A GREAT SCIENTIST’S PESSIMISTIC REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN PROGRESS.

In his book on “The Wonderful Century,” published ten years ago, Alfred Russel Wallace, the distinguished scientist and co-discoverer with Charles Darwin of the theory of evolution, asserted his conviction that, in the matter of mechanical discovery, the human race had made more progress in the nineteenth century than in all the preceding eighteen centuries. It is somewhat difficult to reconcile this statement with the attitude he takes in his latest article on “Evolution and Character” in *The Fortnightly Review*. He has evidently grown more pessimistic. He declares now that it is doubtful if there has been “any considerable improvement in man’s average intellectual and moral status during the whole period of human history”; and he says further:

“In comparing a savage with a civilized race, we must always remember that the amount of acquired and applied knowledge which we possess is no criterion of mental superiority on our side, or of inferiority on his. The average Zulu or Fijian may be very little lower mentally than the average Englishman; and it is, I think, quite certain that the average Britain, Saxon, Dane, and Norseman of a thousand years ago—the ancestral stocks of the present English race—were mentally our equals. For what power has been since at work to improve them? There has certainly been no special survival of the more intellectual and moral, but rather the reverse. As Galton points out, the celibacy of the Roman Church and the seclusion of thousands of the more refined women in abbeys and nunneries tended to brutalize 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; and when we consider further that the effects of education and the arts are not hereditary, we shall be forced to the conclusion that we are today, in all probability, mentally and morally inferior to our semi-barbaric ancestors!”

The Romans and the Greeks, Mr. Wallace reminds us, looked down on their ancestors with just as much contempt as we look down on Kaffirs and Red Indians. It is quite superficial to conclude that because people are in a savage or barbarian state as regards knowledge and material civilization, they are necessarily inferior intellectually or morally. “I am inclined to believe,” says Mr. Wallace, “that an unbiased examination of the question would lead us to the conclusion that there is no good evidence of any difference in man’s average intellectual and moral status during the whole period of human history at all corresponding with differences in material civilization between civilized and savage races today. . . .

There is good reason to believe that some of the lowest savages today (perhaps all of them) are the deteriorated remnants of more civilized peoples.” Moreover:

“If we turn to the facts actually known to us about early man, historic and prehistoric, they
Aryans of Northern India were equally advanced, and their wonderful epic—the Maha-Bharata—in came the wonderful outgrowth of art manifested earlier, the Greeks were our equals, if not supe- poets and literary men were fully our equals. Still ourselves. Further back still, in ancient Egypt, is the oldest in the world, and in many respects we find in the Great Pyramid a structure which we pride ourselves on our science, cannot ap- tecture, admirable alike in structure, and in combination with his fellows against wild beasts and human enemies, either of them might have made some one step in advance— might have invented some new weapon or con- structed some improved trap. He must neces- sarily work on the lines of his fellows and with the materials to his hand. Perhaps in the rude drawings of animals on stone or tusk we have the work of a potential Landseer; while the equal of our Watt or Kelvin might have initiated the polished stone axe or invented the bone needle. That a people without metals and without written lan- guage, who could therefore leave few imperish- able remains, may yet possess an intellect and moral character fully equal (some observers think superior) to our own, is demonstrated in the case of the Samoans, and some other tribes of the Pacific... Even the so long despised Aus- tralians—almost the lowest in material progress —yet show by their complex language, their elab- orate social regulations, and often by an innate nobility of character, indications of a very similar inner nature to our own. If they possess fewer philosophers and moralists, they are also free from so large a proportion of unbalanced minds—idiots and lunatics—as we possess. On the other hand, we find in the higher Pacific types men who, tho savages as regards material progress, are yet generally admitted to be—physi- cally, intellectually, and morally—our equals, if not our superiors. These we are rapidly exter- minating through the effect of our boasted civiliza- tion!" 

But while it may be true that there has been no general advance of character during the whole period of which we can obtain any defi- nite information, there is every reason, says Mr. Wallace, in concluding, to believe that hu- man nature will undergo a decided improve- ment in the not distant future. For the first time in history we are becoming conscious of our destiny; we are taking in our hands the world to re-create it; we are constituting our- selves the agents of "natural selection," instead of trusting blindly to natural forces. Two great influences, Mr. Wallace prophesies, will operate in the future more powerfully than ever before to uplift humanity—education and selection by marriage. To quote, finally:  

"As yet we have no true and effective educa- tion. The very first essential in the teacher— true love of, or any sympathy with, the children—is not made one of the conditions of entering that great profession. Till this is made the pri- mary qualification (as it was by Robert Owen at
his schools in New Lanark) no real improvement in social and moral character can be effected. Mere intellectual instruction—which is all now given—is not a complete education, is really the least important half of it.

"The other and more permanently effective agency, selection through marriage, will come into operation only when a greatly improved social system renders all our women economically and socially free to choose; while a rational and complete education will have taught them the importance of their choice both to themselves and to humanity. It will act through the agency of well-known facts and principles of human nature, leading to a continuous reduction of the lower types in each successive generation, and it is the only mode yet suggested which will automatically and naturally effect this.

"When we consider the enormous importance of such a continuous improvement in the average character, and that our widespread and costly religious and educational agencies have, so far, made not the slightest advance towards it, we shall, perhaps, realize, before it is too late, that we have begun at the wrong end. Improvement of social conditions must precede improvement of character; and only when we have so reorganized 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."