

**Darwin, Literature, and Communication:  
On Two-way Communication and Darwin's Paradox  
Leonard Moss**

“There is no conflict between natural selection and human ethics,” Ernst Mayr comments in *Populations, Species, and Evolution*, “ethical qualities in a social organism are important components of fitness” (389). Darwin’s paradox is, in fact, at the heart of most serious ethical, philosophical, and literary pursuits. A useful theory of interpersonal communication, for instance, can be derived from that concept.

Darwin observed, to summarize the paradox, that organisms respond to the challenge of change, from life to death or from stability to disorder, with contrasting solutions. Plants and animals either preserve the species identity by actively duplicating the *original* form and function, or adapt to change by duplicating (perhaps passively) a *variant* form and function. The avenue to constancy is persistent reassertion of identity and rejection of change. The avenue to adaptation is accommodation to change and modification of the identity.

Paradoxically, these contrasting responses may co-exist in a single organism as well as in a population, sometimes in harmony but typically at odds. In either context, the drive for preservation can conflict with the mechanisms of adaptation. In humans this clash, displaying both repetition of and deviation from the norm, plays out with radically different outcomes, beneficial or destructive, in gender communication.

In one common version, more mythology than reality, the contradiction has been dramatized as rivalry taking place between male and female opponents or between male and female components within an individual. A psychological interplay between stubborn authority and malleable receptivity has gotten extended to an ongoing division between the sexes. Darwin’s paradox—the contrast between preservation of identity and

deviation—becomes visualized as a lopsided contest between masculine stability and feminine inconstancy, an unbending manager dealing with a changeable responder.

The general outlines of this unequal contest have been repeated innumerable times as both an inward duel and a social drama. An assertive masculine identity enacts the role of a disciplined commander, knowledgeable and consistent but dogmatic, narrow-minded, and unyielding. A stereotypical childish female comes on the stage receptive and lovable but dependent and volatile.

One identity proclaims, the other reacts. One typifies manly solidity in bearing and moral position, an immovable force of rigid conservative character; the other welcomes imaginative diversions and cultivates compassion—a liberal, openly expressive temperament. The masculine self supposedly provides confidence, order, control; the feminine self favors intuitive answers to domestic problems. They promote recurring agendas, but the conservative self usually prevails. (I have more to say on this contest in *Darwin and Literature*).

When they disagree, or when one side dominates, the consequence can be intellectual, emotional, or even physical malfunction. The female child becomes timid, fearful, and self-pitying; the male boss dictates with anger and intolerance. E. Y. Harburg, a popular American songwriter, lamented the never-ending debate:

My heart wants roots,  
My mind wants wings.  
I cannot bear their bickerings.

Yet they occasionally collaborate, and when they do (typically under male supervision) they can generate an adaptive vitality grounded in both steadiness and useful change. They can work together to mobilize mental energies, avoid stagnation or despair, and find at least tentative (not necessarily final) answers to dilemmas arising in the communal and natural environments. Ideally, parties motivated to understand each other elicit a productive intimacy in their talks, a potent fusion of constancy and flexibility, Darwin's twin requirements for species renewal.

But dialogue that coordinates these contrasting attributes among dissimilar individuals or within populations is hard to come by. It is easy enough to recommend but awkward to bring about in daily practice. How to produce that dialogue? Constructive conversation depends on the talent each party brings to the art of listening critically as well as speaking persuasively. Evaluating a diversity of information requires skill as demanding as expressing a conventional certainty; without appraising unfamiliar but potentially useful variants of or departures from well-known, reliable, generally accepted truths, a sacred message can become a stagnant and ineffective monologue. Thoughtful receptivity added to thoughtful assertion determine the quality of good communication.

Yet both skills are seldom found together. Commonly, one party announces truths while the other only listens. Even when highly articulate, participants in a discussion tend to be one-sided. To simplify and direct conventional relationships, human abilities have been segregated by gender, with assertiveness and certainty allocated to a commanding male, receptivity and compassion assigned to a subordinate male or a female. An agent of authority--whether father, husband, or boss; professor, doctor, lawyer, or auto mechanic; ruler, therapist, or God--transmits facts and ideas vital to our survival as a species. Those agents usually elevate or cater to masculine power and control most initiatives.

An unrelenting insistence upon the age-old image of women as children, servants, playthings, scapegoats, or savages--an insistence fortified by female collusion or resignation--supports male contestants in the Darwinian tussle between champions of preservation and promoters of variation. And an unrelenting autocratic insistence upon the inherent superiority of a designated ethnic group, assisted by the collusion or resignation of subordinates, intensifies the support. As a result, the commanders, driving hard to magnify the status quo, win their contest with the adapters. One-way talk becomes the default mode of gender exchange!

That outcome can be illustrated in a general way with a typical unbalanced male-female partnership that may be labeled a Pygmalion relationship. Despite good-faith efforts to establish equality, a creative master remains locked into a managerial mode, while an adaptable woman, my fair lady, retains the sense and habits of a beautiful statue

or a loyal servant. There is no reciprocation, either of self-assertion by her or receptivity by him. The partners fail to achieve mutual accommodation: a dominant craftsman shapes pliable material in a civilized routine of gender subjugation. Leadership that lacks reciprocity becomes the cause, not the consequence, of inequality.

