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Auguste Debay as Ahmed Midhat's Lamarckian Source

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Abstract

This study identifies Auguste Debay (1802–1890) as the previously unrecognized source underlying Ahmed Midhat Efendi's (1844–1912) Lamarckian views in his 1873 article, "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru" [Man: The Appearance of Man in the World], published in the journal *Dağarcık*, which he owned. It also determines the particular work by Debay on which Ahmed Midhat relied and examines the direct and indirect ways in which Ahmed Midhat incorporated Debay's arguments into the article. Establishing this source allows a clearer distinction between elements that Ahmed Midhat borrowed from Debay and those that constitute his own contributions. Within this framework, the study identifies two original contributions in Ahmed Midhat's treatment of evolution. The first is his criticism of the hypothesis of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which he challenges through an example also found in Debay. The second is his formulation of a human taxonomy after considering earlier classifications, including Debay's. Identifying Debay as the source also shows that Ahmed Midhat's notion of competition, despite its apparent proximity to Darwinian language, belongs within a Lamarckian framework rather than that of the Darwinian "struggle for existence." These findings clarify Ahmed Midhat Efendi's views on evolution. As far as the available evidence shows, his article was the first work in Turkey to refer directly to the theory of evolution.

Keywords: Ahmed Midhat; Auguste Debay; Lamarckism; Darwinism; theory of evolution; Ottoman history of science.

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1. Introduction

Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844–1912), one of the most prolific and influential figures in nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual life, learned French with the encouragement of Midhat Pasha during his career, which had begun in the civil service, and thus became acquainted with Western scientific and philosophical currents at an early age. He began his publishing career in Baghdad and continued it in Istanbul, where he established a printing press in his own home; through the newspapers *Devir*, *Bedir*, and *Tercümân-ı Hakîkat*, he provided the public with encyclopedic knowledge. His intellectual development falls into two main phases: an early period, during which his writings in the journal *Dağarcık* brought accusations of materialism and led to his exile to Rhodes, and a second period following his return from exile, when he defended Islam and sought to reconcile it with the sciences (Öner, 2016, p. 368). Although Ahmed Midhat long enjoyed a reputation primarily as a writer and man of letters, he was in fact an important intellectual who produced works in a wide range of fields, including the history of philosophy, history of science, economic history, history of religion, and history of ideology (Demir, 2019, p. 113). Of particular relevance to this study is his article "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru" [Man: The Appearance of Man in the World], which also played a role in his exile to Rhodes. Indeed, this was the first work in Turkey to directly mention the theory of evolution. In the article, Ahmed Midhat foregrounded a Lamarckian perspective and drew on a writer whom he referred to as "Debey." The person to whom he was referring was Auguste Debay (1802–1890), a French Lamarckian physician, physiologist, and popular science writer.

A leading figure in nineteenth-century French popular medical literature, Debay dealt particularly with themes such as infertility, fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, hygiene, and marriage. Debay's principal works include *Hygiène et physiologie du mariage: Histoire naturelle et médicale de l'homme et de la femme mariés dans ses détails les plus curieux* (1844) [The Hygiene and Physiology of Marriage: The Natural and Medical History of Married Men and Women in Its Most Curious Details], *La médecine des passions, ou les passions considérées dans leurs rapports avec les maladies, les lois et la morale* (1848) [The Medicine of the Passions, or the Passions Considered in Their Relations to Diseases, Laws, and Morality], *Histoire des métamorphoses humaines et des monstruosités stérilité – impuissance* (1845) [History of Human Metamorphoses and Congenital Anomalies: Sterility–Impotence], and, as it appeared in later editions, *Histoire naturelle de l'homme et de la femme depuis leur apparition sur le globe terrestre jusqu'à nos jours; race humaine primitive, ses métamorphoses en races-types et variétés de race, suivie de l'histoire des monstruosités humaines* (1868) [Natural History of Man and Woman from Their Appearance on the Terrestrial Globe to the Present Day; the Primitive Human Race, Its Metamorphoses into Racial Types and Varieties, Followed by the History of Human Congenital Anomalies], as well as *Hygiène alimentaire: histoire simplifiée de la digestion des aliments et des boissons, à l'usage des gens du monde* (1858) [Dietary Hygiene: A Simplified History of the Digestion of Foods and Beverages for the General Reader].

