

---

## ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE'S NEW THEORY OF MORAL PROGRESS

WHEN one of the greatest scientific discoverers of our age, Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, after observing the evolution of society for more than three generations, declares, without qualification, that our "whole system is rotten from top to bottom," and that our present social environment "as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen," even the most resolute of optimists must hesitate for a while to

talk about progress and take account of the facts as presented by Dr. Wallace in his latest book.\* "It is a terrible arraignment," says the *Christian Commonwealth* (London), "and describes with unflinching truthfulness the various forms of social immorality which have accompanied the economic development of our civilization. But the book is inspired with a passionate faith in a future where brotherly co-operation and coordination for the

equal good of all will be the fundamental principles."

Dr. Wallace believes that we can initiate an era of true moral progress only through the most radical economic and social reforms, and particularly through a new form of natural selection,—the free choice in marriage of independent women. The different theories of eugenics, or any other direct interference with the freedom of marriage, he rejects as bungling and disastrous.

There is no proof, Dr. Wallace be-

\* SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND MORAL PROGRESS  
Published by Cassell & Company.

gins by stating, of any real advance in human character during the whole historical period. For such a change a new selective agency appears to be required. "As examples of great moral teachers in very early times we have Socrates and Plato about 400 B.C.; Confucius and Buddha, one or two centuries earlier; Homer, earlier still; the great Indian Epic, the Maha-Bharata, about 1500 B.C. All these afford indications of intellectual and moral character quite equal to our own; while their lower manifestations, as shown by their wars and love of gambling, were no worse than corresponding immoralities to-day."

The human intellect also has remained stationary. The idea that our recent discoveries and inventions in every department of science and art prove that we are wiser and more intellectual than mankind in the past, is, according to Dr. Wallace, totally unfounded. We are simply the inheritors, he says, of the "accumulated knowledge of all the ages; and it is quite possible, and even probable, that the earliest steps taken in the accumulation of this vast mental treasury required even more thought and a higher intellectual power than any of those taken in our own era." If Newton, for instance, had been born in Egypt at the time of the Pyramid builders, when there were no such sciences as mathematics, perhaps even no decimal notation, he could probably have done nothing more than they accomplished. We forget that in building up the sciences "each of the early steps was the work of a genius." Moreover, only recently papyri have been discovered which show conclusively that ancient residents of Egypt, people belonging to a period even earlier than that of the Great Pyramid, had social desires and aspirations very much like our own.

The material growth of the nineteenth century, our rapid increase of wealth and power over Nature, Dr. Wallace maintains, has succeeded only in putting "too great a strain upon our crude civilization and our superficial Christianity, and it was accompanied by various forms of social immorality almost as amazing and unprecedented." He points to the widespread inhumanity, cruelty and immorality of child labor in our industrial system, and the incalculable loss of infant life through the overwork, poverty or slow starvation of mothers. "Wealth," Dr. Wallace declares, "has been deliberately preferred to human life and happiness"; and one of the great defects of our system of law is that deaths due to preventable causes in any profit-making business are not criminal offences. "No thinking man or woman," he concludes, "can believe that this state of things is absolutely irremediable; and the persistent acquiescence in it while loudly boasting of our civilization, of

our science, of our national prosperity, and of our Christianity, is the proof of a hypocritical lack of national morality that has never been surpassed in any former age."

Altho it is a well-known and incontrovertible fact, Dr. Wallace affirms, that our commercial system is pervaded by a mass of dishonest practices and falsehood, by adulteration, bribery and stock gambling, the possessors of wealth thus acquired hold honored places in our society. To cure this a new industrial ethics is required. "If it were taught to every child and in every school and college, that it is morally wrong for any one to live upon the combined labor of his fellow-men without contributing an approximately equal amount of useful labor, whether physical or mental, in return, all kinds of gambling, as well as many other kinds of useless occupation, would be seen to be of the same nature as direct dishonesty or fraud, and, therefore, would soon come to be considered disgraceful as well as immoral."

Increasing deaths from alcoholism and from suicide, degeneration through sexual immorality, all these facts of our civilization, Dr. Wallace declares, should give us pause and "force upon us the conviction that there is something radically wrong in a social system which brings about such terrible evils." Most modern methods of dealing with these evils are fundamentally wrong and doomed to failure. But human nature is not a failure. It can always be regenerated. Dr. Wallace proposes for our future moral progress a radical change of social environment through the substitution of cooperation for competition in industry, economic brotherhood for economic antagonism, and complete equality of opportunity. He advances the original theory of moral progress through a new form of sexual selection made possible only by the economic and social freedom of women.

