

# Evolutionary misogyny: anthropometry and women's inferiority

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The view that women were less intelligent than men, and inferior in other ways, because they were less evolved, was inspired by Darwin. It was widely accepted in academia, including by many of Darwin's leading disciples. Anthropometric measurements of the skull were used to attempt to 'prove' this idea by showing that women had smaller brains. This idea had a profound negative effect on women's progress, educationally, socially, and economically.

*Anthropometry*, the scientific study of comparable measurements and proportions of the human body, has historically been abused to justify Darwinism. This review focuses on its abuse to argue for the mental inferiority of women based on the theory that they are less evolved. In Europe, anthropometry “dominated the human sciences for much of the nineteenth century and remained popular until intelligence testing replaced skull measurements as a favored device for making invidious comparisons among races, classes and sexes.”<sup>1</sup> The most important means of ‘proving’ female inferiority was *craniometry*, a subset of anthropometry involving measurements of the skull.

## Paul Broca's important contribution to the movement

Of all anthropometric measurements, the academic field of craniometry “commanded the most attention and respect.”<sup>2</sup> The unquestioned leader of this movement to find ‘scientific’ confirmation of the supposed inferiority of women in this way was Paul Broca (1824–1880; figure 1). He was a leading professor of surgery at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. Broca gathered a school of disciples and imitators around himself, consequently influencing the entire scientific community. Their scientific work was very “meticulous and apparently irrefutable, exerted great influence, and won high esteem as a jewel of nineteenth-century science.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the movement now being widely discredited, Broca's fame still remains via Broca's area of the brain. This is a location in the frontal lobe of the dominant brain hemisphere, usually the left one, which is linked to language processing and speech production.

## The ‘inferior female brain’ idea from Darwin

In response to the question ‘Where did the idea that women's brains are inferior come from?’, British neurobiologist Dr Gina Rippon answered, “This goes all the way

back to Charles Darwin, who said that women are inferior because they have inferior brains”.<sup>3</sup> Rippon documents this claim in detail in her 2019 book on the subject:

“Among the intellectuals of the day [the 1800s], there were continuing concerns about the ‘women question’, [in response to] the increasing demands from women for rights ... . This feminist wave served as a rallying call for scientists to provide evidence in favour of the status quo, and to demonstrate how harmful it would be to give power to women—not only for the women themselves, but for the whole framework of society. Even Darwin himself weighed in, expressing his concern that such changes would derail mankind's evolutionary journey. Biology was destiny and the different ‘essences’ of men and women determined their rightful (and different) places in society.”<sup>4</sup>

She added that “Brain size was an early focus in this campaign to prove the inferiority of women and their biology. The fact that the only brains that researchers had access to were dead ones did not stand in the way of trenchant brain-based observations on women's lesser mental capacities ... .”<sup>5</sup> This claim was repeated as late as 1927 in a book titled *Women: The Eternal Primitive*.<sup>6</sup> The author, William Fielding, wrote that “In the pathological state, such as insanity, she tends to be more intractable, more descriptive—representing a more complete reversion to aboriginal life, or [evolutionary] ancestral type.”<sup>7</sup> He added that women's “chief disadvantage in the struggle for existence as it evolved ... is the fact that she is subject to periodic incapacity in performing her functions as the mother of the race ... womankind possesses an inherently primitive disposition.”<sup>8</sup>

## Acknowledging Darwin's contribution to sexism

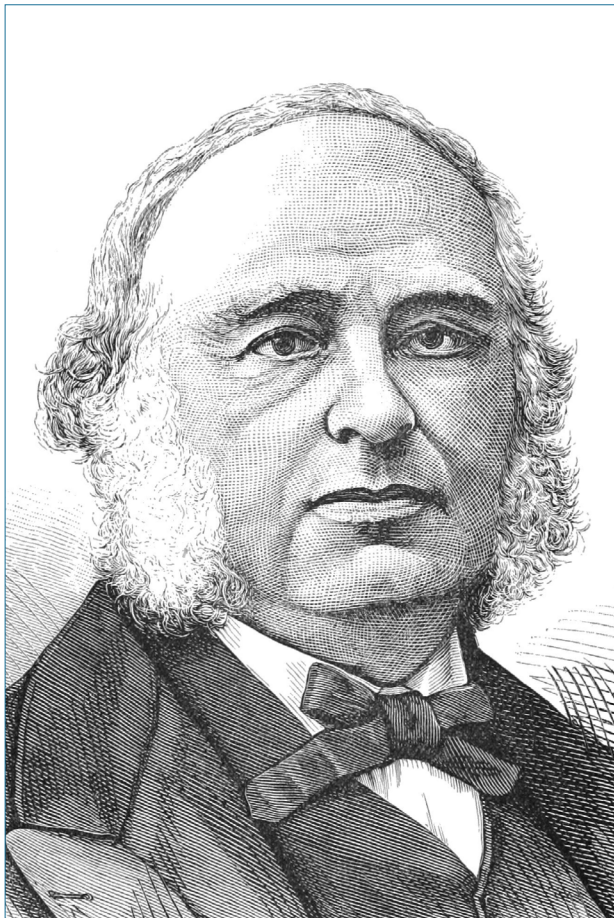
In 2021, Darwin's sexism was finally acknowledged, by a Princeton University professor, in the most esteemed science journal in the world, aptly titled *Science*. The author, Agustín Fuentes, wrote that some of Darwin's sexist “assertions

