Foregoing Intellectual Powers: Exploring Social Instincts in "The Old Gentleman"

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Charles Darwin proclaimed that fitness, which includes instincts, determines survival. In application to society, Darwin takes that theory a step further: in order to survive—or rather thrive—in society, humans rely upon their innate “social instincts” (1279). But just how powerful are these “social instincts” that Darwin claims humans possess? According to Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, these selfless social instincts eventually prevail, which can lead to the willingness of animals or humans “to risk or sacrifice significant amounts of their own good, sometimes their own lives, for the benefits of others” (Brandhorst 6). However, these risks or sacrifices are not made on a consistent basis, and extend “only to those of the same community,” wherein they are “highly beneficial to the species” (Darwin 1279). Theodore Hook’s “The Old Gentleman”—a neglected Victorian short story—actually participates in this discussion of social instincts, for it portrays the narrator’s imbalance of instincts that is created by a new trait (the power of mind reading and foresight). However, this imbalance of instincts causes external struggles between the narrator and society. Ultimately,
“The Old Gentleman” suggests that the supernatural power of mind reading and foresight clashes with Darwinian social instincts when an individual forsakes his “intellectual powers” (Brandhorst 9) and sympathy. Moreover, this forsaking of social instincts can potentially become detrimental to the individual with the instinct imbalance, which can even lead to a societal unfitness, resulting in removal from a community.

As Brandhorst describes, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin names three “intellectual powers” that enable “those who have them to understand and predict the behavior of others”: “language,” “experience,” and “habit” (9). Unfortunately, the narrator of “The Old Gentleman” fails to rely upon these three intellectual powers, contributing to his numerous failed social interactions. Instead, the narrator relies upon supernatural gifts—mind reading and foresight—given to him by the curious old gentleman who follows him home in order to fulfill the narrator’s desire and vain pursuit for the last five or six years. These supernatural gifts only apply to others, meaning the narrator cannot foresee his own future, unless it is inextricably linked with that of others. Naturally, this limits the narrator from fully foreseeing the consequences of his actions. This degree of uncertainty may at first seem to be the downfall of the narrator. However, the following examples will exhibit the necessity of uncertainty in relationships with others; this uncertainty becomes an advantage when coupled with language, experience, and habit. Thus, ironically, in the end, we can see that the narrator does not have a great enough degree of uncertainty in his interactions with others, which leads to his societal rejection.

In regards to “language,” since the narrator can read minds and foresee future events, he does not have to rely on exchanging “language” with others anymore, and so he foregoes conversation and instead jumps to his own conclusions. For instance, when the narrator divulges a detailed description of Barton’s (his butler) escapades from the preceding evening with his sweetheart and of Barton’s future intentions, the narrator certainly does not gain this knowledge through an exchange of any kind with another human being. As a result, the narrator’s communication becomes very one-sided. In fact, even his perspective is one-sided, for he only sees the intentions of personal gain (especially with Sheringham—the narrator’s pompous friend—and Fanny—the narrator’s initial love interest) and is offended that these individuals of his community are inclined to do anything to his disadvantage—to violate their social instincts. But the narrator, by divulging the information in such detail, is actually hypocritically reacting in ways that bring no benefit to anyone, disregarding his own
social instincts, as he attempts to assuage his own hurt feelings. Naturally, each character assumes that the narrator has gone to extreme lengths to obtain this information; both Barton and Sheringham attribute the narrator’s knowledge to spying (294-5). Mr. Fitman, who is so outraged after the narrator exposes Mr. Fitman’s lie about the quality of the cloth he is attempting to sell him and subsequently even kicks Mr. Fitman down the flight of stairs in his fury, actually files a case against the narrator for assault (298). In these cases where the narrator abuses his supernatural powers and relies on a one-sided conversation, he burns ties with the other characters; none of the results are beneficial to anyone, not even the narrator, though he ignores these results and simply focuses on the “[elation] with the possession of [his] extraordinary faculty” (294).

In addition to creating a one-sided conversation, the narrator also incites mistrust in his relations when he bypasses language. Due to the condition that the narrator must never tell another soul about his power or else he will lose it, the narrator refuses to divulge how he really knows the information. In the case of Barton, the narrator goes so far as to affect “an anger [he does] not feel” in order to protect his power (294). Not surprisingly, each of the characters loses trust in the narrator; ironically, they probably would not believe the real means by which the narrator acquired such intimate knowledge anyway, so trust would probably have been lost either way. Thus, the narrator’s new power is even more disadvantageous to the social instinct of language, for it removes one person’s need for language, while the other person still has the existing need. This loss of a linguistic foundation upon which both sides can stand results in an imbalance. Because communication is so intricately tied to trust (sharing of information builds trust), this imbalance of communication leads to a loss of trust because the narrator withholds information from others.

