

Present Distribution Cannot Be Accounted for by Differences in Physical Conditions

In considering the distribution of organic beings over the face of the globe, the first great fact which strikes us is, that neither the similarity nor the dissimilarity of the inhabitants of various regions can be wholly accounted for by climatal and other physical conditions. Of late, almost every author who has studied the subject has come to this conclusion. The case of America alone would almost suffice to prove its truth; for if we exclude the arctic and northern temperate parts, all authors agree that one of the most fundamental divisions in geographical distribution is that between the New and Old Worlds; yet if we travel over the vast American continent, from the central parts of the United States to its extreme southern point, we meet with the most diversified conditions; humid districts, arid deserts, lofty mountains, grassy plains, forests, marshes, lakes and great rivers, under almost every temperature. There is hardly a climate or condition in the Old World which cannot be paralleled in the New — at least so closely as the same species generally require. No doubt small areas can be pointed out in the Old World hotter than any in the New World; but these are not inhabited by a fauna different from that of the surrounding districts; for it is rare to find a group of organisms confined to a small area, of which the conditions are peculiar in only a slight degree. Notwithstanding this general parallelism in the conditions of Old and New Worlds, how widely different are their living productions!

In the southern hemisphere, if we compare large tracts of land in Australia, South Africa, and western South America, between latitudes 25° and 35° , we shall find parts extremely similar in all their conditions, yet it would not be possible to point out three faunas and floras more utterly dissimilar. Or, again, we may compare the productions of South America south of latitude 35° with those north of 25° , which consequently are separated by a space of ten degrees of latitude, and are exposed to considerably different conditions; yet they are incomparably more closely related to each other than they are to the productions of Australia or Africa under nearly the same climate. Analogous facts could be given with respect to the inhabitants of the sea.

A second great fact which strikes us in our general review is, that barriers of any kind, or obstacles to free migration, are related in a close and important manner to the differences between the productions of various regions. We see this in the great difference in nearly all the terrestrial productions of the New and Old Worlds, excepting in the northern parts, where the land almost joins, and where, under a slightly different climate, there might have been free migration for the northern temperate forms, as there now is for the strictly arctic productions. We see the same fact in the great difference between the inhabitants of Australia, Africa, and South America under the same latitude; for these countries are almost as much isolated from each other as is possible. On each continent, also, we see the same fact; for on the opposite sides of lofty and continuous mountain-ranges, and of great deserts and even of large rivers, we find different productions; though as mountain chains, deserts, &c., are not as impassable, or likely to have endured so long, as the oceans separating continents, the differences are very inferior in degree to those characteristic of distinct continents.

Turning to the sea, we find the same law. The marine inhabitants of the eastern and western shores of South America are very distinct, with extremely few shells, crustacea, or echinodermata in common; but Dr. Günther has recently shown that about thirty per cent of the fishes are the same on the opposite

sides of the isthmus of Panama; and this fact has led naturalists to believe that the isthmus was formerly open. Westward of the shores of America, a wide space of open ocean extends, with not an island as a halting-place for emigrants; here we have a barrier of another kind, and as soon as this is passed we meet in the eastern islands of the Pacific with another and totally distinct fauna. So that three marine faunas range northward and southward in parallel lines not far from each other, under corresponding climate; but from being separated from each other by impassable barriers, either of land or open sea, they are almost wholly distinct. On the other hand, proceeding still further westward from the eastern islands of the tropical parts of the Pacific, we encounter no impassable barriers, and we have innumerable islands as halting-places, or continuous coasts, until, after travelling over a hemisphere, we come to the shores of Africa; and over this vast space we meet with no well-defined and distinct marine faunas. Although so few marine animals are common to the above-named three approximate faunas of Eastern and Western America and the eastern Pacific islands, yet many fishes range from the Pacific into the Indian Ocean, and many shells are common to the eastern islands of the Pacific and the eastern shores of Africa on almost exactly opposite meridians of longitude.

