

Transcription, January 2015:

*New York Times Review of Books* (4 May 1913): 263 (anon.).

[p. 263]

‘Against Eugenics. Dr. Wallace Favors a “New Form of Natural Selection.”’

*Social Environment and Moral Progress*. By Alfred Russel Wallace. New York: Cassell & Co. \$1.25.

That we have not, either racially or individually, increased in intellectual power over the Egyptians who lived in the era of the pyramid builders is the basis upon which Dr. Wallace rests a survey in this volume of present social and moral conditions. As the last of the great original expounders of the Darwinian theory, and himself the co-discoverer with Darwin, in 1857, of the law of natural selection or the survival of the fittest, one is apt to consider Dr. Wallace an advocate of the idea that mankind, molded by centuries of evolutionary progress, has reached to-day a distinctly higher and more complex degree of intelligence than was ever attained in the past. A generally accepted corollary of the theory of evolution, as applied to the development of man, is that each generation makes some infinitesimal advance—or it may be retrogression in the case of a people whose environment is unfavorable—and that the sum of this advance, taken over periods measured by thousands of years, indicates a very decided difference between primitive and modern men in their respective moral and intellectual capacities.

Such a view is not only flattering to twentieth century civilization, it also appears to be a logical enough deduction from the remarkable achievements of humanity to-day as compared with what was accomplished, say, in the era of the pyramids. Dr. Wallace, however, does not flinch from the comparison. His contention is that the individual man of to-day has not progressed over the man of centuries ago:

If Newton had been born in Egypt in the era of the pyramid builders, when there were no such sciences as mathematics, perhaps even no decimal notation which makes arithmetic so easy to us, he could probably have done nothing more than they have actually done. In building up the sciences each of the early steps was the work of a genius. But now that there have been nearly a hundred centuries of discovery and specialization by thousands or even millions of workers, that by means of writing, of the printing press, every discovery is quickly made known, and that ever larger and larger numbers devote their lives to study, the rate of progress becomes quicker and quicker, till the total result is amazingly great. But that does not prove any superiority of the later over the earlier discoveries. There is, therefore, no proof of continuously increasing intellectual power.

Dr. Wallace, indeed, goes further back in the historic scale than the pyramid builders to find the twentieth century man’s equal. There are savages, he claims, who are not morally inferior to civilized races, while in the field of intellectual achievement he advances the claim that the aboriginal architecture of Central America is scarcely inferior to mediaeval Gothic. His investigations among savage races leads him to the conclusion that mankind “taken as a whole, shows a substantial identity of human character, both moral and emotional, with no marked superiority in any race or country.” This is, of course, a radical departure from the accepted opinion of scientists, who are usually inclined to estimate the European and American type as a distinct step forward in evolutionary progress. It should be remembered, however, in confirmation of Dr. Wallace’s attitude, that, in this country, an authority so well recognized as Prof. Franz Boas recently declared that the negro, as compared with the white, was by no means to be set down as an

inferior race, while Prof. Edward A. Ross, returning from a tour of China, questioned the current belief of our own racial superiority to the Chinese.

But the main theme of Dr. Wallace's book is not so much a discussion of racial evolution as it is an analysis of existing moral and social conditions in the civilized world to-day. In his review of these conditions Dr. Wallace brings forward statistics on such subjects as alcoholism, suicide, personal immorality, &c., from which he argues that moral degradation is on the increase. He believes that this retrograde tendency is mainly due to four causes—the competitive system under which we live, to be cured by universal co-operation; economic antagonism, cured by economic brotherhood; monopoly by a few of the means of existence, to be remedied by freedom of access to land and capital, and social injustice, to be supplanted by equality of opportunity. The moral progress that Dr. Wallace maintains will ultimately rescue mankind from the pitfalls that menace us at present will come “through a new form of selection.” This new form of selection, according to Dr. Wallace, is that second mode indicated and described by Darwin and to which he gave the name “sexual selection.” This type of selection Dr. Wallace believes “possesses the potentiality of acting in the future so as to insure intellectual and moral progress, and thus elevate the race to whatever degree of civilization and well-being it is capable of reaching in earth-life.”

In support of his theory, Dr. Wallace pays particular attention to the modern science of eugenics, declaring that it is “not only totally unnecessary, but would be a much greater source of danger to morals and to the well-being of humanity than the mere temporary evils it seeks to cure.” He resents as “in the highest degree presumptuous and irrational” any attempt “to deal by compulsory enactments with the most vital and most sacred of all human relations,” and insists that an absolutely “free selection in marriage” will ultimately cure the ills that the eugenicists are endeavoring to stamp out through artificial means.

Throughout his book, which is written with all his old-time vigor and eloquence, Dr. Wallace argues for the efficiency of natural selection as a check to the evils that threaten mankind, and sums up his findings as follows:

I have shown that modern ideas as to the necessity of dealing directly with some of our glaring social evils, such as race degeneration and the various forms of sexual immorality, are fundamentally wrong and are doomed to failure so long as their fundamental causes—widespread poverty, destitution, and starvation—are not greatly diminished and ultimately abolished. I have proved that human nature is not in itself such a complete failure as our modern eugenicists seem to suppose, but that it is influenced by fundamental laws which under reasonably just and equal economic conditions will automatically abolish all these evils.

In the second place, I have shown that the dread of over-population as the result of the abolition of poverty is wholly and utterly fallacious—a mere bugbear created by ignorance of natural laws and of presumption in thinking that we can cure social evils while leaving the man-made causes which produce them unaltered.

[\[Return\]](#)

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.