Restrictive boundaries may be set, of course, not only by gender, race, caste, and economic class but also by many other arbitrarily imposed categories. These categories, when not wholly arbitrary, may give stability to our identities and direction to our transactions, but at the same time they block unanticipated benefits called up by intimate interface between established doctrine and reform, between inertia and flexibility. The systematic order they mandate suppresses or sacrifices talents and innovations needed for the success of our species.

Instead of imposing real or imagined limitations, we can profit (increase evolutionary advantage) by drawing upon the minds of people drafted into such categories. We can profit by integrating their outlooks with ours, each side supplying fertile feedback to complement intense listening. That project does not require profound thought, just attention and careful response to what is said. We are talking about hearing with respect the other person's experiences and ideas while coming to substantial conclusions. Though difficult to bring about, we need heartfelt exchange if we are to survive. Is that too much to ask?

How to connect? How to create kinship? The antidote for one-way talk is two-way talk. Converting Darwin's paradox into a mode of serious dialogue directs each contributor to be both authoritative and adaptable, which is best done by taking turns with each role. I will speak clearly and forcefully, acting as a reliable source of information; you will listen critically and intently, acting as an impressionable recipient with the ability to revise supposed certainties. *Then we switch roles!* By sharing opinions, feelings, judgments, and facts we may arrive at workable, mutually comfortable decisions that empower both parties.

To accomplish this collaboration we try to avoid distrust, condescension, and fixed attitudes—not easy to do, but the rewards are significant when two segregated identities, whether male and female, senior and junior, local and foreign, teacher and student,

or any other set of contrasting individuals, come together and respect each other's competence, thoughts, and history. Conversation that somehow balances consistency with plasticity provides a stimulating yet stable forum for creating successful relationships and (hopefully) for solving difficult problems.

Are such transactions feasible? In my experience, the answer is *yes* if people, even an authority figure and a responder, interact as if they *each* possessed the capacity to both transmit and absorb vital survival information, *as if they were peers* rather than participants in culturally imposed inequality, as if they were not immobilized by a contradiction between tradition and versatility, by an impasse between predetermined, unchanging, superior status and practical revision.

The objective: avoid the extremes--dictatorship, or disorder, or passivity (seclusion, non-participation). The key to a mutually beneficial relationship, either private or public, expressed either in written or spoken words: do not fear to accept other values, virtues, and talents. Multiple accounts of the stability-fluidity paradox may be integrated by tolerant interaction. Two heads can be better than one even when, or especially when, they function in dissimilar ways--a democratic bias!

The rewards are personally as well as socially valuable. Each party, whether an individual, social group, or institution, enriches and augments both its entitlement (influence and credibility) and its adaptability (empathy and ingenuity) by repeatedly practicing both self-expression and subordination. Acting alternately as authority and adapter deepens the wisdom and heightens the energy of the actor. The greatest benefit of two-way talk may be the positive impact of the speaker and listener on themselves!

For many people, of course, interdependence, the liberal exchange of personal resources, may seem irrelevant to their need for certainty, confidence, endurance. They seek the one-way guidance, protection, or sponsorship offered by a secular authority—an older relative, a teacher, a public official, a celebrity, a wise author. Others find reliance on a supernatural leader indispensable.

Unfortunately, over-reliance upon experts may produce distorted results, as the history of aggressive religious fanatics, dictators, fashion mongers, and other self-seeking megalomaniacs and their followers has demonstrated. Could such dependence involve

positive two-way exchange? Can a mutually supportive relationship come about when one party is far more prominent than the other? Can some ultimate power receive a blessing as well as contribute one; can we contribute to it as well as gain from it?

Hard to say. At best, one can only assume the utility of a bond of mutual respect and mutual benefit. Why not? After all, God, as portrayed in both Western Testaments, seems to personify the two capacities that sustain and puzzle humanity. God (like any benevolent sponsor) can be responsive, open to change, and adaptable as well as staunchly commanding—a good listener and an unlimited source of open-minded experimentation as well as conservative reliability. I discuss the correspondence between human and superhuman agents in *Darwin and Literature*; beyond that, God's character and function remain inexplicable to me.

In any case, conflict between the motive to maintain constancy—the dream of permanence—and the need to adjust life's variable boundaries—the dream of metamorphosis—will undoubtedly continue to animate and plague Darwin's creatures. And we humans will keep trying to navigate the paradox to our advantage. For an everyday, down-to-earth example of that effort, here is my wife's formula for profitable letter-writing:

Today on our routine walk, Len and I talked about how to keep correspondence going with friends. I said “people who are after information or meaning like to communicate for two reasons: one is that they are interested in some topic you present, and the other reason is to discuss their own topic or project. So in order to keep the correspondence going you need to arouse people's interest in some topic of yours and also show your interest in subjects they care about.”

Her advice makes sense. Most folks are only too eager to talk about their concerns, and if given the opportunity they often wish to share in another person's concerns. So take turns speaking and listening, or writing and reading! The verbal assertion-reception exchange can exploit Darwin's organic repetition-variation tussle and circum-

vent the antagonisms (male against female, aristocrat versus commoner, boss over worker, etc.) that have been raised by selfish and inflexible partisans. Whatever our social position, we can learn from other perspectives: the professor teaches and learns from his students, the parent fashions and is completed by his child, the government by its citizens, the husband by his wife, the doctor by his patient, the believer by his God. Set authority can nurture originality rather than override it. Originality can accept authority rather than fear or undermine it.

[Next posting: “Darwin and the Bible: The Hebrew Origin of Species”]