

The role of aesthetic judgements in Darwin's discussion of race

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In 1795, Blumenbach wanted to determine which race is the most similar to the "original human form" (Junker, 2018, p. 105). He argued that Caucasian and European people are the most similar to this form, based on his beliefs of degeneration, and based on his own aesthetic judgement. Specifically, he believed that variations of the physical characteristics of races (such as skin tone and the shape of skulls) is caused by "degeneration", i.e. changes brought about by one's geographical location—by the climate one inhabited, and one's environment (p. 104). Thus, Blumenbach argued that Caucasians and Europeans are the most similar because their population centres are the closest to where the "original humans" lived (p. 104). He then substantiated his point further by invoking beauty, arguing that Caucasian and European skulls are the most beautiful (compared to other races' skulls), and that they represent a "mean type" because "their skin colour is white" (p. 105). Thus, while Blumenbach did not invoke aesthetic judgements in his racial hierarchy construction, he painted Caucasians and Europeans in a positive and favourable light via his aesthetic judgement, by presuming that there is a beauty standard for skulls and for skin tones, and that Caucasians and Europeans are the closest to it. Thus, while we should view Blumenbach's hierarchy as being grounded on physical and geographical reasoning, we should be sensitive and aware of Blumenbach's aesthetic judgments.

Thus, in this essay, I examine Darwin's field notes during his voyage on the HMS Beagle, specifically his encounters with the Fuegians on Tierra del Fuego from December 1832 to January 1833, and his work, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). I examine Darwin's discussion of race, and ask whether Darwin made any aesthetic

judgements about the Fuegians, and if he did, whether such aesthetic judgements influenced his discussion of race and race science. Through my analysis, I aim to answer to what extent, and on what basis, is Darwin's discussion and findings scientific.

Stecker (2019) defines aesthetic experiences as "the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience" (p. 23). While Stecker does not outright define what aesthetic judgements are, I take his definition of aesthetic experiences and his definition of value as a baseline for my definition of aesthetic judgements. Stecker (2019) argues that we need not decide whether there is a correct or objective definition of aesthetic value (p. 20). He argues that we can choose a definition which suits our project, and that we should be aware of the limitations of our choice definition and our act of choosing. He notes that aesthetic value is "the value of a type of experience" (p. 21), which is subjective (p. 22), as someone is required to value the experience before the experience itself has aesthetic value. He also notes that "[a]esthetic value is a 'first order' value that is not constituted by other values" (p. 17). This provides us with a baseline on which we can examine aesthetic judgements made in discussions of race. For example, when Blumenbach claimed that Caucasian and European skulls are the most beautiful, he did so in comparison to other races' skulls, and made a value judgement of his aesthetic experience of the skull itself. Is this judgement scientific? I will address this momentarily; Let us focus on how we might disagree with Blumenbach. This baseline also provides us grounds for disagreement, given that aesthetic experiences are subjective. That is, we can disagree with Blumenbach that Caucasian and European skulls are beautiful, let alone the most beautiful, if we argue that our experience of the skull is not an aesthetic experience in the first place (because we do not value the skull for its own sake, &c). Furthermore, since Blumenbach did not state his criteria or definition of beauty, and given the lack of consensus of what aesthetic properties

and aesthetic value is (p. 19, 36), the burden is on Blumenbach to supply a more rigorous analysis by supplying us with his definition of beauty. Returning to the question of whether Blumenbach's aesthetic judgement is scientific or not, therein lies the problem: what counts as scientific for 1795/1833's standards? Does the fact that Blumenbach makes aesthetic judgement gives us ground to reject the claims he made? I argue that we need not adjudicate on this, or on the distinction between scientific and aesthetic judgements. It is sufficient for us to point out the lack of rigour in Blumenbach's approach and claims (given our contemporary standards), and observe how race science has evolved through history. We will return to whether Blumenbach could have been more rigorous, when we discuss Darwin's retractions of his claims about the Fuegians. This is the approach I intend to take in my examination of Darwin's discussion of race.

