

Transcription, June 2016:

Daily Herald, 11 April 1913: 7 (Arthur D. Lewis).

‘The Disease of Civilisation.’

Social Environment and Moral Progress. By Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M. (Cassell and Co., Ltd. 3s. 6d. net).

In this volume Alfred Russel Wallace says that writers who praise death and disease and poverty as means by which the unfit, the weak, and the poor-spirited are stamped out, “ignore the undoubted fact that affection, sympathy, compassion, form as essential a part of human nature as do the higher intellectual and moral faculties; that in the very earliest periods of history, and among the very lowest of existing savages they are fully manifested; not merely between the members of the same family, but throughout the tribe, and also in most cases to every stranger who is not a known or imagined enemy.” “They seek,” he says, of the same defenders of pitiless struggle and destruction of the helpless, “they seek to degrade the higher nature to the level of the lower, to bring down Heaven-born humanity, in its essential characteristics only a little lower than the angels, to the infinitely lower level of the beasts that perish.”

Where Mind Comes From.

I quote these fragments because they at once indicate where Wallace stands. As is well known, Wallace, who is now ninety years of age, propounded the doctrine of evolution by the struggle for existence at the same time that Darwin did, having been led to it by independent observation and thought; but he has never believed that man’s higher nature has been evolved. He thinks a great influx of the universal mind took place when man’s physical body had been evolved, and that this mind cannot be permanently injured by conditions and training.

Difference of Birth-rate.

I do not propose to review this valuable and interesting book, but merely to summarize its argument. Readers who have toiled through some articles I wrote in earlier issues of the *Herald* will perhaps see that parts of Wallace’s argument are in entire agreement with what I have suggested. On other points, I should differ from him. I do not fancy (often as it is stated) that increase of brain work decreases fertility except in the very exceptional cases of people who really overstrain their brains. Only, geniuses are likely to do this. Overstrain of body would produce the same effect. Probably, the difference of birth-rate in the different classes is almost entirely due to the use or non-use of artificial preventatives. Also (as Wallace points out) a moderate advance in the age of marriage diminishes the rate of increase of the population.

Why We Do Not Improve.

Now for Wallace’s line of thought. If improvements of moral character acquired during a man or woman’s life are not inheritable, character can only be improved by selection of mankind, so that the morally inferior leave few children, or none at all. But most scientists do hold that acquired characteristics are not inheritable.

Wallace also holds that no selection of a useful kind has taken place during the known history of man. He argues that as soon as man could shoot arrows, makes clothes; cook food, the wild animals that would prey on him, the changes of climate, and the famines that would kill, were largely rendered harmless;

destruction of the weak in body almost ceased, because his mind had overcome the power of his circumstances. Selection by physical ill was at an end.

The Crime of Law.

Of our law, he says:—

“The party who can pay the highest fees for the services of the most experienced counsel is most likely, through the lawyer’s skill and eloquence, to secure a verdict in his favour.

“To the poor man charged with being drunk, with begging, or with sleeping under a haystack, or any such act which is no real offence, the common punishment of 10s., or a week’s imprisonment, leaving, perhaps, wife and children to starve, or to be sent to the workhouse, is really far more immoral than the alleged offence.” Our readers will find this work well worthy of their attention.

Arthur D. Lewis.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2017.