trembled at the very thought of the hostile reaction that publication of his evolutionary views would evoke. For instance, they highlight his writing that he had read Adam Sedgwick’s scathing review of the journalistic Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, published anonymously in 1844, “with ‘fear and trembling’” (Desmond & Moore, 1991, p. 322). The authors convey the impression that his fears related to the vehemence of Sedgwick’s scornful rejection of the book’s evolutionary content, but an examination of the letter in question shows this is not the case. Darwin tells his friend Charles Lyell that he thought the review “a grand piece of argument against the mutability of species, and I read it with fear and trembling, but was well pleased to find I had not overlooked any of the arguments” (Letter, October 8, 1845).

In other words, his fear on reading Sedgwick’s review was merely an expression of his concern that it might contain arguments he had failed to consider, though on reading it, he was relieved to find that it did not.

Summing up, Desmond and Moore’s intimating that Darwin’s illness was greatly exacerbated specifically when he turned his mind to his evolutionary work is evidence free. But worse, in Darwin’s Sacred Cause, they effectively manufacture evidence to support their contention:

He was also a sick man. For years he had been regularly, often wretchedly, ill. The closer to “man” and to publication, the worse he became. Five times while writing the Origin of Species he was forced to decamp to a rest home to take the water cure, his nerves wrecked. “No nigger with a lash over him could have worked harder,” he explained as he struggled with his prose. But the real cause “of the main part of the ills to which my flesh is heir,” he admitted, was the Origin’s inflammatory case for the evolution of life by a chancy natural selection, and the expected uproar over its bestial implications. He dreaded being “execrated as an atheist.” For a respectable gentleman, for whom reputation and honour were everything, it was barely endurable. Later, at his spa, sending out copies of the Origin, it was “like living in Hell” (Desmond & Moore, 2009, p. 313).

It is instructive to examine the truncated quotations in the above paragraph in context. The authors claim that Darwin admitted that the real cause of his illness was “the Origin’s inflammatory case for the evolution of life by a chancy natural selection, and the expected uproar over its bestial implications.” But here is what Darwin actually wrote in the letter in question:

I have been extra bad of late, with the old severe vomiting rather often & much distressing swimming of the head . . . My abstract [On the Origin of Species] is the cause, I believe of the main part of the ills to which my flesh is heir to; but I have only two more chapters & to correct all, & then I shall be a comparatively free man. (Letter to William Fox, February 12, 1859)

There is nothing here to suggest that he had the supposed “inflammatory case” in mind; rather, it was all the hard work he was putting into writing his book that was causing the severe exacerbation of his illness. This is evident in his intimating that he expected an improvement in health once the work was completed, whereas any fears about the reaction to his work in the terms expressed by Desmond and Moore would hardly be reduced on publication of the book.⁴

The next truncated quotation supposedly has Darwin’s saying that he “dreaded being ‘execrated as an atheist’.” Again, here is what he actually wrote:

I have been thinking that if I am much execrated as atheist &c, whether the admission of doctrine of natural selection could injure your Works; but I hope & think not; for as far as I can remember the virulence of bigotry is expended on first offender, & those who adopt his views are only pitied, as
deluded, by the wise & cheerful bigots. (Letter to Charles Lyell, November 23, 1859)

So he is not saying that he “dreaded being execrated as an atheist”; he is expressing his concern that Lyell might be found guilty by association by “the wise and cheerful bigots.” Contrary to what Desmond and Moore write, there is nothing here to suggest he was particularly perturbed by the thought that the “virulence of bigotry” will be directed at him.

Desmond and Moore’s final truncated quotation in the above paragraph, in which they directly associate Darwin’s sending out copies of Origin with his reporting it was “like living in Hell,” comes from a letter to Joseph Hooker (October 27 or November 3, 1859). The full passage is as follows:

I have been very bad lately; having had an awful “crisis” one leg swelled like elephantiasis – eyes almost closed up – covered with a rash & fiery Boils; but they tell me it will surely do me much good. – it was like living in Hell. (Quoted in Desmond and Moore, 1991, p. 476.)

Darwin’s description of his “living like hell” referred to the gruesome symptoms from which he was suffering, and there is nothing here to link these to the mailing of complimentary copies of Origin at that time as the authors would have their readers believe. More generally, this instance exemplifies that Desmond and Moore’s mode of presentation that purports to show that severe bouts of Darwin’s illness were closely associated to his working on the transmutation of species is grossly misleading.

The question arises why Desmond and Moore should have sought to identify an extra-scientific motivation for Darwin’s enthusiastic pursuit of developing a theory to account for the transmutation of species. As Sulloway (1996) observes, from Desmond and Moore’s sociopolitical perspective, Darwin’s radicalism should have posed a considerable puzzle (p. 236). Likewise, Steven Jay Gould (in an otherwise celebratory review of Desmond & Moore’s Darwin) writes that the two authors had now helped him to “grasp why Darwin was absolutely the wrong person for the job” (Gould, 1992, p. 216). Cohen (1992) also wonders, given what he describes as the authors’ belief that even scientific ideas are largely socially determined, how “a gentleman naturalist of Darwin’s social class and background could have propounded such radical notions about evolution” (p. 10). Desmond and Moore’s thesis that Darwin’s abhorrence of slavery was the spark that ignited his interest in evolutionary processes provides an answer to the quandary expressed by these reviewers of the authors’ 1991 biography of Darwin. However, they do this by inundating the reader with a mass of material on events relating to the anti-slavery movement in the period during which Darwin alighted on his theory in a way that serves to obscure his lack of involvement during this crucial phase of his career. As Richards (2006) writes in a review of what is effectively their first presentation of their thesis (Desmond and Moore, 2004, pp. xi-lxvii), “This account of Darwin’s motivation for his theory of human evolution does suffer the inconvenience of being unsupported by any evidence” (Richards, 2006, p. 615). In his review of the authors’ greatly elaborated case in Sacred Cause, Richards (2009) concludes that they “have laid out no explicit evidence that Darwin supposed that his theory might subvert slavery” (p. 417). More generally, Patricia Fara (2009) writes of Desmond and Moore’s mode of presentation: “In their introduction, they protest at being ‘beset by polemics . . . attempts to pummel Darwin into this shape or that’ (p. xvi), apparently oblivious to the aptness of this description of their own rhetorical work” (p. 615).