What is Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* about? Before we respond to this question, let us ask a similar, illustrative question: what is *Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray*, an oil on canvas double portrait, about? Painted by Martin in 1778, the painting portrays two cousins: Dido Elizabeth Belle, a British gentlewoman, and Lady Elizabeth Murray, a member of the British aristocracy (English Heritage, n.d.). The painting itself is unusual because it depicts the two as equals, an unusual choice for the time (which predates both Darwin's and Blumenbach's works). Thus, when making artistic works, one is required to not only decide on who are the subjects, but also how to portray said subjects. Depicting them as equals is a conscious choice, requiring more effort than the norm (which is to leave people like Dido out of the painting altogether). This is an example of a value judgement—that Dido is worth portraying in the first place, and worth portraying as an equal. Thus, by asking what is the content of Darwin's book, and who are the subjects of said content, we are not only able to examine Darwin's discussion of race, but also point out that aesthetic judgements (necessarily) feature in his work. That is, because Darwin's book is

about humans, some aesthetic judgement is required (to build a theory of race). How we perceive objects (e.g. paintings, the environment, race) is a complex discussion in aesthetics (see (Stecker, 2019, p. 110) for an introduction). Aesthetic perceptions is a crucial part of a complete analysis of aesthetic experiences. Nevertheless, such rigour will not feature in this essay, as it is sufficient for our discussion to simply note that Darwin personally interacted with some of the subjects of his inquiry, such as the Fuegians. Based on his personal experiences, and the discussions and works of others, he developed his race science. Thus, through his aesthetic experiences of the world (and in particular, of people of other races), Darwin developed his race science.

Recall Stecker's definition of aesthetic experiences. Did Darwin have an aesthetic experience when he met with the Fuegians? In Chapter XI of his field notes, Darwin (1839) recounts his interactions with the locals (p. 227). He stated that their clothes were "tattered", that some of them "closely resembled the devils which come on the stage in such plays as *Der Freischutz*" (p. 227-8). They spoke in an inarticulate manner, and had a striking ability to mimic the British's speech (p. 229). When Darwin reintroduced a Fuegian which was previously brought back to the United Kingdom, he said that this particular Fuegian was "ashamed" to be back (p. 230). Darwin was particularly intrigued by their flirting abilities, noting that he believed one of them stood taller and corrected their posture when Darwin looked at him (p. 230). Darwin believed that that particular Fuegian "thought himself the handsomest man in *Tierra del Fuego*" (p. 230), which is significant since this is a clear example of his subjective interpretation of what happened. Later in the week, Darwin notes the lifestyle of the Fuegians, stating that they lived like hunters and gathers, moving from place to place (p. 234). He noted that Fuegians exiled others for acting "badly" (p. 234), indicating moral agency. In a footnote, Darwin compared the various standards of living of the natives he has encountered from his travels, noting that while some races and people are

"sufficiently wretched", the Fuegians are technologically advanced and physically capable (despite being wretched themselves) (p. 235). His tone and phrasing suggests his favour towards the Fuegians. He also believes that because the Fuegians have a steady population, they "enjoy a sufficient share of happiness [...] to render life worth having" (p. 237). More insights can be drawn from Darwin's rich and detailed field notes, but this will suffice. Given Darwin's phrasing, it is clear that Darwin made aesthetic judgments about the Fuegians and their living standards. He also generalised them based on particular interactions of a number of Fuegians (e.g. that Fuegians have some level of happiness because their population is steady, supplemented by his personal interactions with some of them). It should be noted that Darwin did not directly ask any Fuegians whether they were happy (because he could not communicate with them?). Instead, he arrived at his claim via indirect evidence and observations. It should also be noted that Darwin's observations are not neutral (e.g. because he described their clothes as tattered; because he believed some felt shame, pride, &c). In particular, he made aesthetic judgements outright (e.g. likening them to devils in stage plays). Thus, Darwin likely had aesthetic experiences while interacting with the Fuegians, as he was attending to them and their features (e.g. their behaviours, their clothes, &c) for the sake of the experience itself. That is, he wanted to know what the Fuegians are like, which is the necessary attitude for the creation of aesthetic experiences. One could argue that Darwin attended to the Fuegians for the sake of his research project, or for the sake of knowledge, but I disagree. One can have ulterior motives while still attending to something in and of itself (thus, fulfilling the necessary conditions for aesthetic experiences to arise).

