V1 Chapter 1: Primary Source Reading

Charles Darwin, "On the Manner of Development of Man from some Lower Form," chap. 2 in *The Descent of Man; and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1874).

[Introduction] Below is a brief excerpt from the second edition of Darwin's fourth book. Earlier books focused on the structure and variety of coral reefs, the origin of species, and the origin of domesticated plants and animals. *The Descent of Man* was particularly controversial, in that it linked the origins of modern humans to the development of other primates over a period of "countless eons"—challenging the dominant Abrahamic religious notions that the world and all life had existed for only a few thousand years. **[End introduction]**

Natural Selection. — We have now seen that man is variable in body and mind; and that the variations are induced, either directly or indirectly, by the same general causes, and obey the same general laws, as with the lower animals. Man has spread widely over the face of the earth, and must have been exposed, during his incessant migration, to the most diversified conditions. The inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, the Cape of Good Hope, and Tasmania in the one hemisphere, and of the Arctic regions in the other, must have passed through many climates, and changed their habits many times, before they reached their present homes. The early progenitors of man must also have tended, like all other animals, to have increased beyond their means of subsistence; they must, therefore, occasionally have been exposed to a struggle for existence, and consequently to the rigid law of natural selection. Beneficial variations of all kinds will thus, either occasionally or habitually, have been preserved, and injurious ones eliminated. I do not

refer to strongly-marked deviations of structure, which occur only at long intervals of time, but to mere individual differences. We know, for instance, that the muscles of our hands and feet, which determine our powers of movement, are liable, like those of the lower animals, to incessant variability. If then the progenitors of man inhabiting any district, especially one undergoing some change in its conditions, were divided into two equal bodies, the one half which included all the individuals best adapted by their powers of movement for gaining subsistence, or for defending themselves, would on an average survive in greater numbers, and procreate more offspring than the other and less well endowed half.

Man in the rudest state in which he now exists is the most dominant animal that has ever appeared on this earth. He has spread more widely than any other highly organised form: and all others have yielded before him. He manifestly owes this immense superiority to his intellectual faculties, to his social habits, which lead him to aid and defend his fellows, and to his corporeal structure. The supreme importance of these characters has been proved by the final arbitrament of the battle for life. Through his powers of intellect, articulate language has been evolved; and on this his wonderful advancement has mainly depended. As Mr. Chauncey Wright remarks: “a psychological analysis of the faculty of language shows, that even the smallest proficiency in it might require more brain power than the greatest proficiency in any other direction.” He has invented and is able to use various weapons, tools, traps, &c., with which he defends himself, kills or catches prey, and otherwise obtains food. He has made rafts or canoes for fishing or crossing over to neighbouring fertile islands. He has discovered the art of making fire, by which hard and stringy roots can be rendered digestible, and poisonous roots or herbs innocuous. This discovery of fire, probably the greatest ever made by man, excepting language, dates from before

the dawn of history. These several inventions, by which man in the rudest state has become so pre-eminent, are the direct results of the development of his powers of observation, memory, curiosity, imagination, and reason.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are some of the features which Darwin identifies as unique about humans, as compared to other living things?
2. How does Darwin attribute these unique characteristics to humanity's spread across the planet?