

EVOLUTION AND CHARACTER.

"IMPROVEMENT OF SOCIAL CONDITIONS," writes Dr. Wallace in a recent article¹ "must precede improvement of character; and only when we have so reorganised society as to abolish the cruel and debasing struggle for existence and for wealth that now prevails, shall we be enabled to liberate those beneficent natural forces which alone can elevate character." Is it not the fact, on the contrary, that improvement of character must precede improvement of social conditions?

Whilst holding that man has arisen from the lower animals by a process of modification, and that character must be assumed to be acted upon by some form of natural selection, to the extent that its traits are useful, Dr. Wallace maintains that there has been no general advance of character during the whole period of which we can obtain any definite information.

The essential superiority of man over the lower animals, he thinks, was perhaps as great fundamentally in palæolithic man as it is now. But this is pure assumption. The life of early man, as far as we can surmise its nature, was surely more akin to that of the beasts than to that of a modern civilised man. If we imagine such a man transplanted to the life of a modern city, would he not feel far less in common with him who can slay at twenty miles, can converse with his fellows many miles across the ocean, can listen to the reproduction of his dead wife's voice at will, than with the animals?

First as to the intellectual element. Going back but a very short way, Dr. Wallace instances Gothic architecture, and enquires whence came this wonderful outgrowth of art which we, however much we pride ourselves on our science, cannot approach in either originality or beauty. I do not think it is necessary to concede any such loss of power, having regard to the fortuitous accretions of beauty and romance which time alone can produce, and to the conditions of its manifestation. We must recollect that its masterpieces were the highest expressions of the spirit of the age, a superstitious-religious and military one; militarism looking to the Church for power to its arm, the Church in return exacting protec-

1. "Evolution and Character," by Alfred Russel Wallace, in the *Fortnightly Review*, January, 1908.

tion and contributions of wealth. The thoughts of artists and craftsmen ambitious of distinction would therefore be directed to this channel; under similar circumstances, time being of equally little importance, so that very many years might be occupied in erection, and the directors looking for the reward of honest work well done mainly to a future life, is it improbable that ecclesiastical architecture might not now produce works of equal greatness? We are able to admire the genius which built these splendid cathedrals but a few centuries ago; but with what unbounded admiration, with what awe at the marvellous ingenuity displayed, would not a man of that day regard, for instance, our Lusitania and our Dreadnought? Complexity of structure, remember, is one of the accepted evidences of progress.

Somewhat further back, Dr. Wallace finds in the Great Pyramid a structure "which is the oldest in the world, and in many respects the most remarkable." He states that "It was one of the most gigantic astronomical observatories ever erected by man, and it shows such astronomical and geometrical knowledge, such precision of structure, and such mechanical skill, as to imply long ages of previous civilization, and an amount of intellect and love of knowledge fully equal to that of the greatest mathematicians, astronomers and engineers of our day." Now as an observatory, who of us in this age would propose to build, or be given the opportunity of building, its like for this purpose? As a monument, who of us would not condemn it as lacking in imagination? As an illustration of mechanical skill, could we not produce its like with an immense economy of the labour we believe to have been expended upon it? And how can it for a moment be contended that it exhibits "an amount of intellect and love of knowledge fully equal to that of the greatest mathematicians, astronomers and engineers of our day"? Is it not an excellent illustration of the advance of intellect in astronomy to compare the commonplace records of appearances of that day with the marvellous intellectual deductions which have measured distances in the heavens, which tell us the composition of the sun, which tell us where the planet Uranus, which we had failed to observe, must be?

Reversing the position, let us look at history from the point of view of the ancients. Would they find no evidence of intellectual progress on seeing "the first skin" replaced by our cloths and our silks, the "first rude spear" by our arms of precision, "the first fire" by our electric cooking-stoves? Would not man, on the contrary, appear to his ancestors of not long ago godlike when he found him actually controlling Jove's thunder-bolts to slay his enemies, to light his cities, to propel his chariots, and compelling the very stones to speed the vessels which have taken the place of his slave-

galleys? Distance would seem to him to have been almost annihilated in communication; it may happen that it may yet be as regards vision.