A third great fact, partly included in the foregoing statement, is the affinity of the productions of the same continent or of the same sea, though the species themselves are distinct at different points and stations. It is a law of the widest generality, and every continent offers innumerable instances. Nevertheless, the naturalist, in travelling, for instance, from north to south, never fails to be struck by the manner in which successive groups of beings, specifically distinct, though nearly related, replace each other. He hears from closely allied, yet distinct kinds of birds, notes nearly similar, and sees their nests similarly constructed, but not quite alike, with eggs coloured in nearly the same manner. The plains near the Straits of Magellan are inhabited by one species of Rhea (American ostrich), and northward the plains of La Plata by another species of the same genus; and not by a true ostrich or emu, like those inhabiting Africa and Australia under the same latitude. On these same plains of La Plata we see the agouti and bizcacha, animals having nearly the same habits as our hares and rabbits, and belonging to the same order of Rodents, but they plainly display an American type of structure. We ascend the lofty peaks of the Cordillera, and we find an alpine species of bizcacha; we look to the waters, and we do not find the beaver or muskrat, but the coypu and capybara, rodents of the South American type. Innumerable other instances could be given. If we look to the islands off the American shore, however much they may differ in geological structure, the inhabitants are essentially American, though they may be all peculiar species. We may look back to past ages, as shown in the last chapter, and we find American types then prevailing on the American continent and in the American seas. We see in these facts some deep organic bond, throughout space and time, over the same areas of land and water, independently of physical conditions. The naturalist must be dull who is not led to inquire what this bond is.

The bond is simply inheritance, that cause which alone, as far as we positively know, produces organisms quite like each other, or, as we see in the case of varieties, nearly alike. The dissimilarity of the inhabitants of different regions may be attributed to modification through variation and natural selection, and probably in a subordinate degree to the definite influence of different physical conditions. The degrees of dissimilarity will depend on the migration of the more dominant forms of life from one region into another having been more or less effectually prevented, at periods more or less remote;— on the nature and number of the former immigrants — and on the action of the inhabitants on each other in leading to the preservation of different modifications; the relation of organism to organism in the struggle for life being, as I have already often remarked, the most important of all relations. Thus the high importance of barriers comes into play by checking migration; as does time for the slow process of modification through natural selection. Widely-ranging species,

abounding in individuals, which have already triumphed over many competitors in their own widely-extended homes, will have the best chance of seizing on new places, when they spread out into new countries. In their new homes they will be exposed to new conditions, and will frequently undergo further modification and improvement; and thus they will become still further victorious, and will produce groups of modified descendants. On this principle of inheritance with modification we can understand how it is that sections of genera, whole genera, and even families, are confined to the same areas, as is so commonly and notoriously the case.

There is no evidence, as was remarked in the last chapter, of the existence of any law of necessary development. As the variability of each species is an independent property, and will be taken advantage of by natural selection, only so far as it profits each individual in its complex struggle for life, so the amount of modification in different species will be no uniform quantity. If a number of species, after having long competed with each other in their old home, were to migrate in a body into a new and afterwards isolated country, they would be little liable to modification; for neither migration nor isolation in themselves effect anything. These principles come into play only by bringing organisms into new relations with each other and in a lesser degree with the surrounding physical conditions. As we have seen in the last chapter that some forms have retained nearly the same character from an enormously remote geological period, so certain species have migrated over vast spaces, and have not become greatly or at all modified.

According to these views, it is obvious that the several species of the same genus, though inhabiting the most distant quarters of the world, must originally have proceeded from the same source, as they are descended from the same progenitor. In the case of those species which have undergone, during whole geological periods, little modification, there is not much difficulty in believing that they have migrated from the same region; for during the vast geographical and climatical changes which have supervened since ancient times, almost any amount of migration is possible. But in many other cases, in which we have reason to believe that the species of a genus have been produced within comparatively recent times, there is great difficulty on this head. It is also obvious that the individuals of the same species, though now inhabiting distant and isolated regions, must have proceeded from one spot, where their parents were first produced: for, as has been explained, it is incredible that individuals identically the same should have been produced from parents specifically distinct.

Single Centres of supposed Creation.— We are thus brought to the question which has been largely discussed by naturalists, namely, whether species have been created at one or more points of the earth's surface. Undoubtedly there are many cases of extreme difficulty in understanding how the same species could possibly have migrated from some one point to the several distant and isolated points, where now found. Nevertheless the simplicity of the view that each species was first produced within a single region captivates the mind. He who rejects it, rejects the *vera causa* of ordinary generation with subsequent migration, and calls in the agency of a miracle. It is universally admitted, that in most cases the area inhabited by a species is continuous; and that when a plant or animal inhabits two points so distant from each other, or with an interval of such a nature, that the space could not have been easily passed over by migration, the fact is given as something remarkable and exceptional. The incapacity of migrating across a wide sea is more clear in the case of terrestrial mammals than perhaps with any other organic beings; and, accordingly, we find no inexplicable instances of the same mammals inhabiting distant points of the world. No geologist feels any difficulty in Great Britain possessing the same quadrupeds with the rest of Europe, for they were no doubt once united. But if the same species can be produced at two separate points, why do we not find a single mammal common to Europe and Australia or South America? The conditions of life are nearly the same, so that a multitude of

