IS MANKIND IMPROVING?

Sharer with Darwin in the creation of the doctrine of natural selection, and preserving in extreme old age, with apparently no diminution, the intellectual vigor and the power of forcible expression which characterized him in his prime, it was natural that Alfred Russel Wallace, on the advent of his ninetieth birthday, should be approached by many interviewers, asking him for some message to the world. The message he gave to one of these journalists related to no less a question than that of his estimate of the whole moral and intellectual condition of mankind in the present day, as compared with past ages. And its essential purport was contained in a single sentence. "I have come to the general conclusion," he said, "that there has been no advance either in intellect or morals from the days of the earliest Egyptians to the keel-laying of the latest Dreadnought."

That this was no random utterance was evident enough. In point of fact, he was at the time engaged upon a book, "Social Environment and Moral Progress," which has now been issued, and which maintains the thesis then announced, and more. To attempt to appraise its pronouncements on past and present, and its proposals for the future, would be to pass judgment on all the deepest questions of life and society, of economics and ethics. But the book, like the interview before it, is sure to attract widespread interest; and it seems worth while, therefore, to analyze the significance of his chief proposition and to examine the character of his argument.

In the first place, then, the assertion itself does not mean what many doubtless will take it to mean. When Mr. Wallace speaks of morality not having improved, he refers to no objective standard, but to those "inherent and unchangeable" qualities that constitute what is truly "character," as distinguished from the external acts which we may perform, or from which we may refrain, out of regard to the demands of the society around us, and for the sake perhaps of winning praise or honor or worldly advancement. But with this understanding, we imagine that there are few thinking people who will be greatly startled to hear that morality has made no advance. Not many of us
We are in the habit of pluming ourselves on dignation and rebuke, incontinently declaring that one has proved this city to be the wickedest and most depraved "the world has ever seen."

The single place in which any serious attempt at comparison is made is in the chapter entitled Indications of Increasing Moral Degradation. How inadequate the statistics cited by Dr. Wallace are to the proving of what he alleges we cannot here undertake to show. But it is instructive to point out one cardinal defect. This may be indicated by taking that one of his three instances which he makes most prominent—the increase of deaths from alcoholism. The figures are very irregular, but let it be granted that they show, in the past half century, an increase from 40 deaths annually per million inhabitants to 65 deaths per million. Dr. Wallace himself admits that the showing is surprising, since "the drinking habit has certainly diminished"; and he proceeds to account for it in various more or less ingenious ways. But there is one way that does not occur to him, and which yet may be the true explanation.

Everybody knows that the mean duration of life has been greatly increased during the half century. Is it not at least possible—nay, is it not, in the absence of evidence, highly probable—that these 25 additional drunkards per million who die nowadays of "alcoholism" used to be carried off by all sorts of diseases before they had had time to drink themselves to death? The eyes, as Carlyle said, see what they bring with them the power of seeing; and a passionate desire to find a foregone conclusion may deprive of all efficiency, as an instrument for the ascertainment of the truth, even so fine a mind as that of Alfred Russel Wallace.