

## **Wallace, Alfred Russel (1913): Social Environment and Moral Progress**

### **PART I. HISTORICAL**

#### INTRODUCTORY

By morals we mean right conduct, not only in our immediate social relations, but also in our dealings with our fellow citizens and with the whole human race. It is based upon the possession of clear ideals as to what actions are right and what are wrong and the determination of our conduct by a constant reference to those ideals.

The belief was once prevalent, and is still held by many persons, that a knowledge of right and wrong is inherent or instinctive in everyone, and that the immoral person may be justly punished for such wrongdoing as he commits. But that this cannot be wholly, if at all, true is shown by the fact that in different societies and at different periods the standard of right and wrong changes considerably.

That which at one time and place is held to be right and proper is, at another time or place, considered to be not only wrong, but one of the greatest of crimes.

We are obliged to conclude, therefore, that what is commonly termed morality is not wholly due to any inherent perception of what is right or wrong conduct, but that it is to some extent and often very largely a matter of convention, varying at different times and places in accordance with the degree and kind of social development which has been attained often under different and even divergent conditions of existence.

The actual morality of a community is largely a product of the environment, but it is local and temporary, not permanently affecting the character.

#### CHAPTER II. MORALITY AS BASED UPON CHARACTER

Character may be defined as the aggregate of mental faculties and emotions which constitute personal or national individuality. It is very strongly hereditary, yet it is probably subject to more inherent variation than is the form and structure of the body. The combinations of its constituent elements are so numerous as, in common language, to be termed infinite; and this gives to each person a very distinct individuality, as manifested in speech, in emotional expression, and in action.

This is especially the case when the approval leads to wealth or positions of dignity or advantage. Occasionally, in cases of this kind the individual cannot resist his natural impulses, and then acts so as to show his underlying real character. We term such persons hypocrites for making us believe that they were inherently good, instead of being so in appearance only when the good action was profitable to them.

By means of a general discussion of the nature and origin of "Character," I have elsewhere shown that there is no proof of any real advance in it during the whole historical period.

#### CHAPTER IV. PERMANENCE OF HIGH INTELLECT

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.

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.

#### CHAPTER V. SPEECH AND WRITING AS PROOFS OF INTELLIGENCE

There is yet another proof that the faculties of mankind at a very early epoch were fully equal to those of our own time. There is perhaps nothing more difficult in its nature, more utterly beyond the mere lower animal, than the faculty of articulate speech possessed by every race of mankind.

#### CHAPTER VI. SAVAGES NOT MORALLY INFERIOR TO CIVILISED RACES

If this were not so we should expect to find some isolated groups of speechless man, and of this there is no example; but, on the contrary, the very lowest of existing races are found to possess languages which are often of extreme complexity in grammatical structure and in no way suggestive of the primitive man-animal of which they are supposed to be surviving relics.

#### CHAPTER VII. A SELECTIVE AGENCY NEEDED TO IMPROVE CHARACTER

The general result of the facts and arguments now set forth in the merest outline leads us to conclude that there has been no definite advance of morality from age to age, and that even the lowest races, at each period, possessed the same intellectual and moral nature as the higher.

The manifestations of this essentially human nature in habits and conduct were often very diverse, in accordance with diversities of the social and moral environment. This is quite in accordance with the now well-established doctrine that the essential character of man, intellectual, emotional, and moral, is inherent in him from birth; that it is subject to great variation from individual to individual; and that its manifestations in conduct can

be modified in a very high degree by the influence of public opinion and systematic teaching.

These latter changes, however, are not hereditary, and it follows that no definite advance in morals can occur in any race unless there is some selective or segregative agency at work.

The more a person's talent or mental power is above the average the less chance there is that any of his or her children will have still more of that power than he has.

The reason of this is that heredity follows the law of "recession to mediocrity." This is, that all groups of living things vary around an average or mean as regards each of their characters; and those near the average are always numerous, while as we approach the extremes in either direction the numbers become less and less.

It is because the higher intellectual or moral powers are so rarely of lifepreserving value, and are not unfrequently the reverse, that they are not cumulative, though they are hereditary.