were dismally, and dangerously, wrong. ‘*Descent*’ [of *Man* is a book] ... not to venerate” as is common among many evolutionists today.<sup>9</sup> Fuentes writes that, despite

“... some innovative inferences, [Darwin’s book] ‘*Descent*’ is often problematic, prejudiced, and injurious. Darwin thought he was relying on data, objectivity, and scientific thinking in describing human evolutionary outcomes. But for much of the book, he was not. ‘*Descent*’, like so many of the scientific tomes of Darwin’s day, offers a racist and sexist view of humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

Fuentes concluded that Darwin, in his book *The Descent of Man* (figure 2),

“... identified women as less capable than [white] men, often akin to the ‘lower races’. He described man as more courageous, energetic, inventive, and



**Figure 1.** Paul Broca was one of the most respected anatomists of the last century. Consequently, his beliefs about women were very influential in science. In 1848, he founded a free-thinker society and was an active supporter of Charles Darwin. He is famous for stating “I would rather be a transformed ape than a degenerate son of Adam.” (Memoir of Paul Broca, *J. Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 10:242–261, 1881.)

intelligent, invoking natural and sexual selection as justification, despite the lack of concrete data and biological assessment. His adamant assertions about the centrality of male agency and the passivity of the female in evolutionary processes, for humans and across the animal world, resonate with both Victorian and contemporary misogyny. ... Darwin was a perceptive scientist whose views on race and sex should have been more influenced by data and his own lived experience. But Darwin’s racist and sexist beliefs, echoing the views of scientific colleagues and his society, were powerful mediators of his perception of reality.”<sup>9</sup>

One example of sexism is Darwin’s conclusion that women were at a “lower level of development” than men, due to their “earlier arrest of individual evolution”. Darwin and many other evolutionists of the time believed that, because women had smaller brains, they were “eternally primitive” and childlike, less spiritual, more materialistic, and “a real danger to contemporary civilization”.<sup>10</sup> Darwin reviewed historical proof that supported his view that women were inferior to men.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, Darwin’s daughter Henrietta was one of the main editors of Darwin’s *Descent of Man* book. Some Darwin scholars speculate that Darwin’s original words were toned down by Henrietta when she edited the book. Furthermore, these ideas are surprising in view of the fact that Darwin had extensive correspondence with many intelligent, educated women, as documented in a 270-page collection of a select sample of these letters.<sup>12</sup>

Darwinist ideas were critically important in developing and maintaining sexist ideas in society as a whole. Darwin’s writing was an especially important influence on sexism because it is uncontested that Darwin’s ideas had a profound influence on the entire academic and scientific world. In fact, “‘*The Descent of Man*’ is one of the most influential books in the history of human evolutionary science.”<sup>9</sup>

As noted, leading evolutionists have finally openly acknowledged the fact that Darwin influenced the sexism that developed after the biblical foundation of the equality of the sexes was undermined. That one of the world’s leading scientific journals, *Science*, has acknowledged Darwin’s major contribution to this problem will help open the door to others to publicly document this fact.

### Many leading Darwinists followed Darwin

The contribution of Darwin to the denigration of women is well known. Less well known is the fact that many leading Darwinists were as aggressive as Darwin, if not more so, in defending the position that women were intellectually inferior

to men. One example is George Romanes (1848–1884; figure 3). He was the youngest of Charles Darwin’s academic co-workers, and therefore his evolution opinions are historically important.<sup>13</sup> Romanes became Darwin’s research assistant during the last eight years of Darwin’s life. His work for Darwin was essential to Darwin’s compiling the information required for his later books.