Unfortunately, this mistrust caused by disregarding language can potentially lead to much more dire consequences than just severing ties; in fact, in “The Old Gentleman,” this mistrust ultimately leads to a communal rejection of the narrator. For instance, Fanny—the narrator’s initial love interest—invites the narrator to the opera, but only on the pretense that he “play propriety during the evening” (297), for she has her eyes on another man—Sir Henry Witherington. As such, the narrator rudely declines her invitation, unveiling all of his knowledge obtained through his new powers. However, he still attends the opera in order “to satisfy [himself] of the justness of [his] accusation against Fanny” (300). This only leads to more trouble, for the narrator even pulls Sir Henry Witherington, who is clueless as to the circumstances, unaware even of
the narrator’s name (301), into the drama. Ignoring Sir Henry’s need for language (which is greater than any other’s in this situation because of his lack of association with the narrator), the narrator proceeds to insult this stranger when he pulls him aside, saying, “Sir Henry Witherington, your uncalled for interference of to-night must be explained; here is the card of one who has no other feeling for your insolence but that of the most ineffable contempt” (302). By doing so, the narrator gives no explanation for his contempt of this stranger and even closes the door on any chance of future communication with his impoliteness. Not surprisingly, Sir Henry does not seek a further explanation and instead sends a friend later that same night to arrange a meeting for a challenge. However, the narrator refuses the challenge, claiming, first, that this is a matter that does not concern Sir Henry and then finally that he did not wish Sir Henry to lose his life—obviously a lie since the narrator was indeed annoyed “at the worldly consequences,” but “gloried in [his] privilege of prescience, which had informed [him] of the certain result of [their] hostile interview” (304). After the narrator’s refusal, word of the refusal spreads, and even “those who had been [his] warmest friends” begin to reject the narrator’s society, forcing the narrator to actually quit society and escape into the countryside (304). Perhaps if the narrator had taken into account Sir Henry’s complete lack of knowledge of the circumstances and chose to fulfill Sir Henry’s need for language, the narrator would not have severed ties with more than simply Fanny, Fanny’s mother, and Sir Henry. Clearly, these three characters exercised their reliance upon language and communication by relaying these trust-destroying experiences to their friends. Ironically, they build their own foundations of trust with friends while destroying the narrator’s foundations of trust with others. Therefore, by creating social disconnects between the narrator and others, the narrator’s new powers lower his biological fitness, for society begins to reject him.

In addition to language, the narrator also foregoes the intellectual powers of “experience” and “habit,” skewing his immediate knowledge and his reactions to others’ actions. In one such case, Sheringham cannot believe that “after years of undivided intimacy” (395)—of “experience” of Sheringham’s tried and true loyalty—the narrator would suddenly become suspicious enough of his intentions so as to spy on him. Of course, the narrator did not spy on the other characters because of his mistrust in each of them; his power allows him no choice in reading thoughts. Yet, in a way, the narrator indicates a general mistrust for others simply in his Dr. Frankenstein-like pursuit of such a power as to know the thoughts of others. As stated at the beginning of the story, the
narrator was ardently searching how to grant himself such power for about five to six years before the story even begins, but he never indicates his reasoning for such a strange pursuit. Certainly, he must have predicted some unexpected discoveries, even perhaps controversial ones; otherwise such a power would not possess so much intrigue. By pursuing such power, the narrator automatically indicates his desire to live without “experience,” for he desires to rely on immediate and limited knowledge. Even though “experience” is a type of knowledge, we tend to add our accumulated experiences together and then determine how we will act based on the conglomeration; hence, the knowledge upon which the narrator relies is very limited because he ignores all of the other knowledge he gained from past experiences. Therefore, this immediate knowledge from this power is skewed and too one-sided.

Even though the narrator had to be anticipating discovering unexpected information, he reacts rashly and ends up foregoing his “habits”—his social habits—which in the past used to dictate his manners. For instance, when the narrator replies to Fanny’s invitation to the opera, he informs her of her own intentions and declines by saying, “As I have no desire to be the foil of any thing in itself so intrinsically brilliant as your newly discovered baronet, I must decline your proposal” (297). Unmistakably, the narrator masks and yet even heightens his sarcasm through gentlemanly language. The message is clear and is even more impolite than if the narrator had just simply refused, which would have been the true gentlemanly action in this situation. Therefore, by breaking from a gentleman’s behavior, the narrator also breaks from his usual “habits.” Moreover, this new power becomes more than just an additional skill; it becomes instinctive—a new “habit,” per se. Even the narrator admits how integrated into his actions the new power has become when he claims he “intuitively and instinctively wrote” Fanny, using his power to reveal all of her true motives (296). And so because this new power becomes instinctive and, in tandem, overrides the narrator’s social instincts, “The Old Gentleman” seemingly questions Darwin’s theory that social instincts always prevail. However, the narrator has simply experienced an alteration in the balance of power, and as Brandhorst reasons, “this is an image of struggle, but the change in the balance of power takes time and should not be thought of as an experience of psychological conflict” (6). Thus, inevitably, the balance must be restored, meaning that the narrator must return to his old “habits.”