Dr. Wallace instances the names of some of the greatest thinkers in the past, and says are those of our contemporaries their equals? But why does not he discard the theory of organic evolution if this reasoning is conclusive? He does not, as I understand him, hold that there may not have been some giraffes with exceptionally long necks, some animals more striped long before the type became established; and I cannot believe that he seeks to maintain in this sphere that the existence at an early period of an exceptional sport would be a proof that there had been no evolution. It seems probable that had the work of Shakespeare not been committed to paper, judging how little importance his contemporaries attached to it from the scant records which we have of himself and his life, it might have faded out of our intellectual wealth. The deduction is that, born in advance of his age, later generations had progressed intellectually sufficiently to value it more highly. And so we notoriously persecute and martyr the teachers of one generation whom a later canonises.

Turning now from the "purely intellectual to the domain of conduct and ethical standard," religion affords us a means of examination. In this field also we must base our belief regarding the unknown upon the known. And we cannot therefore doubt that the dogmas clung to with such tenacity afford a reflection of the ethical development of earlier generations. The reluctance to discard these past traditions proves a source of embarrassment at each stage as ethical thought attains higher standards. If, first, we consider the side of religion which embodies the duty to the Gods, can we not trace in

" . . . man's giant shadow, hailed divine"

the gradual elevation of man's conceptions: in the means which he takes to placate them, the gradual elimination of human sacrifice, then of all material sacrifice; in the progress of the idea of prayer, the efficacy of which is gradually believed to lie in quality rather than in quantity; in the gradual tendency to replace idolatry by spiritual worship? And turning to the other aspect of religion, man's duty to man, which is the essence of ethics, can we trace no advance? In the attitude, for instance, towards slavery, towards torture, towards revenge?

But if Dr. Wallace fails to make good his contention that character has been stationary since the birth of man, he is surely not less at fault in his belief that hope of its development in the future lies in the economic reorganisation of society, and that though its average has not yet improved, it may be raised almost

indefinitely by the influence of education and selection by marriage. To a believer in evolution this suggests an attitude of mind akin to that confusion of thought which tempts people with superficial knowledge of the subject to speak of adaptation as though it were conscious—as if, for instance, one insect copied another, or as if the animals intentionally changed the colour of their coats in the winter in polar regions.

What is in one word the special quality of survival value to individual man at present? We might say mental flexibility—the combination of the power to absorb knowledge acquired in the past with the imagination to apply it successfully to the circumstances of the moment. (Dr. Archdall Reid puts it in two words—memory and reason.) It may be recalled that when Athens was at the height of her glory Pericles called attention to the versatility of her citizens. But there is no ideal single type for a society, and the more advanced that society the more diverse will the types become, in accordance with the nature of progress. Mr. Francis Galton now recognises this difficulty in any scheme of Eugenics. "There are," he said in an address to the Sociological Society on May 16, 1904, "a vast number of conflicting ideals of alternative characters, of incompatible civilizations; but they are wanted to give fulness and interest to life. Society would be very dull if every man resembled the highly estimable Marcus Aurelius or Adam Bede. The aim of Eugenics is to represent each class or sect by its best specimens; that done, to leave them to work out their common civilization in their own way." But apart from the slowly changing natural environment, for what artificial environment caused by civilization are we to prepare? It will not be denied that in its external aspects life in an age of machinery, the propelling power of which is steam and electricity, is very different from life in earlier civilizations. And this difference does and will react in multifarious ways on man himself. Take warfare: when Leonidas defended the pass at Thermopylæ and Horatius the bridge at Rome, did they not desire as comrades the biggest men with the greatest muscular strength? But for the flying-machine, where every pound is a consideration, should we not choose the lightest men, who would also afford the smallest mark for their enemies' rifles, provided they had the longest sight? Of the two methods, one would say the least impossible would be to shape the civilization from the material available, rather than to breed types suited to unknown future conditions, and this is precisely what Nature does. Herein seems to lie the explanation of another of Dr. Wallace's difficulties. In more than one passage he emphasises the great variability of man's mental nature. This, he argues, indicates that there has been no selective agency adequate to limit

its range or guide it in any special direction. But on what ground does he deny survival value to this characteristic alone? Is it not, on the contrary, exactly what might be looked for in an extremely gregarious creature, tending under civilization to a highly complex social organisation? The Creator's methods are consistent here as elsewhere, and not erratic. The progress of society arises from variety to choose from and the survival of the individuals possessing the characteristics suited to their environment. Dr. Wallace says the special discoveries which render famous a Newton or a Darwin could not manifest themselves amongst eolithic men, but that their powerful intellects might have been equally valuable at that time. I confess that the argument seems to me of as little value in refuting the idea of the development of character as it would be to say that there was no evidence of organic progress because there would be no use for a highly developed mammal even if in potential existence in the early ages of the world. Brooks Adams has a passage bearing with much force on this point in the preface to his suggestive historical essay on *The Law of Civilization and Decay*:—