Of course, historians proposing a thesis almost inevitably exhibit some degree of confirmation bias, but Desmond and Moore (Desmond and Moore, 2004, pp. xi-lxvii), go beyond this. They present a mass of historical material of considerable interest in itself but that never provides more than circumstantial evidence in developing their thesis. Desmond and Moore have a propensity to give truncated quotations within paragraphs that frequently enable them to create an impression of providing substantive evidence in support of their central thesis. The contention in this article is that a close reading of the book demonstrates that they fail to make their case.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes
1. The authors evidently recognized they were leaving themselves wide open to a criticism of lack of balance in their presentation when they wrote, with massive understatement, “Humans were not the sole source of [his] insights into transmutation” (Desmond & Moore, 2009, p. 124).
2. Desmond and Moore (2009) themselves acknowledge later in the book that, prior to the Beagle voyage, his abolitionist views were “barely visible” (p. 114).
3. There are also a few references to the concerns of Darwin’s sisters about slavery.
4. That it was the time and energy that he expended on writing his “extract” that Darwin blamed as the cause of the exacerbation of his chronic illness is also evident from his writing to Joseph Hooker on October 15, 1859, after the work had been completed: “You cannot think how refreshing it is to idle away whole day, & hardly ever think in the least about my confounded Book, which half killed me.”

References
Browne, J. (1995). Charles Darwin: Voyaging. London, England: Pimlico.
Esterson

Cohen, I. B. (1992). The agnostic in the abbey. *New York Times Book Review*, August 2, 1992, p. 10.

Darwin, C. R. (1958). *Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882*. London, England: Collins.

Darwin, C. R. (n.d.). Darwin Correspondence Project. Available from http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/advanced-search

Darwin, C. R. (n.d.). Darwin’s notebooks and reading lists. Available from http://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/van-Wythe_notebooks.html

Desmond, A. and Moore, J. (2004). *Introduction to The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Second Edition (2004). London: Penguin Books, xi-lviii.

Desmond, A. (2009, February 28). Darwin the abolitionist. *Prospect*. Retrieved from http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/charles-darwin-the-abolitionist/

Desmond, A., & Moore, J. (1991). *Darwin*. London, England: Michael Joseph.

Desmond, A. & Moore, J. (2009). *Darwin’s sacred cause: Race, slavery and the quest for human origins*. London, England: Allen Lane, Penguin Books.

Fara, P. (2009). Review of *Darwin’s sacred cause: Race, slavery and the quest for human origins*. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 35, 603-618.

Gould, S. J. (1992). The paradox of genius. *Nature*, 355, 215-216.

Greene, M. (1993). Recent biographies of Darwin: The complexity of context. *Perspectives of Science*, 1(4), 659-675.

Hague, W. (2008). *William Wilberforce: The life of the great anti-slave trade campaigner*. London, England: HarperCollins.

Herbert, S. (1993). Essay reviews. *Isis*, 84, 113-127.

Kjærgaard, P. C. (2009). Review of *Darwin’s sacred cause: Race, slavery and the quest for human origins*. *History Today*, February 2009, 59(2), 62.

Moore, J. (2009, February). Darwin the abolitionist. *Living on Earth, PRI’s Environmental News Magazine*. Retrieved from www.loe.org/shows/segments.htm?programID=09-P13-00006&segmentID=4

Richards, R. J. (1983). Why Darwin delayed, or interesting problems and models in the history of science. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 19, 45-53.

Richards, R. J. (2006). Review of the Introduction by J. Moore and A. Desmond to C. Darwin, *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*, 2nd edition (2004), London: Penguin. *British Journal for the History of Science*, 39(4), December 2006, 615-617.

Richards, R. J. (2009). Review of *Darwin’s sacred cause: Race, slavery and the quest for human origins*. *American Scientist*, September-October 2009, 415-417.

Sulloway, F. J. (1982). Darwin and his finches: The evolution of a legend. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 15(1), 1-53.

Sulloway, F. J. (1985). Darwin’s “dogged” genius: His Galapagos visit in retrospect. *Noticias de Galapagos*, 42, 7-14.

Sulloway, F. J. (1996). *Born to rebel: Birth order, family dynamics, and creative lives*. London, England: Little, Brown and Company.

van Wyhe, J. (2007). Mind the gap: Did Darwin avoid publishing his theory for many years? *Notes & Records of the Royal Society*, 61, 177-205. Retrieved from http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/2007_MindtheGap_A544.pdf

van Wyhe, J. (Ed.) (n.d). *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*. Available from http://darwin-online.org.uk

Author Biography

Allen Esterson held lectureships in physics and mathematics at colleges of further education in London until his retirement in 1994. He has published *Seductive Mirage: An Exploration of the Work of Sigmund Freud* (Open Court, 1993), and articles in *History of the Human Sciences, History of Psychology, and History of Psychiatry*. 