However, while the imbalance of power still exists, the narrator also forsakes another “native component of the human make-up passed along by
natural selection” (May 22)—sympathy. As outlined by Adam Smith, an eighteenth-century moral philosopher, in his *Theory on Moral Sentiments*, though sympathy is normally thought of as “the emotion which we feel for the misery of others” (1), Smith actually understood sympathy to “denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever” (5–6). In “The Old Gentleman,” even though the narrator can read thoughts and understand motives for people’s actions, he does not actually share in their feelings; if he did, then he would be capable of sympathizing with their actions and probably would not be so offended by them. For example, when Sheringham informs the narrator that he did not get appointed to a position that he had desired, the narrator focuses on the outrage of the subterfuge of his friend, rebutting,

“If this matter concern you so deeply, as you seem to imply it does, might I ask why you so readily agreed to your uncle’s proposition, or chimed in with his suggestion, to bestow that appointment on this relation of the Marquess, in order that you might, in return for it, obtain the promotion for which you are so anxious?” (295)

Granted, anyone would probably be upset if he found out that his friend had lied and even swindled him out of an appointment in exchange for personal gain, for this is normally not characteristic of “friend” behavior. However, the narrator only concentrates on Sheringham’s thoughts and actions, assuming that he knows exactly how Sheringham felt. The narrator simply assumes that Sheringham has absolutely no regrets, even though he admits as Sheringham is leaving that his “friendship even to [his] enlightened eye was nearly as sincere as any other man’s” (296). Evidently the narrator cannot see the whole picture; the narrator is so self-absorbed that he cannot sympathize with Sheringham to understand what feelings motivated him to pursue his own personal gain (even though the narrator is not a stranger to pursuing personal gain). In this respect, even though Adam Smith reasons that no human being can ever perfectly sympathize with another human being, the narrator does not even manage to imperfectly sympathize. Moreover, from Sheringham’s perspective, since the narrator himself knows every detail of the circumstances, he also has violated “friend” behavior because he mistrusted Sheringham in the first place. Thus, with this combination of mistrust, lack of sympathy, foregoing of experience, and even non-adherence to habit, the narrator loses a “valued friend” (296), further diminishing his pool of individuals in his community.
Only once the narrator quits society and starts with almost a perfectly clean slate are his social instincts finally able to prevail. However, in this environment, the individuals in his community act much differently toward the narrator; he relishes, “Here I was, domesticated with an amiable family, whose hearts I could read, and whose minds were open to me:—they esteemed, they loved me—When others would oppress and hunt me from the world, their humble home was at my disposal” (305). The narrator lauds this new community because of its constant display of social instincts—they are continuously acting for his benefit. Interestingly, almost as if invoking Darwinian Theory, the narrator utilizes primal language—perhaps even the language of animals—by using the word “hunt,” implying that the other society actively excluded him from their community, which is why he was also excluded from benefiting from any of their social instincts. But then why would the individuals in one community hardly follow social instincts while the individuals in the other community constantly follow social instincts? First of all, in town society, more opportunities and hence more competition exist. Moreover, Darwin might argue that most of those additional opportunities fail to affect the survival of the community as a whole (in fact, they really did not even affect the survival of the narrator); therefore, social instincts do not apply under those circumstances. In the end, a true test of social instincts arises when the narrator is forced to decide between saving Mary (his love interest from the new community) or keeping his supernatural power; as Darwin predicts in The Descent of Man, the social instincts eventually prevail, and the narrator relinquishes his power. By doing so, he benefits the community. He saves a life and ensures offspring for the future since he and Mary wed soon afterward.

In the end, what benefit does the narrator’s power even bring him? Or, more importantly, his community? Clearly, this unnatural power of knowing the thoughts of other humans and foreseeing future events is not conducive to social instincts, for social instincts rely on an element of the unknown. If everything were known, then we would have no need to exchange language or to rely on experience and habit, leading to a disconnect between human beings—a disconnect regarding sympathy. In addition, the supernatural knowledge that the individuals in his community were not always acting for his benefit were injurious to his social instincts. In this respect, “The Old Gentleman” reveals the vitality of trust between a community’s individuals—trust that the other individuals will more often than not follow their own social instincts. This blind trust is built upon experience, language, habit, and sympathy, but when
an individual destroys these foundations, that trust disappears and the fitness of
the community as a whole lowers, which then leads to the rejection of an
individual from a community in order to regain the lost fitness. Thus, although
the narrator’s power did ultimately raise his social fitness (he never would have
known Mary loved him unless he could read her thoughts), it constantly low-
ered his fitness in society and hence society’s fitness. Had he chosen his power
over Mary, he would have ultimately been rejected from another community
once he encountered an individual not acting for his benefit, and he would
have repeated his cycle of societal rejection once again. Therefore, his super-
natural power actually ended up being a disadvantage in natural selection. In
the end, this power actually lowers one’s biological fitness instead of increasing
it, as one might wrongly be inclined to believe it would. Only through learning
to embrace those social instincts and abandoning his new power does the nar-
rator succeed in the struggle of natural selection.
Works Cited