Apart from his works on the theory of evolution, Debay's writings on these themes also attracted considerable interest among the Ottomans in the late nineteenth century. This is hardly surprising when one considers that, during this period, the Ottomans faced epidemics and the problem of population decline. I first show the extent to which the Ottomans drew on Debay in this context. Not only Ahmed Midhat but also figures such as Besim Ömer [Akalın] (1862–1940) and Halid Ziya [Uşaklıgil] (1868–1945) consulted Debay, and his influence among the Ottomans was quite extensive.

2. The Ottomans and Auguste Debay

Three works make Debay's influence among the Ottomans visible. The first is Besim Ömer's translation and compilation, published in 1887 under the title *Sıhhatnüma-yı İzdivac: Evleneceklerle Müteehhil ve Mücerred Bulunanlara Nasihat* [A Health Guide to Marriage: Advice for Those About to Marry, the Married, and the Single], based on Debay's 1844 work *Hygiène du mariage*.[1]

This work generally addresses themes such as the nature and necessity of marriage, the reproductive system, pregnancy and childbirth, infertility, childcare, and nutrition. For example, it emphasizes that infertility constitutes an obstacle to family happiness and that cleanliness is particularly important for fertility (Debay, 1887, pp. 82–85, as cited in Balsoy, 2014, p. 54).

The second is another translation and compilation, drawing on several of Debay's works, which Halid Ziya prepared and published in 1890 under the title *Haml ve Vaz'-ı Haml* [Pregnancy and Childbirth]. While noting that the book is a translation from Debay's works, Halid Ziya also

[1] Besim Ömer (Debay, 1887, p. 6) provides the following information on this point in the work: "Important notice: *Sıhhatnüma-yı İzdivac* was compiled and written on the basis of various medical works, with Monsieur Debay's *Hygiène du mariage* serving as its principal source." As noted in the introduction, the full title of the work is *Hygiène et physiologie du mariage: Histoire naturelle et médicale de l'homme et de la femme mariés dans ses détails les plus curieux.*

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emphasizes the Ottomans' need for works of this kind:

> We are translating this work by selecting material from several of the approximately thirty works on hygiene written by the famous French physician Debay and arranging it in a different order. We, more than any of the civilized nations, are in need of such works. We must therefore pay attention to this matter as well. It is this feeling that has led me to publish a work on medicine, although medicine is not my profession. Let us pray that this service may help save many mothers from seeing their children go to the grave instead of the cradle (Debay, 1890, p. 6).

Since the work essentially revolves around principles of hygiene and is also a compilation, it contains references by Halid Ziya to Debay. For example, in a section dealing with the clothing worn by pregnant women, the text states that during his travels in the East, Debay observed that women who did not wear tight or restrictive clothing were able to give birth without the need for any instrument. Halid Ziya notes that Debay also counted the Ottomans among these fortunate peoples. At the same time, however, he reports that Ottoman women had begun to abandon their traditional clothing in favor of certain garments prohibited by the principles of hygiene (1890, pp. 75–76).

The third work is Halid Ziya's *Kanun ve Fenn-i Vilâde* [The Law and Science of Childbirth], published in 1894. In the book, Halid Ziya discusses the essence of femininity and masculinity and refers to it as the "ovular substance" (madde-i beyze). Femininity and masculinity also possess a force best described as "sexual power." This sexual power differs from bodily or physical strength. Indeed, a physically strong person may lack sexual power, while the reverse is also possible (Halid Ziya, 1894, p. 48, as cited in Balsoy, 2014, p. 58). Sexual power is the driving force underlying fertility.

