

**MARRIAGE AND
HEREDITY: A VIEW OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL
EVOLUTION**

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Marriage and Heredity: A View of Psychological Evolution by J. F. Nisbet

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PREFACE

It is hardly the Author's fault if this book appears to lay claim to being the Manual of a new Social Science. His primary object was to present in a compact form what history, philosophy, science, and even poetry and fiction have to teach on the subject of marriage. From the collation of the facts disclosed in many independent lines of inquiry certain leading principles are evolved which may be found to be worthy of attention. Hitherto the physical aspect of evolution has almost exclusively engrossed the attention of scientific men, and the important fact remains unexplained that while there is practically no difference in bodily form and structure between savage and civilised man, the numerous races of mankind exhibit much variety of mental capacity, and are consequently more or less fitted to carry on the struggle for existence. Physically, the savage is sometimes superior to the European, having greater

muscular strength and greater powers of endurance. Yet the superior mental capacity of the European secures him an easy victory over the savage in whatever field he happens to be opposed to him. The European is the master of the world. By what means has he attained his superiority? Not by physical selection, for not only are the Englishman, the Red Indian, and the Zulu similar in point of physique, but even the evidence of the Egyptian tombs does not warrant us in supposing that within any measurable period of time man was ever physically less developed than now. These considerations prompted Wallace some years ago to put forward the speculative opinion that with the origin of mind in the human race selection with regard to physical form and structure ceased, man as an animal remaining stationary, because all changes in his environment were met by mental instead of corporeal adaptation—that is to say, he made clothes instead of growing fur to suit a particular climate, he learnt to cope with the strength and the agility of other animals by inventing weapons, when food was scarce he produced it artificially, and so on.

The results of an inquiry into the operation of marriage and heredity from the earliest times and

all over the world seem to bear out Wallace's speculation, and to prove that although physically man now remains unchanged, mentally his development continues. In other words, it would seem that the evolution of the human race has passed from the physiological into the psychological field, and that it is in the latter alone henceforward that progress may be looked for. This fact is especially interesting at a time when the biological theories of Weismann seem to set great limitations upon the variability of species. Whatever may be the case with the bodily characteristics of man, his psychological condition would appear to be highly susceptible to the influence of his surroundings, and what we know of the law of heredity justifies the belief that a mental state comprising an elaborate set of social sentiments is more or less transmissible. The child of civilised parents does not come into the world with the same mental equipment as the little savage. He is not obliged to work out all social problems *de novo*. His mind has an hereditary bent which enables him easily and naturally to fulfil his duties as a citizen. No doubt it is difficult to determine what features in the character of an individual are due to education and what to heredity. Until

an English child is taken from his mother's breast, and brought up without any intercourse with his kind, we shall never know precisely in what respect he differs at birth, morally, from a little Hottentot. But the presumption in favour of the heredity of sentiment is overwhelmingly great, even in the case of sentiment which has been accumulated within a fewer number of generations than Weismann assigns to the continuity of his *Keimplasma*.

As regards the method in which the question of psychological evolution is treated in the following pages, objection may be taken to the frequent allusions made to works of fiction. No doubt the evidence furnished from this source as to prevailing currents of sentiment at a given period is inexact and unscientific. But psychology is as difficult to discuss as questions of taste, and an inquirer into the history of popular sentiment, be he as painstaking as he may, can only hope to arrive approximately at the truth. The drama is perhaps after all a more faithful reflex of the popular sentiment of a period than the pages of history; for while the historian may interpret events in the light of preconceptions and prejudices of his own, the dramatist is bound to study and to conform to the feelings of an audience of his contemporaries. The

subject of the elective affinities is closely allied to that of sexual selection. By more than one authority it is questioned whether the importance of sexual selection was not overrated by Darwin ; and there is in fact great difficulty in explaining upon the score of utility alone such variations of structure as the peacock's tail, while in all species, including man, the inferior types find partners without difficulty, and are, upon the whole, as productive as the superior ones. It would thus appear that sexual selection is swallowed up in natural selection. At the same time, men may be trusted to reason about their own feelings more accurately than they can about those of any other species, and the existence of sexual preferences in the human race will hardly be denied. In connexion with a theory of psychological evolution, the elective affinities which are a form of mental selection acquire a new and scientific importance.

LONDON, *July 1889.*