Romanes, the man who said he ‘venerated’ Darwin,<sup>14</sup> had been a Christian, but became an agnostic due to Darwin’s influence.<sup>15</sup> Some, including Romanes’ religious wife, claimed he (Romanes) regained some of his religious belief during his final illness. Just before his untimely death at age 46, Romanes published an important three-volume work titled *Darwin and After Darwin*.<sup>16</sup>

### Romanes’ views on women

Romanes concluded that the main difference between men and women concerned their mental faculties of intellect, emotion, and will.<sup>17</sup> The rationale he used to justify this view was as follows:

“... the average brain-weight of women is about five ounces less than that of men, on merely anatomical grounds we should be prepared to expect a marked inferiority of intellectual power in the former [women]. Moreover, as the general physique of women is less robust than that of men—and therefore less able to sustain the fatigue of serious or prolonged brain-action—we should also, on physiological grounds, be prepared to entertain a similar anticipation. In actual fact we find that the inferiority displays itself most conspicuously in a comparative absence of originality, and this more especially in the higher levels of intellectual work.”<sup>18</sup>

He added that the intellectual difference between males and females is not apparent until the woman reaches her full development as an adult. Then “it becomes apparent that there is a greater power of amassing knowledge on the part of the male.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, regardless of if

“... we look to the general average or to the intellectual giants of both sexes, we are similarly met with the general fact that a woman’s [fund of] information is less wide, and deep, and thorough, than that of a man. What we regard as a highly-cultured woman is usually one who has read largely but superficially; and even in the few instances that can be quoted of extraordinary female industry—which, on account of their rarity, stand out as exceptions to prove the rule—we find a long distance between them and the much more numerous instances of profound erudition among men. ... there can be no real question that the

female mind stands considerably below the male.”<sup>20</sup>

Romanes concluded that he was referring to average differences, and thus

“It would be easy to find multitudes of instances where women display better judgment than men ... . But that as a general rule the judgment of women is inferior to that of men has been a matter of universal recognition from the earliest times.”<sup>20</sup>

One compensatory factor is that although

“... woman has been a loser in the intellectual race as regards acquisition, origination, and judgment, she has gained ... certain very conspicuous advantages. First among these we must place refinement of the senses, or higher evolution of sense-organs. Next we must place rapidity of perception, which no doubt in part arises from this higher evolution of the sense-organs—or, rather, both arise from a greater refinement of nervous organization.”<sup>21</sup>

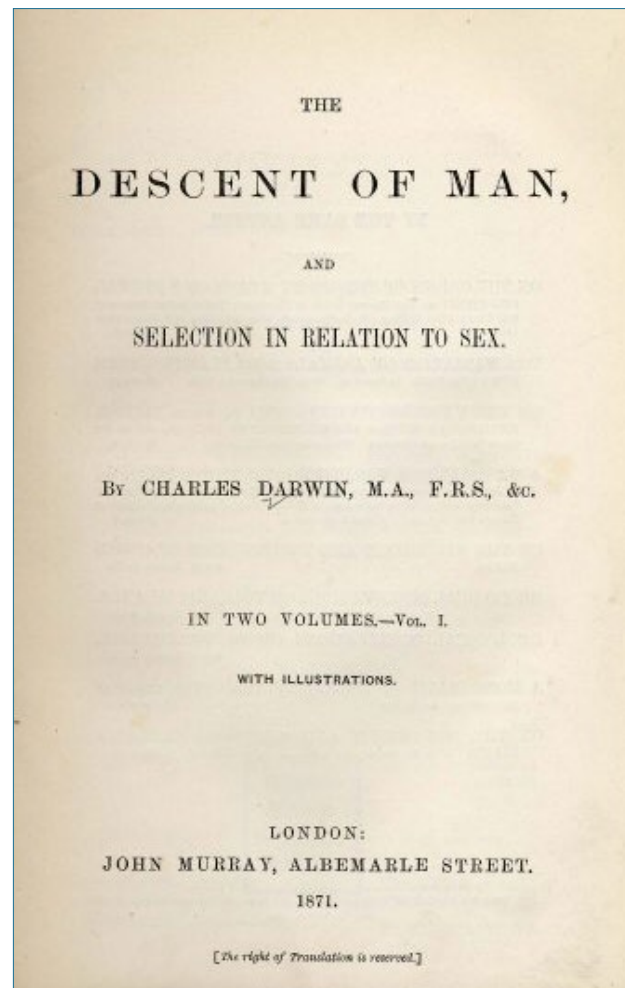
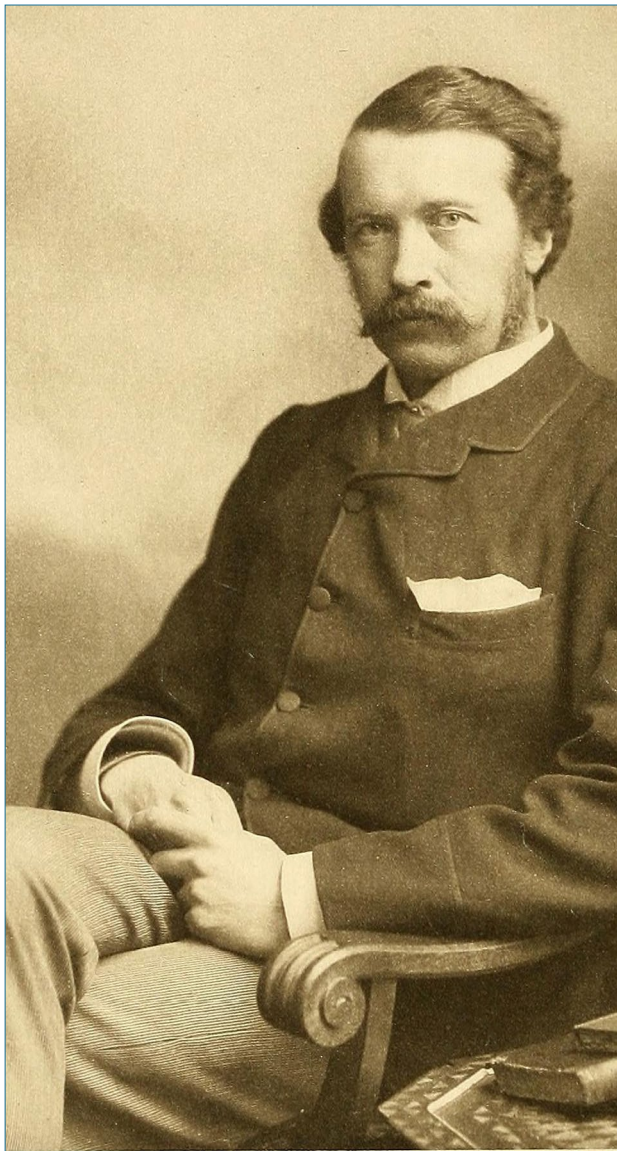