## CHAPTER VIII. ENVIRONMENT DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century, however, saw the initiation of a great change in the economic environment due to the rapid invention of labour-saving machinery; which, with the equally rapid application of steam power, led to an increase of wealth production such as had never been known on the earth before. During the same period new modes of locomotion were brought into daily use, the facilities for inter-communication were increased a hundred-fold, scientific discoveries opened up to us new and unthought-of mysteries of the universe, and the whole earth was ransacked for its treasures, both vegetable and mineral, to an extent that surpassed all that had been accomplished since the dawn of civilisation.

But this rapid growth of wealth, and increase of our power over Nature, put too great a strain upon our crude civilisation and our superficial Christianity, and it was accompanied by various forms of social immorality, almost as amazing and unprecedented.

Our vast textile factory system may be said to have commenced with the nineteenth century, and the profits were at first so large and so dependent on the supply of labour that the mill-owners hired children from the workhouses of the great cities by hundreds and even thousands. These children, from the age of five or six upwards, were taken as apprentices for seven years, and they really became the slaves of the manufacturers, whose managers made them work from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., or sometimes longer; and, in order to keep them awake in the close atmosphere of the factories it was found necessary to whip them at frequent intervals. It was not till 1819 that the age of children employed in factories was raised to nine years, while in 1825 the working hours were limited to seventy-two a week!

It is one of the great defects of our law that deaths due to preventable causes in any profit-making business are not criminal offences. Till they are made so, it will be impossible to save the hundreds, or even thousands, of lives now lost owing to neglect of proper precautions in all kinds of dangerous or unhealthy trades.

## CHAPTER IX. INSANITARY DWELLINGS AND LIFE-DESTROYING TRADES

In the mad race for wealth by capitalists and employers most of our towns and cities have been allowed to develop into veritable death-traps for the poor.

Wealth has been deliberately preferred to human life and happiness.

## CHAPTER X. ADULTERATION, BRIBERY, AND GAMBLING

After the terrible national crime of deadly employments it is almost an anticlimax to enumerate the vast mass of dishonesty and falsehood that pervades our commercial system in every department. Almost every fabric, whether of cotton, linen, wool, or silk, is so widely and ingeniously adulterated by the intermixture of cheaper materials that the pure article as supplied to our grandparents is hardly to be obtained.

Our Stock Exchanges, too, are used largely for pure gambling which, owing to its vast extent and being carried on under business forms, is perhaps more ruinous than any other. But this form of gambling goes on unchecked, and is generally accepted as quite honest business. Yet ordinary betting on races and other forms of direct gambling are hypocritically condemned as immoral and criminal.

The vast fabric of our Foreign Trade in food, or the raw materials of our manufactures, is also used to support perhaps the greatest system of gambling the world has ever seen. The fluctuating prices of corn or cotton, of coal or mineral oil, of iron and other metals, in the great markets of the world, are used in two ways by a large community of gamblers, who not only do not require the goods they buy, but who never see nor possess them. The

## CHAPTER XII. INDICATIONS OF INCREASING MORAL DEGRADATION

### PART II.—THEORETICAL

## CHAPTER XIII. NATURAL SELECTION AMONG ANIMALS

Now, as I am credited by all my scientific friends with having discovered the theory of natural selection more than fifty years ago, and as the whole reading public have had this hammered into them with needless repetition during the whole of that period, it is rather amusing to be told now that I do not know what natural selection is, nor what it implies.

I propose, therefore, to give here a short account of the essential features of the theory of natural selection; how it has operated in bringing about the evolution of the almost

infinitely varied forms of plants and of the lower animals; and also to explain as clearly as I can why, and to what extent, it has acted differently in the case of man.

## Lamarckism and Darwinism—How they Differ

### Natural Selection as the Essential Factor in the Origin of Species

There are two great, universal, and very conspicuous characteristics of the whole organic world which, because they are so very common, were almost ignored before Darwin showed their importance. These are (1) the great variability in all common and widespread species, and (2) their enormous powers of increase.

To declare that variability among men and women, even of the same race and in the same country, is a rare phenomenon, and that in amount it is infinitesimal, would be a ludicrous misstatement of the facts or a wilful perversion of the truth.

It is, however, now well known, as a matter of direct observation and measurement, that when a few scores or hundreds of individuals are compared, even in the same district and at the same season, they differ in their proportions to about the same amount, and to some extent in every visible part or organ, as do human beings.

