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Mutual Aid and Evolution

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## BOOK REVIEW

## MUTUAL AID AND EVOLUTION

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It is good to see Kropotkin's articles on Mutual Aid, first published in *The Nineteenth Century* between 1890 and 1896, and in book form in 1902, brought again to the attention of students of evolution. With all its faults it is a great human document, an expression of the indignation, shared by many and clearly and popularly expressed by Kropotkin, which is aroused when man is viewed as a creature formed by struggle against his fellows, and when his institutions and societies are seen as results primarily of this struggle. It was T. H. Huxley's essay on "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society" published in *The Nineteenth Century* in February 1888 which aroused Kropotkin's indignation and his articles and later book (it is the 1914 edition with its preface which is now reprinted) were direct replies to Huxley's essay.

For comparison with this re-issue I took down my copy of the original edition of 1902 of *Mutual Aid* which I read as a student over 40 years ago. My notes recalled the impression it had made upon me, for I too was troubled by the antithesis in man's nature, and had been led to Kropotkin by Graham Wallas' *The Great Society* which I read in the same year 1914. To look at those two books now is to see as in a mirror the young man with that time as a background. Then I saw dimly what seems clearer now—that both views, Kropotkin's and Huxley's, were incomplete and distorted because they confused scientific with moral or ethical questions, and tried to justify their views on both from the same evidence. There are many causes of this confusion. "Aid" and "struggle" appear where we use them in a narrow, anthropomorphic sense to be transitive verbs which imply the kind of consciousness (our own) which seems driven to form ethical judgements. It is an all too common practice for those who aim at objective views justified by the facts and the reasoning method of natural science to use such words without precision and to attribute to a natural process such as evolution meanings and motivating forces which are expressions of human (and often humane) aspirations and fears. Surely we should not adduce the behavior of such stereotyped automata as ants or their societies as evidence for either view; nor should we, as Huxley did, preface our arguments "I am as strongly convinced as the most pronounced individualist can be—." Kropotkin's use of the evidence was determined by his philosophical posi-

\**Mutual Aid*, by P. Kropotkin, introduction by Ashley Montagu with an appendix: *The struggle for existence in human society*, by Thomas H. Huxley. Extending Horizons Press, Boston, Mass., 1955, 362 pp. cloth bound \$3.00, paper bound \$2.00.

tion as an anarchist for whom cooperation was a substitute for the State, while Huxley's thoroughgoing and unabashed materialism led him to admire equally (so he said) the wolf and its victim the deer. But it is clear that his sympathies were with the winner.

It gives one pause to reflect how one set of facts, observations generally agreed to, like those underlying the theory of natural selection, may lead in different minds to divergent and irreconcilable meanings. Does the reason for this lie in the different extraneous or personal circumstances under which the bent or set of the mind is formed? And how, if this be an ever present danger, is the ultimate disaster to science to be avoided, whereby the discourse is put upon a plane where decision by reference to the factual observations is impossible? One suspects this happens often in the history of science, and that the struggle to limit the meaning of words precisely to the point requiring decision is far from won.

In perspective the final question remains: what have these differing attitudes of Kropotkin and Huxley to do with the scientific study of evolution? Obviously the answer is nothing, if we speak of factual observation, but everything if we mean interpretation. I think it can be said that neither Kropotkin nor Huxley contributed much to the understanding of the mechanism of evolution by natural selection. The firm foundation for this was laid by the more sober work of Darwin and Wallace. After their work was done, neither one of these men concealed their mature and deeply moral views, but they did not derive them from the evidence for organic evolution. Darwin's views are well-known from the attitudes expressed in his letters. The last paragraph in Wallace's *Darwinism* (1889, page 478) is less widely known: "We thus find that the Darwinian theory, even when carried out to its extreme logical conclusion, not only does not oppose, but lends a decided support to, a belief in the spiritual nature of man. It shows us how man's body may have been developed from that of a lower animal form under the law of natural selection; but it also teaches us that we possess intellectual and moral faculties which could not have been so developed but must have had another origin; and for this origin we can only find an adequate cause in the unseen universe of Spirit". And only recently have I encountered for the first time (quoted by S. F. Mason in *Centaurus* 1953: Vol. 3, pp. 90-106) this sentence of Wallace published in 1900: "The only mode of natural selection that can act alike on physical, mental and moral qualities will come into play under a social system which gives equal opportunity of culture, leisure and happiness to every individual". This is a statement, not of fact, but of the same hope which motivated Kropotkin. The moral position of each man was an acquired character, influenced in each case by many factors beyond the facts of evolution accessible to both of them.

T. H. Huxley's position to which Kropotkin was so strongly opposed, was made perfectly clear in his Romanes lecture of 1893. "The ethical progress of society consists, not in imitating the cosmic process, still less in

running away from it, but in combating it." It was Huxley's characterization of the cosmic (evolutionary) process as a "dog-eat-dog" affair against which Kropotkin's ire and opposition were aroused, and for which he tried to substitute his ethical idea of mutual aid, buttressed by evidence of cooperation in animal societies. Although T. H. Huxley occasionally justified his ethical views by his reasoning as a scientist, he did not try to derive them from evolutionary evidence. This remained for his grandson to do fifty years later (J. S. Huxley, *Evolutionary Ethics*, the Romanes Lecture, Oxford 1943); but the impression left by that attempt was that if one tries to derive today's ethics from evolutionary principles, he ends up by seeing its highest achievement in human societies of today and ascribing to the evolutionary process itself an ethical purpose. And this takes us out of the realm of science and into that unseen universe of belief into which Wallace, with more simplicity and directness, retreated.

These thoughts are not intended to belittle the achievements of Kropotkin or of Huxley or their followers in the last century or in this one. They faced our common dilemma and chose their sides; and since the processes of reason by which we all must live, are forwarded by defining alternatives and putting forward the issues to be clarified, we owe for this real service our thanks to all of those concerned in this controversy and to Professor Ashley Montagu for again calling it to our attention.