How does Darwin's aesthetic experiences relate to his race science? In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin (1871) explores the nature of race, stating that he is only interested in the "constants" of racial traits, and perhaps race's "physiological effects" (p. 214). Darwin argues that people of different races, except Black people, are more

alike than we presuppose. He substantiates this claim by showing his acquaintances a French photograph with people of different racial backgrounds, and remarking that his acquaintances judge them all to "pass for Europeans" (p. 216). He then argues that if the same acquaintances were to see people of different races in person, his acquaintances would point out racial differences. Specifically, he asserts that people would point out physical features, such as skin tones, as evidence for racial differences. This is a multi-layered aesthetic judgement which serves as evidence for his racial science claim. Here, Darwin subtly argues that certain racial differences are significant (e.g. one's skin tone). Furthermore, Darwin uses aesthetic judgements to claim that racial differences are not as significant as one might expect (e.g. because people of different races would "pass for European"). Skin tone is not the only characteristic Darwin examines. Darwin claims that races are similar in "mind" (p. 232). Darwin states that the Fuegians' minds are similar to "ours", i.e. his own, and to Europeans' minds in general (p. 232). Regarding his mind claim, it is unclear whether aesthetic judgements feature, given the ambiguity of the term "similar". Nevertheless, Darwin argues that racial differences can be known, metaphysically, as he states that "the distinctive characters of every race of man were highly variable" (p. 225). In this case, Darwin suggests that race science research projects can be successful because the differences are "highly variable", and thus observable (he makes this claim despite worrying that the differences between people in a specific race group is itself highly variable?). He also notes that there are variations within races themselves (p. 225-6), which poses a metaphysical concern on how one can determine what are the constants of a race, and what is "allowed" to be varied. Darwin has other metaphysical worries. Darwin argues that fertility and sterility are not sound distinctions of races, as it is not immediately apparent that race is the sole and primary cause of fertility (and fertility in the context of interracial marriages) (p. 222). He argues the natural laws that govern such results are exceedingly complex, and thus unknown (to him).

Here, Darwin is aware of what can and cannot generate knowledge in his race science. Thus, Darwin was careful not to presuppose the number of distinct races (p. 226). This is important, as one's ontology or classification of race is the basis of one's analysis. In the same vein, Darwin notes the discussion of whether all humans, regardless of race, descended from a "primitive stock" (p. 226), whatever that might be. Thus, while Darwin resists some ontological commitments, he still undertakes at least one—that all people are descended from the same "stock".

It should be noted what Darwin's scope left out intentionally. Darwin was not interested in a physical theory of skin tones. For example, Boyle, Newton, Hooke, and their contemporaries were "preoccupied with optics and the relation of light to colour" (Burton & Ghoshal, 2024, p. 215). In particular, they wanted to determine the "underlying basis of different human skin colours" (p. 215). Thus, through Darwin's choice of research questions, value judgements of skin tones do not feature prominently in his discussions. Were there associations with skin colours in people's discussions of race science? Jablonski (2020) argues that "colours themselves are value-neutral, but they gain meaning from our experiences and associations with them" (p. 438). More precisely, she argues that we observe a historical change from skin tones being indicators of "geographical origin" to "a criterion of [...] cultural differences" (p. 438). Jablonski notes that researchers such as Linnaeus, Kant, Buffon, &c, did not leave their countries, and only built their discussions on accounts from travellers. Darwin did, which exposed him to first-hand interactions with people of other races. While this does not prevent Darwin from valuing white skin over other racial traits, it puts him in a position to come to his own conclusions, based on his own observations (as seen in his field notes and flagship book). Jablonski notes that Kant associated black skin tones "embodied evil, inferiority, and moral negation of "white, light and goodness"" (p. 441). We see this attitude feature in Darwin's field notes when he likened the appearance of

the Fuegians to devils in stage plays, but it does not feature prominently in his flagship book itself (e.g. in his French photograph discussion). Thus, the differences in Darwin's discussion compared to e.g. Newton's discussion is in Darwin's lack of desire to know the physical processes of how skin tones come about (p. 443). That is, since Darwin was primarily concerned about the constants of races, and not of skin tones themselves, he was not trapped by this framing. Nevertheless, I note that it can be argued that Darwin held such associations, despite it not featuring prominently in his claims about racial trait constants.