### Rapid Increase of All Organisms

This is another fact of Nature which requires to be kept in mind in all discussions of the action of natural selection, yet it is often altogether ignored by critics of the theory.

Even the largest and slowest breeding of all known mammals, i.e. the elephant, would, if allowed space to live and breed freely for 750 years, result in no less than nineteen million animals.

By far the larger part of the criticisms of Darwinism by popular writers are due to their continually forgetting these two great natural facts: enormous variability about a mean value of every part and organ; and such ever-present powers of multiplication that, even in the case of vertebrate animals, of those born every year only a small proportion—one-tenth to one-hundredth or thereabouts—live over the second year.

If they all lived their numbers would go on continually increasing, which we know is not the case.

Hence arises what has been termed "the struggle for existence," resulting in "the survival of the fittest."

It is a mere truism that the fittest survive.

Natural Selection, or Survival of the Fittest effected by Nature through rapid increase, great variability, and continual destruction of all the individuals less adapted to the conditions of their special environment,

It is interesting here to note, that the two essential factors of the process of constant adaptation to the environment by great variability and rapid multiplication, formed no part of Lamarck's theory, which some people still think to be as good as Darwin's.

One of the weakest and most foolish of all the objections to the Darwinian theory is, that it does not explain variation, and is therefore worthless.

The beginnings of things can never be known; and, as Darwin well said, it is foolish to waste time in speculation about them. I think I have shown in my World of Life that infinite variability is a basic law of Nature, and have suggested its probable purpose.

The long course of human history leads us to the conclusion that this higher nature of man arose at some far distant epoch, and though it has developed in various directions, does not seem yet to have elevated the whole race much above its earliest condition, at the time when, by the influx of some portion of the spirit of the Deity, man became "a living soul."

We will now consider some of the changes which this higher nature of man has produced in the action of the laws of variation and natural selection. These are very important, and are so little understood that almost all popular writers on the subject of the future of mankind are led into stating as scientific conclusions what are wholly opposed to the actual teaching of evolution.

#### CHAPTER XIV. SELECTION AS MODIFIED BY MIND

But if we recognise the brain as the organ of the mind, and give due weight to the complete distinctness and enormous superiority of the mind of man as compared with that of all other mammals, we shall be inclined to accept Owen's view as the most natural; and this becomes almost certain when we realise the enormous effect his mind has produced, in modifying and almost neutralising the action of that great law of natural selection which has held supreme sway in every other portion of the organic world.

Among the very rudest of modern savages the wounded or the sick are assisted, at least with food and shelter, and often in other ways, so that they recover under circumstances that to most of the higher animals would be fatal. Neither does less robust health or vigour, or even the loss of a limb or of eyesight, necessarily entail death. The less fit are therefore not eliminated as among all other animals; and we behold, for the first time in the history of the world, the great law of natural selection by the survival only of "the fittest" to some extent neutralised.

In the case of man, however, such bodily adaptations were unnecessary, because his greatly superior mind enabled him to meet all such difficulties in a new and different way.

We see, then, that with the advent of Man there had come into existence a being in whom that subtle force we term mind became of far more importance than mere bodily structure.

A being had arisen who was no longer subject to bodily change with changes of the physical universe—a being who was in some degree superior to Nature, inasmuch as he knew how to control and regulate her action, and could keep himself in harmony with her, not through any change in his body, but by means of his vast superiority in mind.

Yet so little attention has been given to this view that most popular and even some scientific writers take it for granted that no such difference exists between man and the lower animals.

Hospitality is, in fact, one of the most general of all human virtues, and in some cases is almost a religion. It is an inherent part of what constitutes "human nature," and it is directly antagonistic to the rigid law of natural selection which has universally prevailed throughout the lower animal world. Those who advocate our allowing natural selection to have free play among ourselves on the ground that we are interfering with Nature, are totally ignorant of what they are talking about.

They seek to degrade the higher nature to the level of the lower, to bring down Heaven-born humanity, in its essential characteristics only a little lower than the angels, to the infinitely lower level of the beasts that perish.