According to Balsoy, the work provides an example taken directly from Debay concerning families' ability to have a child of their desired sex. In this example, the children of two families who know one another marry and form three different couples. The first couple has three sons, while the second has three daughters. The third couple has no children. One day, this childless couple sees a book by Auguste Debay in a bookseller's window and decides to follow the advice it contains in order to have a child, and they consequently succeed in doing so. They then share this advice with their astonished siblings, so that those without daughters might have daughters and those without sons might have sons. While the couple who follows the advice exactly succeeds, the couple who fails to follow it because of a lack of willpower does not (Halid Ziya, 1894, pp. 54–61, as cited in Balsoy, 2014, p. 59).

3. Debay's Influence on Ahmed Midhat Efendi

Unlike the Ottoman writers discussed above, Ahmed Midhat Efendi drew on Debay in relation to the theory of evolution. His article, moreover, predates the translations discussed above by more than a decade, which makes him, as far as I have been able to determine, the earliest Ottoman writer to draw on Debay. In 1873, he devoted considerable space to Debay in his article "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru," published in the fourth issue of *Dağarcık*, his own journal, which appeared in ten issues over the course of approximately one year. However, studies in the Turkish history-of-science literature have been unable to identify this figure. These studies refer to Debay as "De Baye" (Öner, 2016, pp. 369, 370; Gültekin, 2020, pp. 108, 109; Ertan, 2021, p. 615; Kalaycıoğulları & Akgündüz, 2022, p. 453; Demir & Kalaycıoğulları, 2025, pp. 30, 31) and "Debey(?)" (Ceyhan, 2022, p. 105). Identifying him correctly is crucial for explaining why, as Abdülhak Adnan Adıvar noted, Ahmed Midhat preferred Lamarck's theory, which had appeared sixty-four years before his article, over Darwin's theory of evolution, which had appeared fourteen years before it (Adıvar, 1944, p. 116).

As far as I have been able to determine, the work by Debay that Ahmed Midhat used in his article was the fourteenth edition, published in 1868 under the title *Histoire naturelle de l'homme et de la femme depuis leur apparition sur le globe terrestre jusqu'à nos jours; race humaine primitive, ses métamorphoses en races-types et variétés de race, suivie de l'histoire des monstruosités humaines* [Natural History of Man and Woman from Their Appearance on the Terrestrial Globe to the Present Day; the Primitive Human Race, Its Metamorphoses into Racial Types and Varieties, Followed by the History of Human Congenital Anomalies], of a work first published in 1845 under the title *Histoire des métamorphoses humaines et des monstruosités stérilité – impuissance* [History of Human Metamorphoses and Congenital Anomalies: Sterility–Impotence].

The title of Ahmed Midhat's article condenses the title of Debay's work as revised in its later editions. The problem of "human taxonomy," which constitutes the main subject of the article, and the sections in which Ahmed Midhat discusses human evolution in order to propose an original taxonomy also rest on Debay's work and on Ahmed Midhat's interpretation of it. In the article, Ahmed Midhat both quotes directly from and refers indirectly to the work (hereafter *Natural History of Man and Woman*).

In "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru," Ahmed Midhat directly quotes Debay five times. The common theme of these passages, presented in quotation marks, concerns the similarities and differences between humans and orangutans (nesnâs) (1873, pp. 111–112).

The first passage is as follows[2]:

> Among the most obvious differences between humans and orangutans is that, because the orangutan's arms are long, it uses them like feet and walks on all fours; and since the toes of its feet resemble fingers, they are also suited to being used like hands (Ahmed Midhat Efendi, 2022, pp. 91–92).

