A WORD ON DARWIN AND THE ADVANCED THINKERS.

During a debate on the above subject at the Catholic Literary Institute, the following remarks were made by Mr Edward Hackett O'Callaghan:—

Not the least happy achievement of the lecturer in his title, wherein the name of Mr Darwin is associated with other thinkers, for that philosopher is the most conspicuous specimen of hero worship to be found in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To call the doctrine before us to-night, the Darwinian theory is to pick the intellectual pockets of thousands of industrious biologists of all ages and nearly all nations. Mr Darwin's first work appeared in 1830, his last in 1882, and I, one of whose principal pleasures is to be a scientific student, would be among the last to subtract a fraction from the fame of an investigator who spent fifty years in the public service of science. The reason he is unduly exalted by hasty writers and speakers is not far to seek. Miss Frances Power Cobbe, a hostile critic, is forced to admit, I quote her own words, that he is a fascinating writer of the English language, and that it is the sole reason that his name is foremost among the expounders of the great law of nature—the variability by selection of animal and vegetable forms. King Solomon is one of those authors who is intellectually defrauded by those who call this the Darwinian theory. Turn to the third Book of Kings and see it recorded of that wise monarch by the writer of the sacred text that he discoursed of trees from the cedar that is in Libanus unto the hyssop that cometh out of the wall and he treated of beasts, and of fruits, and of creeping things, and of fishes. It would be not greater but less injustice to call modern mechanics the Archimedian theory for Archimedes did incalculable service to mechanical science, but thousands of years before his birth, and after his death, men and women were at work upon the principles that in our day culminated in the evolution of a telephone. Whoever selected a pair of sheep whose from to breed or grafted one apple tree on another contributed his quota towards the exposition of the great doctrine of the modificability by selection of animal and vegetable forms. Both operations were probably performed by Cain and Abel on the very threshold of human history. Like most philosophical questions this has a humourous side, which the lecturer touched on so as to blend amusement with instruction; it is my intension on the other hand to turn it quite round and take a different and more serious view of it. Those who think with the lecturer are never tired of ridiculing the notion that man a completely tailless animal is descended from an ancestor with a tail, but I would strongly advise you to remember that whether man is tailless in all times and places is a fiercely disputed topic and even if it were not the argument puts him in the same category with thousands of other animals. Rats and guinea pigs are so closely allied in structure that if their tailless skeletons were before you on the dissecting table it would be impossible to tell the difference unless you were skilful osteologists. And if we could trace their pedigree sufficiently far back, it is quite easy for me to imagine, we would come to a single ancestor, of whom they are decendants, and while a rat is furnished with a tail, extremely long in proportion to the length of his body, a guinea pig is as tailless as anyone in this room. All cat, wild and domestic, have tails, except those indigenous to the Isle of Man, and it is an undisputed fact, in natural history, that the whole feline species have a common pair of progenitors. In the interior of Borneo, to come to another aspect of the tail question, there is quoted in the "Times" the assertion of a recent traveller in that island that there are men and women with long tails. With the grave statement before us that tails to be found among existing human beings the belief is perfectly reasonable—that though each man has partially outgrown a caudal appendage at a remote period of his history he may have been furnished with it by nature. The fact is the question of tail is one of degree not kind, and depends upon the term to be defined with scientific accuracy. No one ever heard of the tail of a rabbit or a hare. A gorilla has no tail whatever. Examine on the other hand the human skeleton in Barcington's Hospital in this city and the termination of the spinal column (the os coccx of anatomy) you will find to be a perfectly recognizable structure wanting only a few vertebrae to make it into an organ exactly similar to that which so useful to monkeys during their arboreal gambols. A few words as to the potent tendency of all animals including man to develop varieties. The English racehorse of to-day is the lineal descendant of the racer of a hundred years ago, and we have carefully executed pictures of these highly prized animals during that period. Look on one of those pictures painted say in the middle of the last century, and then examine "Dutch Oven" which I am told is going to win the two thousand guineas at Newmarket. After your enquiry is over as wide as so many are the differences between the two animals you will be ready to admit that a naturalist from another planet unacquainted with the flora and fauna of this could be easily persuaded that the two horses belonged to separate and distinct species. And had we an opportunity of observing their skeletons these differences would be multiplied. The comparatively puny efforts of artificial selection having produced so much variety, working through the few years that a century comprises, we may imagine what wonderful and otherwise mysterious phenomena may be due to the mighty engine of natural selection working through time that to our minds is illimitable. Coming to this great natural law of the variability of animal and vegetable forms, by selection, as applied to man, I heard a negro Christian, of considerable eloquence and learning, demonstrate to his own satisfaction, and that of the majority of a mixed audience, that Adam, the first of our species, was a black man. Three of us got sixteen minutes a piece, and every fair play to refute him, and though each of us was pretty well able to take his own part in a debate, we sat down after three quarter's of an hour's work, utterly unable to make an impression on his theory. It seems to me of little consequence whether he was right or wrong, compared to the great question before us, the application to man of the undeniable law of the variation of animal and vegetable forms by selection. To deny that it applies to ourselves, is to make it entirely inconceivable how black men came to be descended from white parents, or white men came descended from black ones. Contemplating, our researches as to variation by inheritance in the case of man, if any of the audience will hold a human hand between their eyes and the light they will perceive certain rudimentary hairs, scattered over the back and fingers. They are not ornamental, as is sometimes asserted, with regard to the hairs on the upper lip, and it is equally certain they are not useful. Anything neither useful or ornamental, having no business in the world of industry and beauty, the question arises—How came the hairs there? According to the doctrine, we are discussing, they are inherited from a hairy and savage ancestor living in the ancient days of primeval man. And assuming the doctrine of variation by descent to be true of our species each succeeding generation, is less hairy than its predecessor, and a day will assuredly dawn, when we shall have completely lost the hairy covering we have partially inherited, corresponding to the day on which we shall have completely lost our hereditary tails. Before concluding I ask you to weigh the expressed ideas of an eminent author who has devoted the greatest part of a laborious life to investigations concerning biological phenomena. He declares he finds a sublimity in believing that the breath of life was originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one, and while this planet goes cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity successive beauteous creation have been and are being evolved. I do not forget one of the objects I had in view when rising to address you—to thank the lecturer for introducing us to one of the burning controversies of the day. It is a question of vital solemnity, which possibly we, assuredly the coming generation, must accept or reject for ever. Far be it from me to pronounce in favor of acceptance or rejection in a dispute wherein the foremost intellects of the nineteenth century come into collision. Were I guilty of the presumption there might be applied to me with painful propriety the contemptuous words of the poet "Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread." Posterity is the only power that can silence the disputants, changing this perfectly open question into an undisputed topic, and whoever arrogates the privilege that will be the right of posterity is merely making one of those displays of presumptuous folly that are common in arguments among the rash and unsophisticated. Suspension of judgment is the only intellectual refuge of one to the lovers of the "Spurele-s Virgin," philosophy.

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