Kant's attitudes about race science are not limited to skin tone associations to moral agency. In *Of the Different Human Races*, Kant (2000) argues that races are of single lines of descent, and that "[racial traits] are deviations" of constants present in a race. He argues that White people and Black people are clearly of the same species, but of different "genus" because they have different racial traits (p. 9). The question is: is Kant's presupposition of the lineal root genus sound? What does Kant mean, precisely, when he says "interbreeding with other deviations of the same line of descent", in his definition of race (p. 9)? It is unclear how we should interpret Kant's thoughts on interracial marriages, and how it influences our evidence that there is a lineal root genus, and that there are racial traits. This is where Kant and Darwin diverge. Darwin recognised his epistemological limitations, and chose to focus his investigations into what he can know, leaving aside discussions of fertility's influence on constants in races. On that criteria, it can be argued that Darwin had a scientific approach, as he was concerned about what can be determined, and the practical limitations of his investigations (i.e. whether he can determine, from his observations alone, whether that races do indeed have constants in terms of traits).

To what extent was Darwin's discussions and findings free from prejudices regarding associations of skin tones? Paul (2009) argues that Darwin's views of evolution were shaped by his time on HMS Beagle from 1831-6 (p. 223). She argues that Darwin's views on

evolution were strongly influenced by his interactions with the natives of Tierra del Fuego (p. 218). Notably, she argues that Darwin acknowledges the imperial and colonial influences he experienced on his travels. Thus, Paul argues that Darwin was aware of the external influences on his own judgement of foreigners, and thus was careful in his judgements and theory-crafting (p. 218). Darwin argues we are community-spirited because of natural selection (p. 219). The problem with Paul's analysis is in how Darwin came to his conclusions. Consciousness of imperial and colonial systems does not exempt one from its influences. Furthermore, it can be questioned whether Darwin's methodology of observation of different races can even be successful for a race science analysis. Thus, while we cannot be certain what prejudices or attitudes towards skin tones or other aesthetic judgements Darwin held, we do know that he was (minimally) careful in his methodology, and mindful of his own biases.

Did Darwin retract any of his statements or claims about the Fuegians? Radick (2010) argues that Darwin did not change his mind that the Fuegians were "low" in "intellectual and moral character" (p. 50). Radick argues that it is a myth that Darwin retracted his statements about the Fuegians, as it was the clergymen who claimed that Darwin retracted it, after his death (p. 54). In reality, Radick claims, Darwin likely never changed his mind, that Fuegians are "savages" but "improvable" (p. 53). Notably, it is likely that Darwin (had always) misunderstood the Fuegians' initial words when he arrived at Tierra del Fuego, as they likely said "be kind to us" instead of "give me" (the latter being Darwin's interpretation; p. 52). Thus, could Darwin have been more rigorous in his discussions of race science? (Similarly, could Blumenbach have been more rigorous?) If Darwin had been more attentive to the Fuegians' language, as Bridges had been (p. 52), could he have viewed the Fuegians in a different light? Radick notes that Darwin considered the word "yammerschooner", of which

the Fuegians repeatedly said to Darwin and the crew, as "odious" (p. 53). Darwin had a value judgement of a word he did not properly translate, which is bad scientific practice.

In conclusion, I have shown that aesthetic experiences were a necessary, and limited part of Darwin's discussion of race. Darwin used his aesthetic experiences in select parts of his discussion of race, specifically in some of his intermediary (e.g. that a group of people is not technologically advanced) and main claims (e.g. that a group of people are savages and requires external intervention so that the group might improve, because they are not technologically advanced). I note that Darwin does make use of non-aesthetic, subjective standards to build towards his main claims (e.g. comparison claims, claiming that one group of people is similar to another, while another group is dissimilar). I also note that Darwin has resisted ascribing inherent values and associations to skin tone, as others have done outright, but nonetheless makes such judgements in his works. Thus, by 1833's standards, Darwin had a progressive and scientific take, which was careful and considerate in its methodology. Darwin took the effort to gain first-hand interactions with the people he wanted to write about, instead of relying on testimony from travellers. I note the limitations of my scope, as Darwin's main conclusion in his flagship work is that sexual-selection is based on cultural standards of beauty (i.e. one group of people has a standard of beauty, while another group has another). Thus, Darwin does assert an aesthetic claim, which is casted in doubt by Bridges, who observed that "Fuegian men prefer the looks of European women" (Radick, 2010, p. 51). Nevertheless, despite my noted limitations, within my scope of analysis, I have shown instances where Darwin's work features aesthetic judgements.

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