The passage quoted corresponds to the section in which Debay (1868, p. 27) states that the comparative anatomy literature had noted striking similarities between the indigenous Khoikhoi people of South Africa and the orangutan, or "man of the woods" (l'homme des bois), including the same skeletal structure, similar organs, and shared animal functions, while identifying differences only in facial angle, arm length, and the transformation of the big toe into a structure resembling the thumb of a hand. These characteristics of the orangutan thus led nineteenth-century natural historians to classify it as a "quadrumane." Debay further states that Lamarck explained these morphological differences through environmental effects arising from habits imposed by life in the wild and through the processes of use and disuse of organs.

The second passage is as follows:

> If orangutans, compelled by certain animal needs, were to begin walking on two feet and abandon such habits as hanging from tree branches by their feet and upside down, performing the acts of grasping and holding solely with their hands and walking solely with their feet, they would gradually cease using their feet as hands and would use their feet as feet and their hands as hands. In that case, their feet would also gradually assume the form of the feet with which we are familiar. For it should be understood that animals do not engage in a particular movement because of the form of their bodies; rather, on the contrary, their bodies assume a particular form as a result of certain movements (2022, p. 92).

The passage corresponds to the section in which Debay (1868, pp. 39–40), drawing on Lamarck, states that if quadrumanes gradually lost the habits of climbing and grasping branches with their feet because of the necessities imposed by circumstances, individuals belonging to this species would, over several generations, have to use their legs and feet solely for walking. If they ceased to use their feet as hands, the separation of their big toes would disappear, and these quadrumanes would eventually turn into bimanous beings.

The third passage is as follows:

> If, thereafter, the orangutan ceased using its jaws and teeth as instruments of defense and attack and instead used them simply for chewing, then its jawbones would gradually become less pronounced, and its jaws and forehead would begin to take on the form of the human jaw and forehead, while its teeth would also become more vertical (2022, p. 92).

This passage corresponds to the section concerning the claim that orangutans' jaws and teeth differ from those of humans solely because of differences in their use (1868, p. 40).

The fourth passage is as follows:

> Now, if orangutans, having once begun to walk on two feet and chew like humans, were thereby to draw closer to humanity and become, as it were, human, and if, driven by their animal needs, they were to form families and societies, helping and protecting one another and acting together, they could form a society resembling the civilized society of present-day humans. Indeed, once they had reached this stage, their former gestures and peculiar and strange sounds would no longer suffice to communicate their concerns to one another; they could then modify those strange sounds and, by altering their throats and tongues, even begin to utter a few words. Eventually, the orangutans, formerly regarded as wild creatures that walked on all fours, would virtually become human (2022, pp. 92–93).

The corresponding passage in Debay's work concerns the possibility that orangutans, once they had begun to walk on two feet and chew like humans and had developed altruistic behavior, might establish a civilization resembling that of humans (1868, pp. 40–41).

The fifth passage is as follows:

> Although some may hesitate to accept this idea, such hesitation arises solely from foolishness and ignorance. Lamarck arrived at this conclusion through profound philosophical investigations. Those who are deceived by their confidence in humanity should not now ask why Lamarck, instead of presenting us with human beings as our earliest ancestors, was compelled to turn to apes (2022, p. 94).

This passage corresponds to the section in which Debay characterizes reluctance to accept the idea that humans descended from apes as a product of pride and ignorance. In the original passage, Debay does not mention Lamarck by name. However, since Debay built his book upon Lamarck's work, Ahmed Midhat may have chosen to emphasize Lamarck in particular. Moreover, where Ahmed Midhat's text refers to "philosophical investigation," the original text instead uses the expression "the science of zoology." In translation, the passage reads as follows:

> Some readers will respond to these ideas with pity; they are mistaken. Others will exclaim: 'This degrades human

[2] I have used the modern Turkish rendering of these passages in order to facilitate their translation into English.