Figure 2. *The Descent of Man* was one of the most influential books in science ever written. This is the title page of the first edition.

Furthermore, Romanes claimed that women, in contrast to men, almost always had less willpower and, as a result, were more apt to break away

“... from the restraint of reason, and to overwhelm the mental chariot in disaster. Whether this tendency displays itself in the overmastering form of hysteria, or in the more ordinary form of comparative childishness, ready annoyance, and a generally unreasonable temper—in whatever form this supremacy of emotion displays itself ...”<sup>22</sup>

He also claimed that “We rarely find in women that firm tenacity of purpose and determination to overcome obstacles which is characteristic of what we call a manly mind.”<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 3.** George Romanes was a leading supporter of Darwin and wrote widely about Darwinism in his books and articles.

Romanes quoted Sir J. Crichton Browne who concluded that, not only is the cortex of the female brain shallower than the male, but it also receives less than its proportional supply of blood than the male. For these reasons, women’s mental inferiority could not be explained by the lack of educational advantages enjoyed by males.<sup>24</sup> The explanation for these differences, Romanes concludes, is that males are more evolved than females. As Darwin himself wrote, as a result of natural selection, “man has ultimately become superior to woman”,<sup>25</sup> claiming that the chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is proven

“... by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. ... if men are capable of decided eminence over women in many subjects, the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of women.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the male

“... being accustomed to rely upon its own strength, is self-central and self-contained: to it the need of external aid, even of a supernatural kind, is not felt to be so urgent as it is to the feminine character, whose only hope is in the stronger arm of another. ‘The position of man is to stand, of woman to lean’ ... although it may be hard for even a manly nature to contemplate the mystery of life ...”<sup>26</sup>

Another example of the women-are-less-evolved-than-men belief was provided by anthropologist Luke Owen. In an 1872 article in which he attempted to be balanced, he nonetheless wrote:

“Among other and better-known features distinguishing the female sex from the male, are the smallness of the brain-case, the width of the pelvis, and the tendency to deposit adipose tissue, rather than muscular fiber. To the rule, of course, there are exceptions; there are masculine women just as there are effeminate men ...”<sup>27</sup>

He added, “the desire, if not the capacity, for the prolonged study of abstruse subjects, is less in the female than in the male; and [therefore her] mental activity pursues another course.”<sup>27</sup>

One last example, of many I could cite, that illustrates this view is anthropologist Gustave Le Bon, who published the following in a respected mainline anthropology journal:

“... there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas ... This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it. ... All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women ... recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they

are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man. They excel in fickleness, inconsistency, absence of thought and logic, and incapacity to reason. ... distinguished women ... are as exceptional as [is] the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, of a gorilla with two heads; consequently we may neglect them entirely.”<sup>28</sup>

This particular idea was challenged, beginning at the start of the last century and has now been effectively overthrown.

### Summary

Darwin and many leading evolutionists and academics accepted the idea that women were less evolved than men, had a smaller brain than men, and thus were less intelligent. This belief demeaned women and strongly impeded women’s educational and social progress for generations. Furthermore, remnants of this myth still exist today. Evolutionists ignored the scriptural teaching of equality that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, man and woman are created equally in the image of God and together have dominion over the earth:

“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”<sup>30</sup>

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