

Circumstances favourable to Man's power of Selection.

I will now say a few words on the circumstances, favourable or the reverse, to man's power of selection. A high degree of variability is obviously favourable, as freely giving the materials for selection to work on; not that mere individual differences are not amply sufficient, with extreme care, to allow of the accumulation of a large amount of modification in almost any desired direction. But as variations manifestly useful or pleasing to man appear only occasionally, the chance of their appearance will be much increased by a large number of individuals being kept. Hence, number is of the highest importance for success. On this principle Marshall formerly remarked, with respect to the sheep of part of Yorkshire, "as they generally belong to poor people, and are mostly *in small lots*, they never can be improved." On the other hand, nurserymen, from keeping large stocks of the same plant, are generally far more successful than amateurs in raising new and valuable varieties. A large number of individuals of an animal or plant can be reared only where the conditions for its propagation are favourable. When the individuals are scanty all will be allowed to breed, whatever their quality may be, and this will effectually prevent selection. But probably the most important element is that the animal or plant should be so highly valued by man, that the closest attention is paid to even the slightest deviations in its qualities or structure. Unless such attention be paid nothing can be effected. I have seen it gravely remarked, that it was most fortunate that the strawberry began to vary just when gardeners began to attend to this plant. No doubt the strawberry had always varied since it was cultivated, but the slight varieties had been neglected. As soon, however, as gardeners picked out individual plants with slightly larger, earlier, or better fruit, and raised seedlings from them, and again picked out the best seedlings and bred from them, then (with some aid by crossing distinct species) those many admirable varieties of the strawberry were raised which have appeared during the last half-century.

With animals, facility in preventing crosses is an important element in the formation of new races,— at least, in a country which is already stocked with other races. In this respect enclosure of the land plays a part. Wandering savages or the inhabitants of open plains rarely possess more than one breed of the same species. Pigeons can be mated for life, and this is a great convenience to the fancier, for thus many races may be improved and kept true, though mingled in the same aviary; and this circumstance must have largely favoured the formation of new breeds. Pigeons, I may add, can be propagated in great numbers and at a very quick rate, and inferior birds may be freely rejected, as when killed they serve for food. On the other hand, cats, from their nocturnal rambling habits, can not be easily matched, and, although so much valued by women and children, we rarely see a distinct breed long kept up; such breeds as we do sometimes see are almost always imported from some other country. Although I do not doubt that some domestic animals vary less than others, yet the rarity or absence of distinct breeds of the cat, the donkey, peacock, goose, &c., may be attributed in main part to selection not having been brought into play: in cats, from the difficulty in pairing them; in donkeys, from only a few being kept by poor people, and little attention paid to their breeding; for recently in certain parts of Spain and of the United States this animal has been surprisingly modified and improved by careful selection; in peacocks, from not being very easily reared and a large stock not kept; in geese, from being valuable only for two purposes, food and feathers, and more especially from no pleasure having been felt in the display of distinct breeds; but the goose, under the conditions to which it is exposed when domesticated, seems to have a singularly inflexible organisation, though it has varied to a slight

extent, as I have elsewhere described.

Some authors have maintained that the amount of variation in our domestic productions is soon reached, and can never afterward be exceeded. It would be somewhat rash to assert that the limit has been attained in any one case; for almost all our animals and plants have been greatly improved in many ways within a recent period; and this implies variation. It would be equally rash to assert that characters now increased to their utmost limit, could not, after remaining fixed for many centuries, again vary under new conditions of life. No doubt, as Mr. Wallace has remarked with much truth, a limit will be at last reached. For instance, there must be a limit to the fleetness of any terrestrial animal, as this will be determined by the friction to be overcome, the weight of the body to be carried, and the power of contraction in the muscular fibres. But what concerns us is that the domestic varieties of the same species differ from each other in almost every character, which man has attended to and selected, more than do the distinct species of the same genera. Isidore Geoffroy St. Hilaire has proved this in regard to size, and so it is with colour, and probably with the length of hair. With respect to fleetness, which depends on many bodily characters, Eclipse was far fleet, and a dray-horse is comparably stronger, than any two natural species belonging to the same genus. So with plants, the seeds of the different varieties of the bean or maize probably differ more in size than do the seeds of the distinct species in any one genus in the same two families. The same remark holds good in regard to the fruit of the several varieties of the plum, and still more strongly with the melon, as well as in many other analogous cases.

To sum up on the origin of our domestic races of animals and plants. Changed conditions of life are of the highest importance in causing variability, both by acting directly on the organisation, and indirectly by affecting the reproductive system. It is not probable that variability is an inherent and necessary contingent, under all circumstances. The greater or less force of inheritance and reversion determine whether variations shall endure. Variability is governed by many unknown laws, of which correlated growth is probably the most important. Something, but how much we do not know, may be attributed to the definite action of the conditions of life. Some, perhaps a great, effect may be attributed to the increased use or disuse of parts. The final result is thus rendered infinitely complex. In some cases the intercrossing of aboriginally distinct species appears to have played an important part in the origin of our breeds. When several breeds have once been formed in any country, their occasional intercrossing, with the aid of selection, has, no doubt, largely aided in the formation of new sub-breeds; but the importance of crossing has been much exaggerated, both in regard to animals and to those plants which are propagated by seed. With plants which are temporarily propagated by cuttings, buds, &c., the importance of crossing is immense; for the cultivator may here disregard the extreme variability both of hybrids and of mongrels, and the sterility of hybrids; but plants not propagated by seed are of little importance to us, for their endurance is only temporary. Over all these causes of change, the accumulative action of selection, whether applied methodically and quickly, or unconsciously and slowly, but more efficiently, seems to have been the predominant power.

Revision #1

Created 2019-08-12 14:47:16 UTC by Textpedia

Updated 2019-08-12 15:02:00 UTC by Textpedia