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> nature; to assign an ape to man as his first ancestor is to debase him; man has a more exalted origin. The beliefs of all peoples, the books of creation of all nations, revelation … prove this …' Stop! Can the books of creation take precedence over the book of nature? The former was made by human hands; the latter, by contrast, bears the divine seal. Why, then, do you reject the quadrumane as an ancestor? Do you know what role it fulfilled on our planet and for what purpose the Creator brought it into existence? You despise the quadrumane, yet perhaps without it you would not even exist. You cry scandal, but you do not even know the 'a, b, c' of the science of zoology; your outcry, then, is nothing but pride, and your pity nothing but ignorance (1868, pp. 41–42).

Ahmed Midhat's indirect engagement with Debay's work falls into four categories. The first concerns Ahmed Midhat's objections to Lamarck; the second, "sound, language, and speech"; the third, "competition"; and the fourth, "human taxonomy." Ahmed Midhat's principal criticism of Lamarck concerns the hypothesis of the "inheritance of acquired characteristics." Ahmed Midhat takes the examples he uses in making these objections from Debay's work. In other words, without naming Debay, Ahmed Midhat objects to Debay's examples and, through them, criticizes Lamarck. Debay, for example, states that Chinese women, in accordance with standards of beauty and through the use of metal shoes since ancient times, were able to prevent their feet from growing and to transmit this characteristic to their children, thereby producing later generations with small and thick feet.[3] Ahmed Midhat uses the same example and emphasizes that the continued use of "tempur papuç" (metal shoe) for many years itself demonstrates that feet had not become shorter. Otherwise, there would no longer be any need for such shoes. According to him (1873, p. 113), offspring do not inherit an ability that an animal acquires artificially or through training. Another law governs this process of change. Ahmed Midhat thus criticized this assumption years before the meeting at which August Weismann (1834–1914) presented the results of his 1888 experiment[4], which challenged Lamarck's hypothesis of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This criticism does not place Ahmed Midhat outside the Lamarckian framework. He accepts, with Debay, that needs and habits shape the form of organisms and that humans emerged through such a transformation. What he rejects is the claim that organisms pass acquired changes on to their offspring. His Lamarckism is therefore selective rather than wholesale.

According to Ahmed Midhat, the strongest objection to accepting humans as a species of ape concerns their ability to speak. It is therefore necessary to explain the process by which humans transformed from a non-speaking species into a speaking one (1873, p. 114). Once it becomes clear that humans are not speaking beings by nature and that they acquired this ability over time, it becomes possible to regard them as a species of ape (1873, pp. 114–115). Debay (1868, pp. 40–41), for his part, proceeds from a hypothesis concerning the origin of speech. He first argues that, after quadrumanes acquired through habit the ability to stand upright and walk on two feet, they could form families and subsequently societies. Quadrumanes would then develop new needs within society, and these needs would lead them to work and produce. As a result, in order to multiply and acquire more space, they would have to spread into surrounding regions and drive away other animals that stood in their way, and within a short time a dominant species resembling the human species in every respect would emerge. As new needs gave rise to new ideas, pantomimic gestures would no longer be sufficient for this advanced quadrumanous species; individuals would consequently modify their cries, begin to articulate sounds by exercising their throats, tongues, and lips, and multiply their means of communication. Ultimately, through the continuous use of the vocal organs, the remarkable ability of speech would emerge.

Although Ahmed Midhat agrees with these ideas, he focuses particularly on the section in which Debay discusses the development of children. Debay (1868, pp. 432–443) divides the human lifespan into fifteen seven-year periods (septenaries), which he discusses under thirteen named stages.[5] During the first stage, childhood, a human being can stand upright only upon reaching the age of one and can begin to walk and babble only during the second year. Ahmed Midhat (1873, p. 114), however, distinguishes between walking and speaking and states that speaking is far more difficult and demanding. Speech is therefore an ability that humans can acquire only through education. Human beings, in other words, do not possess such an ability by nature.

[3] Debay (1868, p. 72) also emphasizes that, although the French regarded this Chinese practice as barbaric, women in France engaged in an even more barbaric practice by wearing corsets. In addition to being harmful to health, the corset deformed women's bodies and made them unattractive.

