

The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals

Charles Darwin

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Background

In the weeks before [Queen Victoria's coronation](#) in 1838, Charles Darwin sought medical advice for his [mysterious physical symptoms](#). He then travelled to Scotland for rest and a "geologising expedition" but also revisited the old haunts of his undergraduate days. On the day of the coronation, 28 June 1838, Darwin was in [Edinburgh](#). Two weeks later, he opened a private notebook—*Notebook M*—for philosophical speculation, and, over the next three months, filled it with his ideas about hereditary influences on the psychological aspects of life. Darwin also made his first attempt at autobiography in August 1838.

Darwin fully grasps his conception of [natural selection](#) towards the end of September 1838, after encountering the sixth edition of the [Essay on Population](#) (1826) by [Thomas Malthus](#).^{[8][10][11]} However, Malthus and his essay are strangely unmentioned in *Notebook M*, their acknowledgement delayed till October 1838 in *Notebook N*.

In *Notebook M*, Darwin describes conversations with his father—a successful doctor with a special interest in psychiatric problems—about recurring patterns of behavior in successive generations of his patients' families. [Howard Gruber](#) comments that these passages suggest genetic aspects to emotions and thought, and there is emphasis on the continuity between sane and insane.

Darwin was concerned about the materialistic drift in his thinking and the suspicions this might arouse in early [Victorian England](#). At the time, he was mentally preparing for marriage with his cousin [Emma Wedgwood](#), who held firm Christian beliefs. On 21 September 1838, *Notebook M* discloses a "confusing" dream where Darwin found himself involved in a public execution; the corpse had come to life and joked about not running away and facing death like a hero.

Darwin assembled the central features of his evolutionary theory while developing an appreciation of human behavior and family life; during this period, he was experiencing some emotional turmoil, largely expressed in physical symptoms.

A detailed discussion of the significance of *Notebook M* can be found in Paul H. Barrett's *Metaphysics, Materialism and the Evolution of Mind - Early Writings of Charles Darwin* (1980).

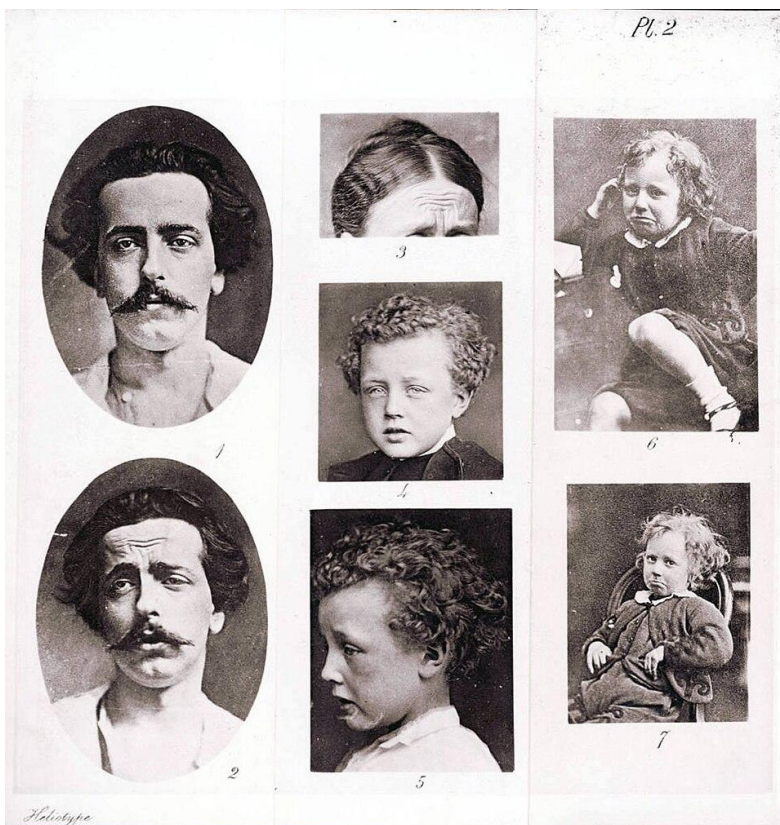
Development of the text in 1866–1872

In its public management, Darwin understood that [his evolutionary theory's](#) relevance to human emotional life could provoke an anxious and hostile response.

While preparing the text of [The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication](#) in 1866, Darwin began to explore topics related to human ancestry, [sexual selection](#), and emotional life. After his initial correspondence with the psychiatrist [James Crichton-Browne](#),^[14] Darwin set aside his material concerning emotional expression to complete *Descent of Man*, which covered human ancestry and sexual selection. He finished work on *The Descent of Man* on 15 January 1871. Two days later, he began work on *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* and completed most of the text within four months; progress then slowed because of work required on the sixth (and final) edition of *The Origin of Species* and a hostile review from [St George Jackson Mivart](#). Darwin finished his work on the proofs on 22 August 1872.

