NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL SELECTION.

The writer of a remarkable paper in the September number of Fraser's Magazine attempts to make out that the Darwinian principle of natural selection fails, and fails necessarily, in the case of man;—not, indeed, in the case of races of men, as to which he argues that it completely holds good, since the less efficient race-organizations yield in the conflict of race to the more efficient, and as inevitably in the case of man as of the lower animals; nor, he asserts, even in the case of nations of men, since there, too, he thinks that there is evidence that the more united and better governed society wins power and influence and a position of physical and moral advantage at the expense of the less united and worse governed; but in the case of classes and individuals, as to whom he argues that art, law, and usage tend to neutralize the severity of nature in extinguishing diseased or weak constitutions, and crushing feeble and imprudent and useless characters. "The two great instruments and achievements of civilization are respect for life and respect for property." Now, the former, and the science which it has developed, tend to prolong sickly lives, and to transmit debilitated constitutions to a posterity which in a "natural" state ("natural," of course, in the Darwinian sense) would never have existed at all. On the other hand, the respect for property and the institutions which it has developed, provide for the transmission of millions sterling to people who would never have had the energy to earn or acquire it for themselves, and so encourage the foundation of families and the growth of races which could only have flourished under a protected system of things,—a system of things in which the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. The able poor man, instead of coming as quickly to the top as he would in a society where proprietary institutions were of the rudest, has to compete not only with his fellow-men, but with fellow-men whose influence is artificially multiplied by an enormous factor representing that accumulated industry of their friends or ancestors through whom they have been placed on this vantage-ground. Such is the argument of the essayist in Fraser, and he leaves the difficulty where he finds it, without, of course, proposing seriously to remedy this failure of "natural selection," either by abolishing hospitals and putting to death feeble children in their infancy, or, on the other hand, by proclaiming a confiscation and universal scramble for property every fifty years or so.

Now, in criticizing this argument, we must notice, first, that there is a great danger of confusion in the use of the words "the law of natural selection" as applied to races in which any characteristics higher than the physical exist at all. What is to be the criterion of a natural advantage? How are we to know which is the race "favoured" by nature, except by the result of success? That is what Mr. Darwin judges by, though he often points out, on a retrospect, what were the natural advantages by which one race of lower animals beat another in the competition. But Mr. Darwin would never question the testimony of facts. He often shows us that some defeated and dying if not extinct race had some one or more special advantages over the races which vanquished it; only, if it was defeated in spite of those advantages, he would not for a moment dispute that the conquering race must have had, on the whole, overbalancing advantages, whether visible or not, on its side. Now, applying this train of reasoning to the supposed "failure" of the law which the able essayist has pointed out, is it not obvious that if, by the growth of the respect for life and of medical science, enfeebled or delicate constitutions are patched up, and enabled to transmit their deficiencies of frame and brain to posterity, we have yet no scientific right whatever to deny that this may be the very arrangement which on the final balance of advantages is the best calculated to bring the best and wisest and sanest minds to the top? True, it may, so far as it goes, tell against the purity of the race, that medical science not only restores and preserves to us the radically sound and vigorous constitutions, but also prolongs and patches up many radically unsound and tainted constitutions, which are thus handed down to a later generation. But the question is whether the race does not gain far more even for its vigour, health, and sanity by the true healing art, than it loses from this cause. Of course it is not true, as the essayist seems to suppose, that any such art can put the radically unsound on a level with the radically sound in the struggle for existence, or give them the same chance of healthy and vigorous children. The most it can do for
the latter is probably less than it does to save the former from the results of injuries and mischances which do not affect the foundation of the constitution. At all events, even if it be supposed to diminish the relative disadvantages of undermined constitutions as compared with sound ones, and to patch up lives that are organically diseased even more successfully than it wards off the accidental dangers affecting the strong and healthy, even then it does not neutralize the law of natural selection, it only slightly imperils the force and acts; and against this must be set, on the contra side, the vast gain in force which, as we shall presently see, accrues most to the wisest and best, from the substitution of a higher principle than that of mere "natural" struggle and competition, for the lower one which suffices in the purely animal world. And with respect to the laws of property, the essayist's case is weaker still. No doubt they do secure to a vast number the means of living and of giving life to others who would not seem well qualified for the "struggle of existence," and who might have succeeded if they had had to win the means of living for themselves by shouldering their own way in life. Still, not only does this tell as strongly for the energetic who inherit, as for the dilettaus who inherit, not only does it leave it quite as certain as ever that those who have no moral capacity to rise will scarcely fail to fall, will be quick to lose their inheritance to those who would have power to gain it,—not only is this so, but in fact this transmission of a great bulk of property to persons not well fitted to make or save it, is a necessary condition of detecting and developing capacities, of the first value to our race, which would be utterly drowned and lost in the mere confusion of the lower one which suffices for mere self-preservation. In most cases it is inexact, and is an inexactness of the sort of intellectual and moral energy which gives value to life, than the test of ability to win money without the help of accumulated capital. Such a test would put out of court at one blow, as unfit for "the struggle for existence," three-fourths of the religious teachers, the thinkers, the philanthropers, the reformers. If we are to assume that all who inherit are drones unless they show the power to win what they inherit, we should have to assume that there is no true sort of energy at all, except it admits of diverson into a channel wherein there may in the long run do good, and be the means of overcoming imperfection, as by multiplying graces and virtues. And it is obvious enough that such a test would be quite false.

Still, what we have said as yet, is but preliminary to the true answer to the essayist we refer to. The real answer to him is this,—that directly you reach man in the ascending stages of animal life, you reach a point where the competitive principle of "natural selection" is more or less superseded by a higher principle, of which the key-note is not "Let the strong trample out the weak," but "Let the strong sacrifice themselves for the weak." This is really the law of self-sacrifice, the law of the Cross, which governs the selection of races in the lower animal world. It is from reverence for this law that men value so highly the healing art which helps us to restore the weak instead of to trample them out,—the arts of political organization which teach us to feed and clothe those who are, without their own fault, hungry and naked. No test could be coarser or more ineffectual of the sort of intellectual and moral energy which gives value to life, than the test of ability to win money without the help of accumulated capital. And it is obvious enough that such a test would be quite false.

The children of the purely selfish start from a selfish basis of impulses and dispositions in which they are rooted, are amongst the most transmissible of hereditary moral qualities. The history of all Christian and many other Churches is at bottom little but the history of the growth of human reverence for that law of supernatural selection which supersedes the law ruling in the merely animal world. If we are to complain that the Darwinian theorem does not apply to man, we are complaining that we are among the lowest stages of men in all progressive civilization, the stage at which the growth of the higher law of supernatural selection by virtue of which the "weak" is preserved — the " Providential" principle, as our essayist calls it, which secures a gradual amelioration of the organisms of the animal world? Can we properly say that the principle of competition, so far as it secures the recognition of every new faculty, and the appropriate reward of self-sacrifice and industry, should go so far as to be wanted, and not in the highest degree beneficent, in the human world as well as the world below it? If not, where are we to draw the line? Where does the Darwinian principle end, and the Christian begin? Where does it cease to be mischievous, to give aid to lower forms of life which which might otherwise dwindle and perish, a vindication of that higher law of supernatural selection by virtue of which the "weak" things of the world confound the mighty, and the things which are not bring to naught the things which are?" 

But then how far is this reversal of the Darwinian law of "conflict for existence," in the life of man, a true abrogation of the principles of the "natural selection" of the animal world. And it is obvious enough that such a test would be quite false.