[4] Weismann cut off the tails of 901 mice and their offspring over five generations and observed that the tails of mice in subsequent generations continued to grow normally, just like those of ordinary mice. Weismann used the results of this experiment to construct a comprehensive argument against the possibility of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. See Akgündüz (2023, p. 275).

[5] These thirteen named stages are, respectively, childhood, adolescence, puberty, youth, adulthood, middle age or second youth, mature age, the age of decline, first old age, second old age, decrepitude, longevity, and the centenarian age.

Another subject that Ahmed Midhat addresses indirectly through Debay's work is "competition." In his article "İnsân" [Man], published in the second issue of *Dağarcık*, Ahmed Midhat regards competition as a trait unique to humans, one that distinguishes them from other animals. Competition is also the reason for human success (Ahmed Midhat, 1872, p. 48). For example, this characteristic underlies human discoveries and the progress of the sciences (1872, pp. 48, 49). Ahmed Midhat (1873, p. 115) maintains this view in "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru," stating that "competition" is the characteristic that makes humans the "eşref-i mahlûkat" (the noblest of creatures). In his work, Debay likewise states, from a Lamarckian perspective, that humans attained a distinct position through "competition." According to him (1868, pp. 25–26), population growth and the new needs arising from it forced human communities to divide, descend from the mountains, and search elsewhere for food that was becoming increasingly scarce in the regions where they had settled. In this way, humans began to reach both hemispheres and came to occupy the highest level of the animal kingdom. In this account, as in Lamarck, what drives change is need rather than a selective struggle among varying individuals. It therefore differs from the Darwinian "struggle for existence," even though the vocabulary of competition may suggest otherwise.

Having addressed the process of human emergence directly or indirectly through Debay's work, Ahmed Midhat proposes two forms of classification at the end of his article. The first consists of two different families, whites and blacks; the second consists of four different families: "Chinese people," "people of Tartary," "people of the Caucasus and Europe," and "people of Africa, America, and Australia" (1873, p. 116). Debay, by contrast, states that there are three different racial types derived from the original race. These are the "black or Ethiopian race," the "yellow or Mongolian race," and the "white or Caucasian race" (1868, pp. 43–44).

4. Conclusion

The first work in Turkey to directly mention the theory of evolution was Ahmed Midhat's article "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru." Despite this distinction, the identity of "Debey," to whom the article frequently refers, has remained unknown until now. In this study, I have shown that this figure was Auguste Debay.

The chief benefit of identifying Debay is that it makes it possible to determine which of the ideas expressed in Ahmed Midhat's article were his own and which were not. In this way, one can also discern Ahmed Midhat's original contributions in this article, which occupies a central place in the reception of the theory of evolution in Turkey.

As the foregoing shows, the first of these original contributions is Ahmed Midhat's criticism of the "inheritance of acquired characteristics." Using Debay's own example of the metal shoe worn by Chinese women, Ahmed Midhat rejected the Lamarckian argument that Debay had drawn from it, and in this respect anticipated Weismann. He read his Lamarckian source critically and did not simply repeat it.

The second original contribution is the human taxonomy proposed in the article. In order to present his own scheme for the classification of humans, Ahmed Midhat first evaluated earlier taxonomies. According to him, different scientists had previously classified humans into anywhere from two to twenty-three categories. Ahmed Midhat stated that all of these attempts were open to criticism and, after finally addressing Debay's taxonomy, proposed two different classifications of his own.

Another important aspect of identifying Debay is that it reveals the origin of the idea of "competition" that Ahmed Midhat first raised in "İnsân" and maintained in "İnsân: Dünyâ'da İnsânın Zuhûru." Although at first glance one might attribute this idea to Darwin through the notion of the struggle for existence, an examination of Debay's work shows that Ahmed Midhat employed it in a Lamarckian sense.

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