European animals and plants have become naturalised in America and Australia; and some of the aboriginal plants are identically the same at these distant points of the northern and southern hemispheres? The answer, as I believe, is, that mammals have not been able to migrate, whereas some plants, from their varied means of dispersal, have migrated across the wide and broken interspaces. The great and striking influence of barriers of all kinds, is intelligible only on the view that the great majority of species have been produced on one side, and have not been able to migrate to the opposite side. Some few families, many subfamilies, very many genera, a still greater number of sections of genera, are confined to a single region; and it has been observed by several naturalists that the most natural genera, or those genera in which the species are most closely related to each other, are generally confined to the same country, or if they have a wide range that their range is continuous. What a strange anomaly it would be if a directly opposite rule were to prevail when we go down one step lower in the series, namely to the individuals of the same species, and these had not been, at least at first, confined to some one region!

Hence, it seems to me, as it has to many other naturalists, that the view of each species having been produced in one area alone, and having subsequently migrated from that area as far as its powers of migration and subsistence under past and present conditions permitted, is the most probable. Undoubtedly many cases occur in which we cannot explain how the same species could have passed from one point to the other. But the geographical and climatical changes which have certainly occurred within recent geological times, must have rendered discontinuous the formerly continuous range of many species. So that we are reduced to consider whether the exceptions to continuity of range are so numerous, and of so grave a nature, that we ought to give up the belief, rendered probable by general considerations, that each species has been produced within one area, and has migrated thence as far as it could. It would be hopelessly tedious to discuss all the exceptional cases of the same species, now living at distant and separated points; nor do I for a moment pretend that any explanation could be offered of many instances. But, after some preliminary remarks, I will discuss a few of the most striking classes of facts, namely, the existence of the same species on the summits of distant mountain ranges, and at distant points in the Arctic and Antarctic regions; and secondly (in the following chapter), the wide distribution of fresh water productions; and thirdly, the occurrence of the same terrestrial species on islands and on the nearest mainland, though separated by hundreds of miles of open sea. If the existence of the same species at distant and isolated points of the earth's surface can in many instances be explained on the view of each species having migrated from a single birthplace; then, considering our ignorance with respect to former climatical and geographical changes, and to the various occasional means of transport, the belief that a single birthplace is the law seems to me incomparably the safest.

In discussing this subject we shall be enabled at the same time to consider a point equally important for us, namely, whether the several species of a genus which must on our theory all be descended from a common progenitor, can have migrated, undergoing modification during their migration from some one area. If, when most of the species inhabiting one region are different from those of another region, though closely allied to them, it can be shown that migration from the one region to the other has probably occurred at some former period, our general view will be much strengthened; for the explanation is obvious on the principle of descent with modification. A volcanic island, for instance, upheaved and formed at the distance of a few hundreds of miles from a continent, would probably receive from it in the course of time a few colonists, and their descendants, though modified, would still be related by inheritance to the inhabitants of that continent. Cases of this nature are common, and are, as we shall hereafter see, inexplicable on the theory of independent creation. This view of the relation of the species of one region to those of another, does not differ much from that advanced by

Mr. Wallace, who concludes that "every species has come into existence coincident both in space and time with a pre-existing closely allied species." And it is now well known that he attributes this coincidence to descent with modification.

The question of single or multiple centres of creation differs from another though allied question,—namely, whether all the individuals of the same species are descended from a single pair, or single hermaphrodite, or whether, as some authors suppose, from many individuals simultaneously created. With organic beings which never intercross, if such exist, each species, must be descended from a succession of modified varieties, that have supplanted each other, but have never blended with other individuals or varieties of the same species, so that, at each successive stage of modification, all the individuals of the same form will be descended from a single parent. But in the great majority of cases, namely, with all organisms which habitually unite for each birth, or which occasionally intercross, the individuals of the same species inhabiting the same area will be kept nearly uniform by intercrossing; so that many individuals will go on simultaneously changing, and the whole amount of modification at each stage will not be due to descent from a single parent. To illustrate what I mean: our English race-horses differ from the horses of every other breed; but they do not owe their difference and superiority to descent from any single pair, but to continued care in the selecting and training of many individuals during each generation.

Before discussing the three classes of facts, which I have selected as presenting the greatest amount of difficulty on the theory of "single centres of creation," I must say a few words on the means of dispersal.

Revision #1

Created 2019-08-13 13:19:51 UTC by Textpedia

Updated 2019-08-13 13:20:26 UTC by Textpedia