

**HEREDITY, VARIATION AND GENIUS:  
WITH ESSAY ON SHAKSPEARE,  
"TESTIMONIED IN HIS OWN  
BRINGINGSFORTH" AND ADDRESS ON  
MEDICINE: PRESENT AND PROSPECTIVE**

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Heredity, variation and genius: with essay on Shakspeare, "Testimonied in his own bringingsforth" and address on Medicine: present and prospective by Henry Maudsley

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**HENRY MAUDSLEY**

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BY  
HENRY MAUDSLEY, M.D.

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## HEREDITY, VARIATION AND GENIUS.

### I.

EVERYBODY is what he typically is because his progenitors were what they were, like having begotten its like ; he inherits the form, traits and qualities of the stock from which he proceeds. In the molecular structure of the minute germ of him, with its millions of constituent atoms and their ordered mazes of intricate motions, lurked the predispositions or plans of his essential structure, form and qualities : in that little book were all his members written when as yet there were none of them. That is an opinion which, based on the experience of all the world, emerges plainly in such popular sayings as that he comes of a good stock, that eagles do not breed doves, that one cannot gather grapes off thorns or figs off thistles, that what is bred in the bone will out in the flesh, and in the old Hebrew proverb—not quite baseless perhaps although savagely denounced by Isaiah—that when the fathers have eaten sour grapes the children's teeth are set on edge ; wherein lies truly not the broad statement of a general law of heredity only but also a just appre-

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hension of the predominant part which the quality of the stock plays in the transmission of qualities and the foundation of character. Always a basic fault in the stock is liable or likely to appear in one or another offspring of parents who themselves have shown no sign of it; the bad streak, Alphaeus-like, having gone under for a while to come again to the surface in the stream of descent. No one, be his aims and ambitions, his regrets and resolves, his triumphs and mishaps what they may, evades the fate of his organization. Happy he then who, looking back on a sound ancestry, can rest in the quiet confidence of a good descent; in all changes and chances of life it shall stand him in good stead.

Besides the manifest inheritance of physical and mental features of both parents either in the same forms or in various blends and proportions offspring exhibit features not visible in either of them, not even it may be in their known ancestry. Every one has his idiosyncrasy, being essentially himself, not another self, notwithstanding the multitude of selves that are and are likely to be. Diversities do not at first sight seem so natural and necessary as it does for a child to resemble its father or mother. Whence comes the invention which the new feature is? Somehow from the union of the special qualities of two stocks compositions of germinal elements issuing in organic variations have taken effect. But is that strange at all? Compositions in organic natures are



more than mere mixtures of matters. As chemical bodies unite to form compounds having properties unlike those of either component, it is not surprising that the vital union of the infinitely complex and numerous constituents of the germinal plasm, containing essentially the qualities of two individuals and their respective stocks—reaching back indeed to the very beginnings of life—should originate variations.\* It would be more strange if it were not so. Considering the innumerable varieties of personal features which men and women present, no two faces nor two voices nor two gaits being exactly alike, and reflecting that what is displayed outwardly must, so to speak, have been contained essentially in the innermost of the minute germ, the visible bespeaking that which is invisible, it is plain that there are innate

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\* The period during which organic life has been evolving on this planet is differently estimated. Most experts agree that it was from 100 to 200 million years, while some assign more than double that time. A German scientist, taking the lowest computation, has in imagination reduced the 100 million years to a day, assigning the proper proportion of hours and minutes to the successive geological periods. According to that estimate the human period would be two minutes, and if the historic period be estimated at 6,000 years it would be five seconds of the imagined day and the Christian period in that case two seconds. All too brief a period, plead Christian apologists, to fulfil its destined function of regenerating mankind, when account is taken of the many million years during which countless millions of the race died unregenerate, unwitting of the transcendent event of its future redemption and powerless to profit by it.

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germinal differences, predispositions of elements fitted to grow into definite structural characters, and that unlike bodily and mental qualities are as much in the natural order of things as likenesses. And if innate germinal differences, then active elective affinities working in the particular germ-unions as in the particular parental germ-breeders when they fell furiously and fatuously in love—sexual attractions or selections of elements in germs as of mortals in social life.

That variations continually occur in organic combinations and developments is a familiar fact. Sprouting prodigally they mostly perish soon because they are not then put forth in circumstances favourable to their growth; those only thrive and grow which lighting on propitious surroundings meet with conditions suiting them and they suit—that is to say, by what is called natural selection. In such case it is a survival of that which is most fitted to survive in the circumstances, although nowise always a survival of the highest and best, seeing that the circumstances may suit the worst and starve the best. Pliant sycophancy prospers well where manly self-respect would die of inanition, and the apt lie often spreads quickly in civilized communities by natural selection or easy infection when the naked truth, being conventionally indecent, obtains no sustenance and is promptly stifled. Why variations occur so constantly in organic development is not yet explained, unless it be thought explanation enough

to ascribe it to the inherent impulse of protoplasm under suitable stimulation to increase and divide when it can and as adaptively as it can. Scientific enquiry has to concern itself for the present with the *what is* without knowing the *why*. As in the end it must perforce do with the ultimate *why* of things; for when science has reached its utmost stretch it will not be omniscience, each height of painfully scaled outlook disclosing height towering above height without end. It is the foolish body only, not considering wisely, who aspires to "pierce the veil of the unknown"; the lifting of one veil evermore discovers another veil and will surely do so to the ending of mortality.

All the laboured learnings of mankind being but modes of self-expression in response to progressive adaptations of experience, the symbolical notations of the classified experiences of limited beings who begin and end, and whose ultimate value consists not in thinking but in being—symbols too made exclusively in terms of the leading senses of sight and touch and of the muscular sense—it is evident that knowledge of the whence and whither of things cannot be obtained by any rational method of enquiry; not less evident that such revelation by any other method may be just the irrational illusion of human conceit exulting in and interpreting grandly its own creative exercise.\* But not therefore un-

\* There is notably a singular pleasure in creative or productive work, mental as well as bodily, a sort of transporting