

REVIEWS AND ABSTRACTS OF LITERATURE

Social Environment and Moral Progress. ALFRED RUSSELL WALLACE.
London, New York, etc.: Cassell and Company. 1913. Pp. 158.

The purpose of this short, but most interesting and popularly written volume, which may come to be considered the crowning point, if not the *magnum opus*, of its author's long-continued work, is "to bring together the evidence in support of this view [that actual morality is largely a product of the social environment], to distinguish what is permanent and inherited and what is superficial and not inherited, and to trace out some of the consequences as regards what we term 'morality'" (p. 3). The

first part of the book, which is termed "historical," first, defining character as "the aggregate of mental faculties and emotions which constitute personal or rational individuality" (p. 4), attempts to show by historical and literary evidence that as a basis for morality it has shown no essential advance during the historic period; and secondly, with some statistical references, sketches with vigorous pen the injustice, the horrors, the moral degradation of the nineteenth-century environment. In so far as education and the superficial inducements of conventional morality have no hereditary effects, while true moral character, though hereditary, is not cumulative, "it follows that no definite advance in morals can occur unless there is some selective or segregating agency at work" (p. 37). The natural moral character of the race is good—hospitality, for instance, is a universal virtue (p. 101); it is the social environment which is evil and which ruthlessly prevents the attainment of full moral stature corresponding to the probable finality of the human form. Man, therefore, as that animal which alone molds his environment, may proceed to better his condition by its readjustment in a manner and for a purpose to be suggested in Part II.

So far there is probably nothing new or disputable for readers who assume the "dynamic" standpoint in sociology, though the view resembles that which H. G. Wells, referring to Comte and Frederick Harrison, has recently described as the belief "that there was once a stable condition of society with humanity, so to speak, sitting down in an orderly and respectable manner; that humanity has been stirred up and is on the move, and that finally it will sit down again on a higher plane, and for good and all, cultured and happy, in the reorganized positivist state." Again, it might be objected, perhaps, that the products of genius available for educational purposes, while not hereditary when acquired nor cumulative when innate, can yet be cumulatively transmitted by education. There is a social as well as an individual heredity. Moral progress might, therefore, be in a degree possible without positing any inheritance of the qualities of genius or any artificially liberated (though intrinsically natural) selective potentiality. As, however, Wallace heartily favors equality of educational opportunity as part of his remedial philosophy, this point need not be pressed. The indictment of existing conditions reminds us of the querulous tone of Mr. Spencer's "Facts and Comments," and is drawn in striking contrast to the author's fundamental faith in the essence of human nature. Here we may remember that the author of "The Wonderful Century" found much therein to praise as well as to deplore.

Part II. is entitled "Theoretical." After a brief presentation of the facts of natural selection, among animals (Ch. XIII.), and as modified by mind (Ch. XIV.), and of the laws of heredity and environment, the last two chapters are concerned with the author's idea of initiating through a new form of selection (Ch. XVI.) an era of moral progress (Ch. XVII.). The non-heredity of acquired moral characteristics is here defended as not merely true, but fortunate. How glad we may be that the dreary education in brutality and superstition afforded by the Middle Ages could have no hereditary influence. And yet here we may ask how Mr. Wal-

lace was so confident that the many tokens of moral inferiority which history furnishes were but superficial, in no way contaminating the fundamental goodness of our nature. If we judge not mankind's nature by its fruits how, then, shall we estimate its value? And if you answer that those fruits were largely the product of a compromise with the hostile environment, may we not ask again, if man is the modifier of his environment why do we credit him only with his will, not with his deeds? Can social environment and that human nature which is in and of it be considered separately? Not, I think, without some such speculative doctrine as that of the "Divine Influx," to which in the last resort Mr. Wallace feels impelled.

The substance of this second part is that by the diminution of economic pressure there will be a possibility of selection on the part of the female who, under existing conditions, is for the most part driven to marriage by economic stress rather than by choice. From the standpoint of the female the argument is persuasive, but from the standpoint of the male does not the opposite hold good? Under a system of economic pressure, such as to-day obtains, it is the least able worker who is least able to support a wife (omitting from consideration the injustices of transmitted wealth) while, under the humanitarian conditions which Wallace would fain have seen prevail, the feeblest male will have less difficulty in finding himself a mate. That there will be no females so tasteless as to select the less desirable males can hardly be maintained, even granting the belief that they would *prefer* the more desirable, for that the preponderance of males, brought about by shifting the incidence of accidental death, will "give to women the power of rejecting all the lower types of character among their suitors" (p. 148) is at least a speculative interpretation of the slight excess of male births. This excess being usually traced to a provision of nature accommodating the population to that greater incidence, the two may be expected to disappear together. From the male's point of view, therefore, the true selective agency, if also the cause of widespread misery and social unrest, would appear to be the old malthusian law with its implication of an inevitable struggle for existence within the economic field. It is true Wallace has been at pains to discredit this law because "when poverty is abolished and neither economic nor social advantages will be gained by early marriage there can be no doubt it will be generally deferred to a later date" (p. 143), and hence, on Galton's showing, fertility will decrease. But supposing the government manage "to organize the labor of the whole community for the equal good of all" (p. 155)—Wallace's final solution of the whole matter—is the inference to the postponement of marriage at all a reasonable one? Is it not precisely economic pressure which leads to its frequent postponement by young men, and therefore perforce by women, to-day, and when there is nothing to prevent marriage at an early date, why should we not suppose it will occur earlier rather than be still further delayed? Apparently Wallace relies on educational persuasion, which seems a none too reliable motive. It is true that marriage to-day occurs later among the better off, in a degree roughly proportional to their position in the social scale,

but as this is due to greater economic obligations at least as much as to causes of culture or perhaps to a mixture of the two, it can not from this be inferred that there would be a further postponement among all classes either with the advent of better conditions in general, or with the attainment of a higher average of general culture. On the contrary, an earlier average of marriage has been taken as a reliable standard of realized or immediately anticipated prosperity in a given territory. "Statistics of marriage during and after so-called economic crises," says Parsons, "are plain on this point." Thus the desirability of free selection on the female's part seems to be decidedly modified, if not rendered wholly doubtful, by the necessarily concomitant elimination of existing selective agencies operating in economic terms upon and through the male. The social argument would thus point rather to an increasing inheritance tax and greater equality of educational advantages than to conceding "full political and social rights" (p. 148) to women.

Perhaps, however, there is something to be said on either side, and it is at least cheering to have before us so clear an argument for the solution of questions widely vexing us to-day, wherein the quasi-medical aspect is specifically discounted (pp. 127 ff.), and the procedure is strictly pragmatic, in place of insisting upon the indefinable "natural rights" of a political philosophy now outgrown. Thus are eliminated two features of the controversy of which many of us are becoming increasingly weary. We are wisely reminded that social amelioration may more fitly become an object of legislation than bungling attempts to tamper with the private functions of the individual, and Wallace well asks how we can entrust governments with the technical removal of minute effects, that have shown themselves so largely incompetent to deal with the underlying cause. "Let them devote all their energies to purifying this whitened sepulcher of destitution and ignorance, and the beneficent laws of nature will themselves bring about the physical, intellectual, and moral advancement of our race."

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