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‘Moral Progress. The Remarkable Study by Alfred Russel Wallace of Human Character and Its Possible Improvement by Modification of the Present Social Organization.’

The remarkable little volume, “Social Environment and Moral Progress” (Cassell), by Dr Alfred Russel Wallace, although commented upon editorially, merits more extended review, since it is one of the most fruitful and suggestive of recent works aside from the interest which is lent it by the fact that its author, famous 50 years ago as the co-discoverer with Darwin of the theory of evolution, has but lately passed his 90th birthday, in evident full possession of a great intellect. The book has two main phases: It is a study on the one hand of the moral character and intellectual capacity of man, and upon the other of modern society as affecting man’s moral and intellectual progress.

The fundamental proposition which Dr Wallace lays down and which will be received with surprise, if not at first with skepticism, by many of his readers, is that in character and intellect man has made no essential progress in all his known history. This proposition Dr Wallace undertakes to prove in a manner which is fascinating, even though the conclusion be somewhat depressing. He gives a rapid but remarkably lucid survey of certain of the earliest human achievements, such as the building of the pyramids in Egypt, in order to prove that taking into consideration the then accumulated amount of knowledge, they reveal an intellectual capacity equal, if not superior, to that which is indicated by any of our present-day achievements when our greater accumulated knowledge is similarly considered. He declares flatly:—

The great majority of educated persons hold the opinion that our wonderful discoveries and inventions in every department of art and science prove that we are really more intellectual and wiser than the men of past ages—that our mental faculties have increased in power. But this idea is totally unfounded. We are the inheritors of the accumulated knowledge of all the ages; and it is quite possible, and even probable, that the earliest steps taken in the accumulation of this vast mental treasury required even more thought and a higher intellectual power than any of those taken in our own era.

In somewhat similar fashion Dr Wallace argues that there has been no definite advance in moral character. He cites Socrates and Plato, Confucius and Buddha, Homer and the great Indian epic, the *Maha-Bharata* (about 1500 B.C.), as all affording indications of moral as well as intellectual character quite equal to our own: “While their lower manifestations, as shown by their wars and love of gambling, were no worse than corresponding immoralities to-day.” He quotes from the *Maha-Bharata*, and also from the Vedic hymns, ethical ideals and aspirations which lead him to declare that, making allowance for the limited knowledge of nature at such early periods, we must admit that the minds which conceived such thoughts and expressed them in appropriate language “could not have been in any way inferior to those of the best of our religious teachers and poets—to our Miltons and our Tennysons.” He also undertakes to support his argument by a study of the so-called savage races known to us to-day, such as the Australian aborigines and various islanders in the Pacific, and he maintains that inherently they are not morally inferior to the so-called civilized races. From this he proceeds to the assertion that only through some selective agency may human character and intellectual power be improved. This leads him to a sweeping

study of modern society, in which, for purposes of definition, he may be described as dealing in language as strong as any “muckraker.” He takes up such topics as child labor, insanitary dwellings, the dangers of miners, the adulteration of foods, bribery, gambling and alcoholism, and attacks the modern system of so-called justice, from all of which he deduces the conclusion that “our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and the social environment is the worst that the world has ever seen.” Yet, depressing as such an assertion is by itself, unless it be frankly discounted as an unwarranted exaggeration, Dr Wallace is by no means altogether pessimistic. For if he paints the present darkly he pictures hopefully the possibilities of the future.

As Dr Wallace reads the future of the race the possibilities of its moral and intellectual progress which he denies as having taken place hitherto—lie in automatically supplying the necessary selective agency by a betterment and a reorganization of society. Stated concretely in its fundamental terms his proposition is that when industry is properly safeguarded and sanitation has been properly developed (wars would also need to cease), the present excess of deaths among men as compared with those among women will be done away with, which will result (through the natural excess of male births over female births) in their being more men than women in the world, rather than fewer, and in thus giving women in the vast aggregate a power of selection and rejection which they do not now possess, and making them the true eugenists of the race. Incidental to the setting forth of this proposition, which involves an essentially socialistic form of society, Dr Wallace undertakes a needed restatement of the theory of evolution and the so-called and much misunderstood theory or doctrine of the survival of the fittest. He protests vehemently against the assumption that the application of the theory of the survival of the fittest means, by one process or another, a cruel elimination of the unfit. For he points out that charity and sympathy and care for the afflicted are precisely a part of man’s higher nature which it is the hope of the race further to develop.

Upon the whole it seems that Dr Wallace gives too little credit to modern society while not infrequent points in his argument might be taken to support the counter proposition that there has after all been moral and intellectual progress. Yet whether or not his declarations are to be accepted as a whole, the study is a remarkably stimulating examination of the life of mankind.

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