

Summary.

In this chapter I have attempted to show that the arrangement of all organic beings throughout all time in groups under groups — that the nature of the relationships by which all living and extinct organisms are united by complex, radiating, and circuitous lines of affinities into a few grand classes,— the rules followed and the difficulties encountered by naturalists in their classifications — the value set upon characters, if constant and prevalent, whether of high or of the most trifling importance, or, as with rudimentary organs of no importance,— the wide opposition in value between analogical or adaptive characters, and characters of true affinity; and other such rules,— all naturally follow if we admit the common parentage of allied forms, together with their modification through variation and natural selection, with the contingencies of extinction and divergence of character. In considering this view of classification, it should be borne in mind that the element of descent has been universally used in ranking together the sexes, ages, dimorphic forms, and acknowledged varieties of the same species, however much they may differ from each other in structure. If we extend the use of this element of descent,— the one certainly known cause of similarity in organic beings,— we shall understand what is meant by the Natural System: it is genealogical in its attempted arrangement, with the grades of acquired difference marked by the terms, varieties, species, genera, families, orders, and classes.

On this same view of descent with modification, most of the great facts in Morphology become intelligible,— whether we look to the same pattern displayed by the different species of the same class in their homologous organs, to whatever purpose applied, or to the serial and lateral homologies in each individual animal and plant.

On the principle of successive slight variations, not necessarily or generally supervening at a very early period of life, and being inherited at a corresponding period, we can understand the leading facts in embryology; namely, the close resemblance in the individual embryo of the parts which are homologous, and which when matured become widely different in structure and function; and the resemblance of the homologous parts or organs in allied though distinct species, though fitted in the adult state for habits as different as is possible. Larvæ are active embryos, which have become specially modified in a greater or less degree in relation to their habits of life, with their modifications inherited at a corresponding early age. On these same principles,— and bearing in mind that when organs are reduced in size, either from disuse or through natural selection, it will generally be at that period of life when the being has to provide for its own wants, and bearing in mind how strong is the force of inheritance — the occurrence of rudimentary organs might even have been anticipated. The importance of embryological characters and of rudimentary organs in classification is intelligible, on the view that a natural arrangement must be genealogical.

Finally, the several classes of facts which have been considered in this chapter, seem to me to proclaim so plainly, that the innumerable species, genera and families, with which this world is peopled, are all descended, each within its own class or group, from common parents, and have all been modified in the course of descent, that I should without hesitation adopt this view, even if it were unsupported by other facts or arguments.