“Like other personal characteristics, the peculiarities of the mind are apparently strongly hereditary, and, if these instincts be transmitted from generation to generation, it is plain that, as the external world changes, those who receive this heritage must rise or fall in the social scale, according as their nervous system is well or ill adapted to the conditions to which they are born. Nothing is commoner, for example, than to find families who have been famous in one century sinking into obscurity in the next, not because the children have degenerated but because a certain field of activity which afforded the ancestor full scope, has been closed against his offspring. Particularly has this been true in revolutionary epochs such as the Reformation; and families so situated have very generally become extinct.”

There are occasional sports, whom we term geniuses, whose abnormal qualities are of exceptional value to their own or to future generations. Whence do they arise? We have no idea. And it is the belief that men are equally incapable by taking thought of producing a highly complex and progressive civilization which causes me to repudiate Dr. Wallace's contention that its beneficial growth can be promoted by the reorganization of society, and by the two measures on which he relies.

The first of these, Education, involves the imposition upon the rising generation of the particular accumulation of knowledge and the beliefs which find favour with whoever happen at the

moment to control coercive power. Of how disastrous this is to progress Dr. Wallace himself quotes very good illustrations: "the celibacy of the Roman Church and the seclusion of thousands of the more refined women in abbeys and nunneries tended to brutalise the race. To this we must add the destruction of thousands of psychics, many of them students and inventors, during the witchcraft mania, and the repression of thought and intellect by the Inquisition." We need not doubt that in origin these coercive measures were actuated by the highest motives. There will always be the danger that education dictated by an organized society of the type which Dr. Wallace implies may have an equally pernicious influence in impeding progress in the future.

Nor can we hope for better results "in raising the average of character almost indefinitely" from the "perfect freedom of choice in marriage which will only be possible when all are economically equal." It is clear that here also the choice in marriage would have to be regulated by the State to achieve the object aimed at. For if "the cruel and debasing struggle for existence and for wealth" were suppressed and replaced by perfect freedom of choice in marriage, would not the struggle be merely transferred to another field, one which we regard as even more bestial, the struggle for mates, which led, in the opinion of ingenious investigators, to what they call the Primal Law? The influence of the attraction of wealth is altogether over-rated. Whilst wealth is at present the material expression of human power most in evidence, its possession brings no satisfaction to character, and observation of modern civilization affords little ground for supposing that those in whom the desire for it overpowers other considerations will have much influence in establishing their type in future generations.

The higher elements of character which Dr. Wallace enumerates, "reason, the sense of beauty, the love of justice, the passion for truth, the aspiration towards a higher life," do not depend upon wealth or rank, although they are an important element in the production of both; and it is to be feared that those who put the cart before the horse, as Dr. Wallace does when he states that improvement of social conditions must precede improvement of character, are only retarding its advance instead of promoting it.

But if we have no confidence in Dr. Wallace's panaceas, that is not a ground for pessimism, but for hope. If it has been shown that the Influence for Good and for Progress, which we can neither examine nor measure, has existed from the creation of our world to the present time, we may surely deduce that it will not now be

withdrawn, and that, though "our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be"—

 "Oh yet we trust that somehow good
 Will be the final goal of ill,
 To pangs of nature, sins of will,
 Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

Behold we know not anything;
 I can but trust that good shall fall
 At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring."

The recognition that progress is best advanced by the fullest possible extension of liberty to the individual to pursue his aims and to hold his beliefs, so long as he does not injure others by doing so, and by the acceptance of the personal responsibility for the welfare of those whom he calls into existence, of which he should desire none to relieve him, will do more to accelerate it than any attempts to "reorganize" the growth of ages.

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