## CHAPTER XV. THE LAWS OF HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT

### Some Light on the Problem of Evil

Before passing on to another branch of my subject I feel it necessary to make a few suggestions in reply to the objection that will certainly and very properly be made, as to why, if our higher human nature is in its essence Divine, it has suffered such long and terrible eclipses—why has the lower so often and for so long prevailed over the higher? This is, of course, one of the many forms of the old problem of the origin of evil, which is no doubt insoluble by us.

What I have here termed the Divine influx, which at some definite epoch in his evolution at once raised man above the rest of the animals, creating as it were a new being with a continuous spiritual existence in a world or worlds where eternal progress was possible for him.

In order that this extreme diversity of character should be brought about, a great space of time, as measured by successive generations, was necessary, though utterly insignificant as compared with the preceding duration of organic life on the earth, and still more insignificant as compared with the spirit-life to succeed it.

It is for this purpose, perhaps, that languages become so rapidly diverse and mutually unintelligible after a moderate period of isolation, binding together small or moderate communities in distinct tribes or nations, which each develop in their own way under the influence of special physical surroundings and originate peculiarities of habits, customs, and modes of thought. Antagonisms soon arise between adjacent tribes, leading each to protect itself against others by means of chiefs and some quasi-military combinations.

This requires organisation and foresight, and after a time the most powerful conquers the weaker, they intermingle, and still greater diversity arises. By this constant struggle the less advanced suffer most, and the race as a whole takes a step forward in the march of civilisation.

## CHAPTER XVI. MORAL PROGRESS THROUGH A NEW FORM OF SELECTION

Many readers, and some writers of books on organic evolution, seem quite unaware that Darwin established two modes of selection, both alike "natural" but acting in different ways and producing somewhat different results. He termed the second mode "sexual selection," and in his *Origin of Species* he briefly describes it as consisting in the fighting of males for the possession of females, which undoubtedly occurs in numbers of the higher vertebrates and also in insects.

But he also includes under sexual selection another mode of rivalry by the display of the special male ornaments of many birds, and the choice of the more ornamental by the females. To this latter phase he devotes nearly half his volume on *The Descent of Man*, and on *Selection in Relation to Sex*.

### Eugenics, or Race Improvement through Marriage

The total cessation of the action of natural selection as a cause of improvement in our race, either physical or mental, led to the proposal of the late Sir F. Galton to establish a new science, which he termed Eugenics. A society has been formed, and much is being written about checking degeneration and elevating the race to a higher level by its means.

But there is great danger in such a process of artificial selection by experts, who would certainly soon adopt methods very different from those of the founder. We have already had proposals made for the "segregation of the Feeble-Minded," while the "sterilization of the unfit" and of some classes of criminals is already being discussed. This might soon be extended to the destruction of deformed infants, as was actually proposed by the late Grant Allen; while Mr. Hiram M. Stanley, in a work on *Our Civilisation and the Marriage Problem*, proposed more far-reaching measures. He says: "The drunkard, the criminal, the diseased, the morally weak, should never come into society. Not reform, but prevention should be the cry."

Of course, our modern eugenicists will disclaim any wish to adopt such measures as are here hinted at, which are in every way dangerous and detestable. But I protest strenuously against any direct interference with the freedom of marriage, which, as I



shall show, is not only totally unnecessary, but would be a much greater source of danger to morals and to the wellbeing of humanity than the mere temporary evils it seeks to cure.

It is in the highest degree presumptuous and irrational to attempt to deal by compulsory enactments with the most vital and most sacred of all human relations, regardless of the fact that our present phase of social development is not only extremely imperfect, but, as I have already shown, vicious and rotten at the core. How can it be possible to determine by legislation those relations of the sexes which shall be best alike for individuals and for the race, in a society in which a large proportion of our women are forced to work long hours daily for the barest subsistence, with an almost total absence of the rational pleasures of life, for the want of which thousands are driven into wholly uncongenial marriages in order to secure some amount of personal independence or physical well-being?

... and then ask himself if the Legislature which cannot remedy this state of things should venture to meddle with the great problems of marriage and the sanctities of family life.

It is my firm conviction, for reasons I shall give farther on, that, when we have cleansed the Augean stable of our present social organisation, and have made such arrangements that all shall contribute their share either of physical or mental labour, and that every one shall obtain the full and equal reward for their work, the future progress of the race will be rendered certain by the fuller development of its higher nature acted on by a special form of selection which will then come into play.