Expression brings Darwin's evolutionary theory close to [behavioural science](#), although several commentators have perceived a spectral [Lamarckism](#) within its text.

illustration of grief from *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*



Darwin's sources on emotional expression

Darwin attended debates about psychology at the [Plinian Society](#) in December 1826 and March 1827 as a medical student at Edinburgh University. These were prompted by the publication of Charles Bell's *Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* (1824). In his presentations, the [phrenologist William A.F. Browne](#) ridiculed Bell's theological explanations, pointing instead to the similarities of human and animal biology. Both meetings ended in uproar. Darwin revisits these debates 45 years later and refers to Duchenne de Boulogne's *Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine* (1862) as he shifts the debate from philosophical to scientific discourse and highlights the social value of facial expression over other forms of expression in vocalisations, tears, and posture.

Darwin's response to Bell's natural theology is discussed in [Lucy Hartley's *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth Century Culture*](#) (2001).^[23]

In the composition of the book, Darwin drew on a variety of sources:

- His questionnaire (circulated in the early months of 1867) concerning emotional expression in different ethnic groups
- Anthropological memories from his time on [HMS Beagle](#)
- Conversations with livestock breeders and pigeon fanciers
- Observations on his infant son [William Erasmus Darwin](#) (*A Biographical Sketch of an Infant*, published in 1877 in the philosophical journal *Mind*), on his family's dogs and cats, and on the orangutans at [London Zoo](#)
- Simple psychology experiments with members of his family concerning the recognition of emotional expression
- The neurological insights of Duchenne de Boulogne, a physician at the [Salpêtrière asylum](#) in Paris
- Hundreds of photographs of actors, [babies](#), and children, including photographs by [Oscar Rejlander](#)
- Descriptions of psychiatric patients in [West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum](#) in [Wakefield](#)

As a result of his domestic psychology experiments, Darwin reduced the number of commonly observed emotions from Duchenne's calculation of more than sixty [facial expressions](#) to six "core" expressions: anger, fear, surprise, disgust, happiness, and sadness.

Darwin corresponded with James Crichton-Browne, the son of the phrenologist [William A. F. Browne](#) and now the distinguished medical director of West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum. At the time, Crichton-Browne was editing *The West Riding Lunatic Asylum Medical Reports*. Recognising the significance of Crichton-Browne's contributions, Darwin suggested to him that *Expression* "ought to be called by Darwin and Browne?"

Darwin also drew on his personal experience of the symptoms of bereavement and studied the text of [Henry Maudsley's](#) 1870 [Goulstonian Lectures](#) on *Body And Mind*.

Darwin considered other approaches to the study of emotions, such as their depiction in the arts—as discussed by the actor [Henry Siddons](#) in his *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (1807) and by the anatomist [Robert Knox](#) in his *Manual of Artistic Anatomy* (1852)—but abandoned these approaches as unreliable.

It is noteworthy that only a few sections in *Expression* touch on emotional deception.

Structure

Expression opens with three chapters (1–3) entitled "General Principles of Expression", where Darwin introduces three principles:

1. "The principle of serviceable associated Habits" – describes how initially voluntary actions constitute complex expressions of emotion by association of habit.
2. "The principle of Antithesis" – explains how opposite mental states induce directly opposing movements.
3. "The principle of actions due to the constitution of the Nervous System, independently from the first of the Will, and independently to a certain extent of Habit" – discusses the interplay between physiological reactions (e.g., sweating, muscle trembling, blushing) and emotional experiences.

In the following chapters (4–6), Darwin presents his findings on modes of emotional expression peculiar to particular species, including humans.

Chapters 7–8 contain Darwin's observations on "low spirits" ([anxiety](#), grief, dejection, and [despair](#)) and "high spirits" (joy, love, tender feelings, and devotion). Darwin claims that high spirits, exemplified by joy, find their purest expression in laughter.

Subsequent chapters (9–13) discuss various emotions and their expression. In his discussion of the emotion "disgust", Darwin notes its close links to the sense of smell and conjectures an association with offensive odours. In chapter 13 (which highlights the emotional states of self-attention, shame, shyness, modesty, and blushing), Darwin describes blushing as "the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions".

Darwin closes the book with chapter 14, where he summarises his central argument, demonstrating how human emotions link mental states with bodily movement. He argues that these expressions are genetically determined and derive from purposeful actions observed in animals. He comments on the book's implications, proposing a single origin for the entire human species, with universal human expressions. Darwin emphasises the social value of expression, especially the [emotional communication](#) between mother and child.