It is certainly of importance when the codiscoverer with Darwin of the law of natural selection and survival of the fittest tells us that this law has been misinterpreted to excuse the brutalities of our competitive system. "Others," writes Dr. Wallace, "are so imbued with the universality of natural selection as a beneficial law of Nature that they object to our interfering with its action in, as they urge, the elimination of the unfit by disease and death, even when such diseases are caused by the unsanitary conditions of our modern cities or the misery and destitution due to our irrational and immoral social system." But the transference of the action of natural selection from bodily structure to the mind of man, Dr. Wallace maintains, introduced a new factor—that of mutual help in human evolution, thus neutralizing profoundly the law of survival. This modification

of the theory was originally pointed out by Dr. Wallace in the *Anthropological Review* of 1864, and, tho apparently not attracting the attention of popular economists of that day, it received the approval of both Darwin and Spencer. What Dr. Wallace terms the "divine influx," which "at some definite epoch in his evolution at once raised man above the rest of the animals," created "a new being with a continuous spiritual existence in a world or worlds where eternal progress was possible for him." Mutual help became a factor in that progress.

Many readers and some writers of books, Dr. Wallace says, appear quite unaware that Darwin established two modes of selection, "natural" and sexual; the latter acting in two different ways, through the fighting of males for the possession of females, and the display of special male ornaments to attract the female. The second form, however, Dr. Wallace has long believed to be imaginary, and his views are generally adopted by evolutionists. He now discovers a third form of sexual selection in human society which he believes will initiate an era of moral progress. It is not eugenics. Dr. Wallace fiercely repudiates any connection with eugenic theories and regards them as fantastic. He says:

"It is in the highest degree presumptuous and irrational to attempt to deal by compulsory enactments with the most vital and most sacred of all human relations, regardless of the fact that our present phase of social development is not only extremely imperfect but, as I have already shown, vicious and rotten at the core. How can it be possible to determine by legislation those relations of the sexes which shall be best alike for individuals and for the race, in a society in which a large proportion of our women are forced to work long hours daily for the barest subsistence, with an almost total absence of the rational pleasures of life, for the want of which thousands are driven into wholly uncongenial marriages in order to secure some amount of personal independence or physical well-being? . . .

"Is it not a hideous mockery that the successive governments which for forty years have seen the people they profess to govern so driven to despair by the vile conditions of their existence that in an ever larger and larger proportion they seek death by suicide as their only means of escape—that governments which have done nothing to put an end to this continuous horror of starvation and suicide should be thought capable of remedying some of its more terrible results, while leaving its causes absolutely untouched?"

Free selection in marriage made possible by the independence of women is a form of selection far preferable to eugenics, in Dr. Wallace's opinion. There are those who would probably object that women could not be counted upon so to advance the morals of the



"OUR SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IS THE WORST THE WORLD HAS EVER SEEN"

Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, the discoverer with Darwin of the theory of natural selection, now declares that moral progress is possible only through radical social changes, including a new form of sexual selection.

race. No one has a right to make such a statement, says Dr. Wallace, without adducing very strong evidence in support of it. He continues:

"We have for generations degraded women in every possible way; but we now know that such degradation is not hereditary, and therefore not permanent. The great philosopher and seer, Swedenborg, declared that, whereas men loved justice, wisdom, and power for their own sakes, women loved them as seen in the characters of men. It is generally admitted that there is truth in this observation; but there is surely still more truth in the converse, that they do not admire those who are palpably unjust, stupid, or weak, and still less those who are distorted, diseased, or grossly vicious, tho' under present conditions they are often driven to marry them. It may be taken as certain, therefore, that when women are economically and socially free to choose, numbers of the worst men among all classes who now readily obtain wives *will be almost universally rejected.*"

This mode of moral improvement by elimination of the less desirable has many advantages, Dr. Wallace maintains, over that of securing eugenic marriages of the more admired.

"What we most require is to improve the *average* of our population by rejecting its lower types rather than by raising the advanced types a little higher. Great and good men are always produced in sufficient numbers and have always been so produced in every phase of civilization. We do not need more of these so much as we want a diminution of the weaker and less advanced types. This weeding-out process has been the method of *natural selection*, by which the whole of the glorious vegetable and animal kingdoms have been developed and advanced. The survival of the fittest is really the extinction of the unfit; and it is the one brilliant ray of hope for humanity that, just as we advance in the reform of our present cruel and disastrous social system, we shall set free a power of selection in marriage that will steadily and certainly improve the character, as well as the strength and the beauty, of our race."

Dr. Wallace hopes and believes that the women of the future will prove equal to their high task of human regeneration. He writes in conclusion: "The certainty that this powerful selective agency will come into existence just in proportion as we reform our existing social system by the abolition of poverty and the establishment of full equality of opportunity in education and economic position, demonstrates that Nature—or the Universal Mind—has not failed or bungled our world so completely as to require the weak and ignorant efforts of the eugenicists to set it right, while leaving the great fundamental causes of all existing social evils absolutely untouched."