

MR HUXLEY'S FANCIES ABOUT MAN AND APES.

Sir,—Mr Huxley has been here asking the confiding members of the Philosophical Institution to believe him that we are probably descended from apes. On the same platform, some years ago, he had his laugh at some nonsense Paley had written about the spleen, and then drew the logical and profound conclusion that Paley's argument (that design proves a designer, that a watch proves a watchmaker) is all wrong, upset by the demonstration of unity of plan! By a process, doubtless, of "natural selection," the smart London lecturer has gone on developing since, and we are now told that there is no designed plan at all, but that one wonderful egg has done the whole business. The Creator made A, or A made itself, somehow, and then made B, and B made C, and so on to Z, which is man. Or, to give it in the nursery version—this is the oyster that made the fly, that made the frog, that made the cock, that made the dog, that made the ape, that made the man, that lives in the house that Jack (Darwin) built.

Mr Huxley's argument, if argument it can be called, is, that there being a greater bodily difference between the lower and the higher apes than between the latter and man, therefore the body of man has probably sprung from the apes, wherever his mind may have come from. As Mr Huxley told us himself, his facts (that is, the facts he chose to mention) are in no way new; but what of the inference? The frog has more points of resemblance to the dog than to the oyster, therefore dogs are probably descended from frogs; the dog is nearer to man than to the frog, therefore man has probably had his day as a dog, and so on says Darwin, essentially endorsed by Huxley. When Mr Huxley showed how very closely the early ovum of the frog, dog, and man resemble each other, it possibly did not occur to him that the natural and right conclusion drawn by his ingenuous audience was, that structure of itself proves nothing as to his theory, and may mislead, as the ovum of the said frog never brings forth a dog or a man, but always a little tadpole, which stops when it has attained the image of its papa. A few plants, and some poor pigeons, dogs, and other tamed beasts, may be made to vary their shapes and habits a little, and therefore dogs may be converted into sheep, mice into cats! The tendency of domesticated animals to return to their original condition, the infertility of species with other species, and all the other facts, anatomical and physiological, which lead nearly all unbiased men of science to hold the original distinction of species, must, of course, be ignored. It has pleased the Creator to make all vertebrate animals on a plan, mostly in a graduated series—ladder-like, but with steps at various distances—and some two or three crotchety would-be philosophers infer from this that one step has produced the others, and that, accordingly, the steps were much closer to each other originally, the so-called "missing links" being somewhere hidden, but unfortunately not yet found. Yes, the want of the "missing" links is a very unhappy circumstance; and yet, if they exist, why should they be missing when those both above and below them are found—for the bones of the link-animals must be in as good preservation, and ought to be as easily found, as those of others which are found, especially the "missing links" near man, as he lies quite superficially in the crust of the earth? The time which is asked to seek for them we readily grant, asking only in return that until then, and until, besides, some sort of proof has been given that the one has grown from the other, science may not be discredited before the public, and outraged among its cultivators, by even the utterance of so baseless a theory. If the missing links are not found in the "Arabian Nights," the seekers of this "man's nest" are most likely to succeed by digging in the grey strata of the Darwinian brain.

Then, as to Mr Huxley's comparison between the higher apes and man, viewed even as an anatomical question, he spoke of the points of resemblance, but what of the differences, to which he might have devoted half-a-dozen lectures, if his theory had not blinded him, or had a more accurate study of the specific structure of man enabled him to appreciate them. Every anatomist who understands the natural condition of that human characteristic, the big-toe, before the shoe has pinched it, would recognise Mr Huxley's representation of it to be unorthodox in every sense of the term. And what are anatomists to think of a lecturer who could leave on his audience the impression that the differences between the head and teeth of the gorilla and man are not, after all, so very great, with the gorilla's small cranial capacity, its ferocious muzzle and teeth, and great orbital margins, sagittal ridge, and occipital crest all staring him in the face. Besides the brain and mind questions, the unsophisticated fact is that the human figure is built for the erect posture, man alone, among mammals, being firm and serious on two feet, or on one, his hands being thus set free for human work, while the apes are built for four-handed action on the trees, where they are at home; and that the common type of vertebrate skeleton has its specific characters in each; those of man, which are best known, never having essentially varied from the oldest known skeleton down to the most modern, whether savage or civilised. With a skeleton like the gorilla's, the lecturer would in a few minutes have required to go down upon all fours, or get up a tree, which would be rather a novel platform for a Philosophical Institution!

But, different as that is, it is not the mere bodily form or structure which makes the one a man and the other a monkey. In fact, the liker we can show them to be to us in their animal framework the more remarkable it becomes that they are only apes; that, as Sydney Smith has it, the ape, although he has hands as good, and stature as great, and senses as acute as ours, has certainly hitherto taken no surprising part in the political revolutions of the earth, has done nothing for poetry, painting, music, or science, and is still as unable to read and write as persons of honour and quality were in the time of Queen Elizabeth! It is not a little entertaining and instructive to notice that those who, contrary to the conclusions of most of our scientific ethnologists, would not admit that a black and a white man could be descended from common parents, have suddenly wheeled round to the fancy that mankind may have sprung from apes! so true is it that the wish is often father to the thought. It is likewise a gratuitous assumption to speak of man's primal condition as that of the savage. There is nothing either in ethnological science or in history incompatible with the view that the savage is a degraded man, or to support the view that man is an elevated savage. I do not take up the argument from a Scriptural point of view. Error in science may always be, and is, best met by science, and vanquished in the ring of its own choosing, within which truth and falsehood may be safely left to grapple.—I am, &c.

SCALPEL.